

ENHANCING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE FOR TOURISM PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS IN BANYUWANGI: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: March 2025 Revised: May 2025 Published: July 2025	<i>The study aimed to explore the essential competencies of hospitality professional and the vocational students in communication skills needed to effectively interact with tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds and enhance their overall travel experience. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach. The data was collected through in-depth interviews, with tourism student, professional industry worker, and practitioner tourism industry in Banyuwangi, participatory observations which conducted across tourist spots and documentation. A comprehensive analysis of relevant educational resources and industry-specific documents were employed in this study. Findings reveal a significant gap between theoretical instruction and practical application in English real tourism industry workforce setting, which affects confidence and communication skills among tourism workers. It emphasizes the necessity of collaborative frameworks between educational institutions and tourism enterprises to align training with dynamic industry demands. These findings provide valuable insights for curriculum improvement and training initiatives to enhance the global competitiveness of tourism professionals, especially in communication skills.</i>
Keywords Communication competences; Tourism industry; Hospitality professionals;	
How to cite: Rusmawan, P.N., Kanom, K., Setianingsih, T., & Kamarudin, K. (2025). Enhancing English Communication Competence for Tourism Professionals and Students in Banyuwangi: A Phenomenological Study, <i>JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching</i> , 13(3), 1567-1577. Doi: https://doi.org/10.33394/joltt.v13i3.15142	

INTRODUCTION

A rapidly grow Tourism in Banyuwangi, a regency located at the eastern tip of East Java, Indonesia, offers a balanced mix of adventure, nature, and culture, supported by innovative governance and a commitment to sustainability. It continues to rise as a top destination in Indonesia, especially for travelers looking for an alternative to Bali with fewer crowds but equally rich experiences. As one of tourism destination in Indonesia, English communication skills play a crucial role for hospitality professionals and vocational students (Yusra et al., 2021). However, challenges persist among industry professionals and students in developing adequate English proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills, as well as confidence in interacting with international visitors (Winnie et al., 2023).

Existing literature indicates that English proficiency in the tourism industry extends beyond linguistic competence, encompassing intercultural skills that facilitate effective communication between tourists and local service providers (Miao, 2022). Previous studies have identified barriers to English learning among vocational students and hospitality professionals, including limited integration of communication-focused curricula in vocational education (Fonseca et al., 2024). Although initiatives such as the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in Indonesian vocational education have

been introduced, gaps in execution continue to impact workforce readiness in the tourism sector (Yusra, 2023).

Communication skills are fundamental in the tourism and hospitality industry. They can enable effective interactions between service providers and tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, these skills include interpersonal dimensions such as cultural awareness and empathy which are essential in managing guest expectations (Čuić Tanković et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the tourism and hospitality industry, digital communication skills have become increasingly important in the modern era that allow tourism professionals to engage in online marketing, virtual customer service, and social media interactions (Carlisle et al., 2021). In the context of globalization, tourism facilitates cultural exchange and significantly impacts the economies of host destinations (Navío-Marco et al., 2019). The manifestations of tourism can be categorized based on travel purposes and the experiences offered. Hospitality professionals must possess strong interpersonal skills to build positive guest relationships and manage complex service situations (Koç & Boz, 2020). Additionally, with technological advancements, hospitality professionals are now expected to develop digital competencies and manage online customer interactions (Huang et al., 2021).

This study aims to equip students with the essential competencies needed to effectively interact with tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds by enhancing the overall tourism experience. Through an empirical analysis of students' and professionals' perceptions and experiences in the hospitality and tourism sector of Banyuwangi, this study seeks to identify factors affecting English communication effectiveness and propose strategies for improvement (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021). This research also explores how the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of tourism professionals and students in the industry impact their ability to effectively communicate in English. This study seeks to provide valuable insights that can inform curriculum improvements, training initiatives, and industry-level strategies to enhance the global competitiveness and intercultural communication abilities of aspiring and practicing tourism professionals.

The urgency of this study stems from the continuous growth and development of Banyuwangi's thriving tourism industry, which has experienced a steady influx of international visitors arriving each year to explore the region's diverse array of cultural, natural, and recreational attractions. This rapid expansion of the local tourism sector underscores the critical need to address the communication challenges faced by hospitality professionals and aspiring tourism students in effectively engaging with these international guests and providing them with exceptional service and experiences. As a result, it is imperative for both hospitality professionals and vocational students to develop communication skills that go beyond linguistic proficiency to include intercultural aspects, such as cultural sensitivity, adaptability in cross-cultural interactions, and the ability to build meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This expanded set of communication competencies will enable tourism and hospitality vocational students to engage more effectively, enhancing customer experiences and strengthening the overall competitiveness of the tourism industry.

The findings of this study are expected to generate recommendations that can be implemented by educational institutions and policymakers to enhance the quality of English language instruction in tourism and hospitality, ultimately producing a more competitive workforce for the global job market (Upadhyay et al., 2023). Therefore, the study was driven by two key research questions: (1) What are the key challenges faced by tourism students and professionals in Banyuwangi in developing effective English communication skills? and (2) What strategies can be adopted to enhance these skills?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study examines the essential competencies of hospitality professional and the vocational students in communication skills needed to effectively interact with tourists from

diverse cultural backgrounds and enhance their overall travel experience which focuses on identifying communication barriers and exploring potential improvements to enhance interactions with international tourists and support tourism development (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Additionally, this study investigates the role of educational and industry environments in facilitating the enhancement of communication skills among tourism workers.

Research Design

The qualitative phenomenological approach was particularly suitable for this research as it allowed for an in-depth examination of the complex dynamics and processes involved in the essential competency that was used by professionals to interact with tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by tourism professionals and students in developing and applying effective English communication skills to engage with international visitors. This research adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, aiming to understand the meaning of participants' experiences in tourism and hospitality communication. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, including students, industry practitioners, and academics, to explore the essential competencies required for effective communication with international tourists (Williams, 2021). Secondary data were gathered from relevant literature on communication skills, tourism, and hospitality professionals (Lodhi et al., 2022). By employing this methodology, the researcher could investigate the diverse experiences, perspectives, and understandings that tourism professionals and students possess regarding communication skills. The qualitative phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the significance of comprehending the contexts in which professionals operated and interacted between these contexts. This theoretical framework provided a comprehensive foundation for examining the various factors that influence the communication skill performance of learners within the tourism and hospitality industry.

Research Participants

The participants of this study comprised three main groups: a student from Banyuwangi State Polytechnic majoring in tourism, a tourism industry practitioner with direct experience serving international tourists, and an academic specializing in English language education for tourism (Patton, 2020). The participants were purposively chosen using a criterion-based sampling technique. The primary criterion for participant selection was involvement as a hospitality professional, tourism student, tourism industry practitioner, or academician. This purposive strategy was employed to ensure representation of key stakeholders in the tourism industry in Banyuwangi who are directly involved in and impacted by English communication skills. A total of four participants were included in the study—one from each stakeholder category. Although the sample size may appear small, it aligns with the goals of qualitative research, which prioritize depth of understanding over statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative inquiry, smaller samples are acceptable when the participants are selected for their relevance to the research objectives and are capable of providing rich, detailed insights. The adequacy of the sample size was further supported by the attainment of thematic saturation—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this study, thematic saturation was assessed through ongoing coding and analysis during the data collection process. By the fourth interview, recurring patterns and themes related to English communication skills, stakeholder expectations, and industry challenges were consistently observed. This indicated that further data collection was unlikely to yield significantly new information. While gender was not a criterion for selection, it was recorded to provide additional demographic context. Including participants of different genders aimed to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives

that might influence English communication practices within the tourism sector. By using purposive sampling and monitoring for thematic saturation, the study ensured that the data collected was both meaningful and sufficiently representative of the most relevant stakeholder groups.

Instruments

The research process involved data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives on English communication challenges and the strategies used to overcome them (Land, 2024). In addition, direct observations were conducted to analyze real-time interactions between tourism students, professionals, and international tourists, providing contextual data on communication dynamics. Documentation—such as curriculum guides, training materials, and institutional reports—was used as a supplementary source to validate findings and reinforce research conclusions.

To address the research questions effectively, the researcher conducted online semi-structured interviews and administered open-ended questionnaires with tourism professionals and educators. This approach was selected to gather rich qualitative data while accommodating the participants' demanding schedules. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing participants' experiences and perspectives, while ensuring that all relevant themes were consistently addressed.

The interview guide was designed to explore four key areas: (1) experiences in English communication with international tourists, (2) perceptions of oral communication competence among tourism students and professionals, (3) observed challenges and barriers in real-world settings, and (4) recommendations for improving English communication training. Sample interview questions included:

"Can you describe a situation where you or someone you observed struggled to communicate with a tourist in English?"

"How confident do you feel when speaking English in professional tourism contexts?"

"In your opinion, what are the most common barriers to effective English communication in your work environment?"

"What kinds of training or learning experiences have helped improve your English communication skills?"

"What changes do you suggest for educational programs to better prepare students for real communication with international tourists?"

To ensure the credibility and validity of the research instruments, the interview and questionnaire items underwent a content validation process. Two subject matter experts in tourism education and applied linguistics were consulted to review the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives. Their feedback led to the refinement of several questions for better coherence and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with one tourism student and one tourism professional. The pilot results helped assess the comprehensibility and practical flow of the interview protocol. Adjustments were made accordingly to improve clarity and ensure that all prompts were understood by participants. Through this process of expert review and pilot testing, the instruments were validated for content and contextual relevance, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data collection process. The triangulation of data through interviews, observations, and documentation further strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

This study employed the data analysis model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This model was selected for its structured yet flexible approach, which supports qualitative

inquiry grounded in participants' lived experiences. In the first stage, the researcher reduced the data by carefully transcribing all interview recordings and filtering out irrelevant information to focus on aspects directly related to English communication challenges, strategies, and learning experiences. The reduction process also involved summarizing, categorizing, and coding textual data to identify meaningful segments. The organized data were then displayed in the form of matrices and thematic tables to facilitate pattern recognition. These displays enabled the researcher to compare participant responses across categories and develop preliminary interpretations of how English communication skills are experienced and perceived in the tourism industry. In the final stage, the researcher drew conclusions by identifying recurring themes and verifying them through continuous comparison and triangulation with observational notes and documentation. The phenomenological method supported the extraction of underlying meanings, while an editing approach (McGinley et al., 2020) allowed the researcher to refine codes and correct potential inconsistencies in interpretation.

To enhance credibility, this study applied trustworthiness criteria such as: Credibility (via triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents), Dependability (through consistent coding and analytic memos), Transferability (by providing thick descriptions of context), Confirmability (by documenting the decision-making trail during data interpretation) and Coding and Thematic Development.

The researcher developed initial codes by closely reading the transcripts and identifying meaningful segments. These were then clustered into broader thematic categories. Representative excerpts from participants were used to illustrate key codes. Analytic memos were maintained to capture the researcher's reflective insights and interpretations throughout the process.

Table 1
Coded Excerpts and Thematic Categories

Code	Excerpt from Participant	Emergent Theme
Lack of confidence	"I get nervous when I have to speak to foreigners. I'm afraid I'll say something wrong."	Speaking Skills and Confidence
Culture barriers	"Sometimes we don't understand the tourists' habits or what they expect from us."	Cultural Awareness
Theory-practice gap	"We learn a lot of theory, but not many chances to practice with real tourists."	Practical Learning Challenges
Use of translator apps	"When I don't understand, I use Google Translate quickly."	Technology Dependence
Need for training	"It would help if we had more chances to talk with tourists in school."	Recommendation: Practice-Based Training

As the data analysis progressed, thematic categories were refined, and new subthemes were developed to reflect the complexity of participant experiences. Constant comparison between data segments ensured that the analysis was both inductive and grounded in the data. This rigorous process ultimately contributed to the formulation of practical recommendations aimed at improving English communication training in tourism settings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section of this study provides a comprehensive examination of the key themes and insights that emerged from the research. This section delved into the underlying factors affecting English communication effectiveness and proposes strategies for improvement based on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges shared by the tourism students, industry practitioners, and academics who participated in the study. By integrating the qualitative interview findings, it offers a holistic understanding of the role of English

communication skills in the tourism sector and provides evidence-based recommendations to enhance the communication competencies of the local tourism workforce.

Research Findings

Regarding the research problems, according to the results of the interviews with the tourism student, professional, tourism industry practitioners, and academics. Several keywords were determined to be relevant to the research problems, such as learning experience, communication skills, and challenges. The themes were derived and further analysed to identify the key factors affecting English communication effectiveness within the tourism industry. This thematic analysis provided insights that informed the development of strategies to enhance communication skills for hospitality professionals and tourism students. The analysis of the interviews reveals recurring themes on the effects of English language proficiency, the challenges faced in communication, and the strategies for improving communication skills among tourism professionals and students. Table 1 presents the themes of learning experience, professional perception, and challenges faced in developing effective English communication skills for tourism and hospitality professionals and students.

Table 1
Theme of Learning Experiences, Professional Perceptions, and Challenges

No	Competency aspect	Description
1.	Speaking Skills	Tourism students and professionals struggle with confidence in speaking English, particularly in direct interactions with international tourists.
2.	Cultural Awareness	Difficulties in understanding cultural differences often lead to miscommunication in service delivery.
3.	Theory-Practice Gap	Educational curricula focus more on theoretical knowledge, with limited practical experience

As shown in Table 1, both students and professionals face challenges in confidently using English during real-life interactions, often due to anxiety or lack of practice. Miscommunication with international tourists is frequently linked to limited cross-cultural awareness and unfamiliarity with diverse values, norms, and communication styles. The findings suggest that cultivating cultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptive communication strategies is critical for delivering high-quality service in global tourism contexts.

Moreover, participants noted a significant *theory–practice gap* in tourism education. Curricula tend to emphasize academic content while offering limited hands-on opportunities such as internships, site visits, or project-based learning. This disconnect between classroom learning and workplace expectations hampers the development of practical communication competencies. Another major theme that emerged relates to workforce competency development. These findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
The theme of tourism Workforce Competency Development

No	Competency aspect	Description
4.	Technology Utilization	Some professionals still rely on translation applications during critical communication situations.
5.	Learning Methods	A lack of experience-based learning, such as role-play activities and project-based internships
6.	Impact on Tourism	Inadequate communication skills affect tourist satisfaction and the overall image of Banyuwangi as a travel destination.
7.	Recommendations	Strengthening collaborations between educational institutions and the industry to implement practice-based communication training programs

As reflected in Table 2, the reliance on translation tools indicates insufficient confidence and fluency among some professionals, especially during high-pressure or nuanced service encounters. The limited use of immersive learning techniques—such as simulations, role-plays, and fieldwork—further hinders skill development.

The findings also underscore the broader implications of communication competency. Poor English communication affects not only individual performance but also tourist satisfaction and the perception of Banyuwangi as a tourism destination. Therefore, the study recommends stronger collaboration between educational institutions and tourism stakeholders (e.g., hotels, restaurants, tour operators) to co-develop practical training programs. These initiatives should include not only language proficiency but also intercultural competence, customer service, and problem-solving strategies—skills essential to the modern tourism workforce.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a pressing concern: despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of English communication skills, both students and tourism professionals in Banyuwangi continue to face substantial challenges in effectively applying these skills in real-world contexts. This reality underscores a persistent disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical application. Tourism students often express a lack of confidence when engaging with international tourists, while professionals already in the field report difficulties in navigating cultural nuances and responding to the diverse needs of global travelers. In some critical service interactions, reliance on translation applications remains common, highlighting the inadequacies of current education and training frameworks in preparing individuals for dynamic tourism environments. This phenomenon aligns with existing literature emphasizing the critical role of communication—particularly cross-cultural and digital communication—in tourism. Jin (2023) points out that digital platforms can be instrumental in improving intercultural communication competencies, which are increasingly necessary in a globalized tourism industry. Moreover, research by Čuić Tanković et al. (2022) reinforces the need for Generation Z, who form a significant portion of the emerging tourism workforce, to master verbal, non-verbal, and digital forms of communication.

The strength of this study lies in its phenomenological methodology, which provides rich, contextual insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating communication challenges in a specific regional tourism context. The study was driven by two key research questions: What are the key challenges faced by tourism students and professionals in Banyuwangi in developing effective English communication skills? and What strategies can be adopted to enhance these skills? The first question is answered through the identification of several core themes: lack of confidence in speaking, insufficient cross-cultural awareness, and an educational focus on theory rather than practice. These themes reveal that the major challenges stem not from a lack of awareness, but rather from a lack of structured opportunities for practical engagement. The second question is addressed through proposed strategies that emerged from both the data and corroborating literature: immersive learning, role-playing activities, project-based internships, and stronger collaborations between academia and industry.

A critical implication of this research is the need for curriculum reform within vocational and higher education institutions that offer tourism programs. Current curricula are largely centered around theoretical knowledge, offering limited practical engagement. Institutions should incorporate immersive activities such as simulated tourist interactions, role-playing exercises, and fieldwork in authentic tourism settings. This approach is supported by Huang and Fisher (2021), who advocate for integrating real-world scenarios and digital tools in training programs to bridge the theory-practice divide. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of policy interventions at the local government level. Initiatives such as subsidized language

certification programs and industry-supported language training could significantly elevate the communication competencies of tourism professionals. These programs not only enhance individual capabilities but also contribute to the broader goal of positioning Banyuwangi as a competitive international tourist destination.

A deeper analysis of the findings indicates that limited direct exposure to international tourists is a critical barrier to developing communication confidence. This lack of interaction reduces opportunities for learners and workers to refine their language skills in context. Yusra et al. (2021) emphasize that experiential learning plays a vital role in building self-efficacy in language use. Therefore, increasing access to real-world communication experiences through internships, field visits, and interactive simulations is essential. Additionally, both formal and informal learning environments should be leveraged. Peer learning, guest lectures from international tourism professionals, and collaborative projects with overseas institutions can all enhance exposure. Emphasizing real-time language use over rote memorization encourages learners to become more adaptable and confident in varied service scenarios. Based on these insights, several actionable recommendations can be made: Curriculum Revision: Education providers must integrate practical learning opportunities into tourism programs to align academic outcomes with industry needs. Industry Collaboration: Tourism stakeholders should partner with educational institutions to provide mentorships, internships, and job shadowing programs. Government Support: Local government bodies should sponsor certification and upskilling initiatives to standardize and elevate English language competencies across the tourism sector. Digital Integration: Incorporate digital tools and platforms into training modules to simulate real-life communication tasks and enhance digital literacy.

This study contributes significantly to the discourse on vocational education and workforce readiness in emerging tourism destinations. By contextualizing the challenges faced by a specific regional workforce, it provides a blueprint for targeted educational reforms and capacity-building initiatives. The findings serve as a call to action for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders to co-develop sustainable solutions that not only address current gaps but also anticipate future workforce demands in a global tourism landscape. This study aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of cross-cultural communication skills in the hospitality and tourism industry. Jin (2023) emphasizes that digital platforms, such as social media, can be leveraged to enhance intercultural communication competence (Jin, 2023).

Similarly, Čuić Tanković et al. (2022) found that Generation Z entering the tourism workforce must develop various communication skills, including verbal, non-verbal, and digital communication (Čuić Tanković et al., 2022). The strength of this study lies in its phenomenological approach, which provides an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of tourism professionals in a specific regional context. Reflecting on these findings, it is evident that there is an urgent need to create more immersive and experience-based learning environments. This study suggests that educational institutions must revise their curricula to incorporate more practical activities, such as role-playing, simulated tourist interactions, and on-site training in real tourism settings. Additionally, the tourism industry should implement more rigorous English training programs, integrating real-world scenarios and digital tools to enhance communication skills (Huang & Fisher, 2021).

A deeper analysis reveals that the primary reason for the communication gap is the limited exposure of students and tourism professionals to direct interactions with international tourists. This lack of exposure contributes to their low confidence in using English effectively. Furthermore, the predominant focus on theoretical learning rather than practical application exacerbates this issue (Yusra et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to develop more interactive, hands-on learning strategies to bridge this gap. Based on these findings, several key actions should be taken. Strengthening collaborations between educational institutions and the tourism industry is essential to provide more internship and project-based training opportunities.

Additionally, local government initiatives could support language certification programs for tourism workers to enhance their global competitiveness (Upadhyay et al., 2023). By adopting a more structured and practice-oriented approach, the tourism sector in Banyuwangi can better prepare its workforce to meet the growing communication demands of the global tourism industry.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a vital insight into the development of English communication skills in Banyuwangi's tourism sector. Despite the recognized importance of these skills, both students and professionals in the industry face persistent difficulties in their practical use. The findings reveal a clear disconnect between the theoretical knowledge taught in classrooms and the communicative abilities needed in real-world tourism contexts. Many students lack confidence when interacting with international visitors, and tourism staff frequently encounter cultural misunderstandings. The common use of translation apps during service interactions highlights the inadequacy of current training and education systems. Theoretically, the research supports the link between vocational education and job preparedness, especially regarding cross-cultural communication. It emphasizes the importance of incorporating experiential learning methods, such as simulations and role-playing, into tourism English instruction to better prepare learners for workplace demands.

In practice, the study suggests that education providers need to redesign their curricula to include immersive, task-based activities that reflect actual tourism encounters. Industry players should strengthen staff training by blending language development with cultural awareness programs. Additionally, government bodies and policy makers are urged to back initiatives such as language certification, partnerships between academia and industry, and structured internship opportunities to enhance communication competence across the tourism workforce. While the study focuses specifically on Banyuwangi, limiting the scope of its conclusions, it offers a valuable foundation for further research in other tourism regions with diverse characteristics. Expanding the study to other locations and comparing instructional methods like blended learning, digital resources, or peer mentoring could help identify best practices. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgent need to close the gap between theory and practice in English language education for tourism professionals. Collaborative, experiential, and locally relevant strategies will be essential in raising service standards and boosting Banyuwangi's global tourism appeal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research program was funded by the Research and Community Service Center of Politenik Negeri Banyuwangi. Special thanks are extended to P3M Unit for providing the necessary funding to support this initiative. The Tourism Department of Politeknik Negeri Banyuwangi also played a crucial role in supporting the implementation of this program. Finally, the researchers would like to express their sincere gratitude to all the participants who actively engaged and contributed to the success of this activity.

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