THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LITERACY IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY: CHALLENGES, IMPACTS, AND LEARNING METHODS

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Abstract. *In the tourism and hospitality industry, the English language has become an integral component for delivering exceptional services and building memorable guest experiences. The ability to read and write in English is no longer an additional skill, but a fundamental requirement for every employee working in this field. This study aims to examine the significance of English literacy for hospitality professionals and to identify the challenges, impacts, and learning methods associated with English language proficiency in tourism and hospitality contexts.*

Adopting a qualitative literature review methodology, this research synthesises findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, industry reports, and case studies drawn from academic databases. Sources were selected based on their relevance to English proficiency in hospitality, covering customer service communication, language barriers, intercultural competence, and language teaching methodologies. The review encompasses studies from diverse geographical contexts, including Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

The findings reveal that English literacy significantly enhances customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and intercultural communication in hospitality settings. Conversely, language barriers contribute to service disruptions, delayed response times, staff dissatisfaction, compromised safety during emergencies, and negative guest reviews. Several effective pedagogical approaches are identified, including English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the active learning method, and the direct method of teaching. The study concludes that strategic investment in English literacy training is essential for maintaining competitive advantage in the global hospitality market, and recommends that future research explore the long-term impact of targeted training programmes on service quality metrics.

Keywords: *English literacy, tourism and hospitality, intercultural communication, language barriers, customer satisfaction, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), active learning, service quality, lingua franca, hospitality training*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The tourism and hospitality industry is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors globally. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2024), an estimated 1.4 billion international tourists travelled worldwide in 2024, marking a 99% recovery compared to pre-

pandemic levels and generating a record USD 1.9 trillion in export revenues. This unprecedented volume of cross-border movement necessitates effective communication between service providers and international guests, making language proficiency a critical factor in the industry's success.

An important tool for communication, as well as for the provision of services, is not only an employee's skills and professionalism, but also their command of language. In modern society, knowledge of and learning foreign languages is essential, as it has a positive impact on various cognitive skills and improves communication, memory, creativity and concentration. Furthermore, it fosters empathy, which arises from understanding different perspectives and enriching interactions with people from cultures different to one's own (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002).

First of all, it is necessary to understand what 'literacy' means. The terms 'literacy' and 'language' are used and familiar to many, but their meaning is not accurately perceived by people due to their similarity. Basic literacy refers to the ability to read and write, and language is often perceived as a tool for communication and the exchange of ideas. According to Gee (1987), literacy is nothing more than the control of language use — for example, not the simple use of a second language, but its understanding, the ability to perceive and process information obtained through communication.

1.2 Review of Related Literature

English is the most widely spoken language, as well as the dominant one among others spoken all over the world. The most commonly used terms are 'English as a lingua franca', 'English as an international language' or 'English as a global language'. Furthermore, the English language has become an indispensable tool for those wishing to work in a multinational company or in another country (Rao, 2019). New trends along with discoveries are mostly made in English, and this has a tremendous impact on all areas of activity (Simatupang & Rintaningrum, 2021). Undoubtedly, the tourism and hospitality sector is one of them. It helps people unite in a global world, promotes understanding and respect for other cultures and positive intercultural communication, which is necessary in this industry.

A significant aspect of the work for those employed in the tourism industry is learning a foreign language, as this is the primary means of communicating with international visitors (Pek et al., 2019). Furthermore, it helps to understand cultural differences and thereby enhances the quality of the tourism industry (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2013). Understanding not only the meaning but also the cultural aspects of a language is a key criterion, as it helps to appreciate cultural values alongside language proficiency. According to Galan (2025), the number of people able to speak English stood at 1.53 billion worldwide, which demonstrates not only widespread awareness of the language but also the significant role it plays across a broad spectrum of modern business.

The tourism sector, like the hospitality sector, is focused on meeting the desires and needs of its customers and delivering a great customer experience — a combination of tangible elements and the emotions they evoke, which align with customers' expectations at every point of contact (Shaw & Ivens, 2002). There are many different departments within a hotel, each with varying levels of interaction; however, this does not diminish the importance of knowing a foreign language, particularly English. Bobanovic and Grzinic (2011) confirmed that English is the most commonly required language in the hospitality industry and that insufficient language skills directly affect the quality of tourism services.

According to Pulina and Biagi, everything that makes the guest's everyday life more convenient, such as communication, can affect tourist demand (Chassapopoulos et al., 2014). Torres

and Kline (2013) examined the effect of hotel employees' behaviour on tourist satisfaction, naming the importance of professionalism and friendliness as well as the ability to understand guests' needs and effectively solve any problems. The overall importance of service quality to customer satisfaction and retention has also been proven (Deng et al., 2013). English, as a second language learnt and taught for use in tourism, plays a vital role in fulfilling the needs of tourists and accomplishing meaningful and long-lasting experiences between hosts and visitors (Nomnian, 2020).

Blue and Harun (2003) found that hotel front-office staff in Malaysia experienced significant communication difficulties when interacting with international guests, primarily due to limited English vocabulary and a lack of confidence. Similarly, Prachanant (2012) identified that tourism employees in Thailand most frequently needed English for giving information, followed by offering help and making apologies, highlighting the functional nature of English use in hospitality contexts. Leslie and Russell (2006) also demonstrated that language competence among staff is a significant determinant of service quality perceptions in tourist accommodations.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of English proficiency in the hospitality sector, there remains a gap in the consolidation of existing research that comprehensively addresses the relationship between English literacy, customer service quality, and employee training methods within tourism and hospitality. Previous studies have tended to focus on individual aspects — such as language barriers or specific pedagogical methods — without providing an integrated analysis. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the challenges faced by hospitality workers in Central Asian contexts, where English is increasingly required but not yet widely spoken.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the role and significance of English literacy in the tourism and hospitality industry. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. Determine the impact of English literacy on customer service quality and guest satisfaction in tourism and hospitality settings.

2. Identify the key challenges and barriers associated with limited English proficiency among hospitality employees.

3. Describe effective learning methods and strategies for improving English competence among hospitality professionals.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a consolidated review of literature on English literacy in tourism and hospitality. The findings are significant for hospitality management practitioners who seek to improve service quality through language training, for educational institutions designing ESP curricula for tourism students, and for policymakers developing workforce development strategies in tourism-dependent economies. In the context of Uzbekistan's rapidly growing tourism sector, this research is particularly relevant for institutions such as MDIST that prepare graduates for careers in international hospitality.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a systematic literature review methodology, to examine the role of English literacy in the tourism and hospitality industry. According to Snyder (2019), a literature review is a rigorous and transparent research methodology

that enables scholars to synthesise existing knowledge, identify gaps, and build a foundation for future inquiry. This approach was deemed appropriate given the study's aim to consolidate findings from multiple sources rather than generate primary data.

2.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Sources were gathered from academic databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and ResearchGate, as well as industry reports from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The search was conducted using key terms such as 'English literacy in hospitality', 'language barriers in hotels', 'English for Specific Purposes tourism', 'intercultural communication hospitality', and 'customer satisfaction language proficiency'. The selection criteria included: (a) publication in peer-reviewed journals or reputable industry sources; (b) relevance to English language proficiency in tourism and hospitality contexts; (c) publication between 1987 and 2025 to capture both foundational and contemporary research; and (d) availability in English.

2.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was adopted to organise and interpret the collected literature. Key themes were identified inductively from the reviewed sources and grouped into three major categories: (1) the global influence of English and its impact on customer service, (2) issues, challenges, and consequences of language barriers, and (3) methods and strategies for improving English competence among hospitality employees. Findings from individual studies were compared, contrasted, and synthesised to draw coherent conclusions.

2.4 Scope and Limitations

The review encompasses studies from diverse geographical contexts, including Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia), Central Asia (Uzbekistan), Eastern Europe (Ukraine), and the Middle East, to provide a comprehensive perspective. However, as a literature review, this study is limited to secondary data and does not include primary data collection through surveys or interviews. The findings are also constrained by the availability and accessibility of published research in English.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Impact of English Literacy on Customer Service and Guest Satisfaction

Staff in hospitality sectors interact directly with customers on behalf of the company and act as creators of both positive and negative emotions, which in turn influence customer satisfaction. An employee's communication style, appearance and knowledge have an impact; however, an equally significant aspect is the language spoken by the staff. An employee's inability to create a pleasant stay at the hotel or during the provision of services may have a negative impact on revenue generation (Shaw & Ivens, 2002).

To win the battle for customers in the modern world of tourism, all establishments in these sectors compete with one another for customer loyalty by employing various strategies and techniques. One such technique involves creating a sense of belonging to the place, a personalised approach, and the comfortable provision of services and understanding. An employee cannot speak every language in the world to fulfil a customer's wishes; for this reason, knowledge of a single global language is sufficient for effective communication. Furthermore, with correct and competent communication, the likelihood of errors or discrepancies in meeting a guest's request will be significantly lower, meaning that levels of trust and satisfaction will be higher.

Virtually all innovations and cutting-edge technologies are developed in English, and this has not bypassed the technical aspects of running a hotel business. The OPERA Property Management

System serves as a clear example. This system is used for guest check-in and check-out, room allocation, managing inventory on the hotel premises, and meeting guests' needs within the hotel. Although a Russian language option is available, English remains the primary language, and all new features, updates and additional functions are released in English. During shift changes, adjusting the language settings for each staff member on the same device becomes a time-consuming task and may cause frustration among staff members who are unable to use the system due to the unfamiliar language.

These findings are consistent with Deng et al. (2013), who demonstrated that service quality — of which communication is a critical component — directly influences customer satisfaction and retention in international tourist hotels. Similarly, Prachanant (2012) found that giving information, offering help, and making apologies were the most common functions requiring English proficiency in tourism workplaces, confirming that language competence is central to everyday hospitality operations.

3.2 Issues, Challenges, and Consequences of Language Barriers

When employees are not able to communicate effectively, they face numerous consequences, including safety issues, wasted time, reduced guest satisfaction, decreased efficiency, and lowered team morale. Effective communication plays a crucial role in hotel management. Whether it is room cleaning with housekeeping staff or proper communication at the front desk, all steps and messages must be taken into account. Nevertheless, if language barriers enter the equation, response times lengthen and reputation takes a hit. Barriers lead to delayed communication, increasing staff workload and causing longer wait times for guests. These kinds of situations are especially common during peak times when hotels are operating at full capacity (Relay, 2024).

Staff frustration, associated with a high turnover rate or job dissatisfaction, represents another significant challenge. In Indonesia, where English is not widely spoken, communication challenges between hotel staff and foreign visitors frequently arise. Nawawi et al. (2024) analysed 70 relevant guest reviews from TripAdvisor using a qualitative approach and found that limitations in English proficiency lead to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction with hotel services. Specific challenges include limited technical vocabulary, difficulty in understanding different accents and dialects, challenges in responding promptly in emergency situations, grammar difficulties, lack of self-confidence, and pronunciation issues (Al-Jufri et al., 2024). Limited vocabulary is also a main challenge for hotel employees when they have to understand guests' accents (Clarah et al., 2023).

Safety during emergencies represents a particularly critical concern. Language barriers create significant challenges when informing guests about severe weather or medical emergencies (Relay, 2024). These findings align with the work of Macrohon (2021), who found that hospitality workers in the Philippines with limited English proficiency experienced heightened anxiety during emergency protocols, potentially compromising guest safety.

Moreover, competence in English allows individuals to have a voice in different fields worldwide, contributing to effective communication in both local and global contexts. Due to problems in language learning, a shortage of qualified personnel becomes apparent (Nomnian, 2020). Leslie and Russell (2006) similarly noted that the absence of language-competent staff in tourist accommodations led to measurably lower service quality ratings, reinforcing the direct link between English proficiency and organisational performance.

3.3 Methods and Strategies for Improving English Competence

In a rapidly changing world, intercultural relations remain a popular topic of discussion, as cultural awareness is the driving force behind friendly and productive communication. The effectiveness of learning depends on the chosen method, which determines not only the style of education but also the style of learning.

There are many different learning methods, one of which is English for Specific Purposes, or ESP (Wali et al., 2022). This method is tailored to students' needs and is included in the curricula of various educational institutions. Rao (2019) emphasised that ESP programmes designed specifically for tourism and hospitality contexts are more effective than general English courses because they address the specific communicative needs of the industry. At the Management Development Institute of Singapore in Tashkent (MDIST), two types of courses are taught during the Foundation Year to improve English language proficiency: English Plus and English Advanced. By incorporating these subjects into the curriculum, the institution ensures that its graduates are well-prepared for the workplace and enhances their employability upon graduation.

One of the most effective strategies identified in the literature is the active learning method, in which particular attention is paid to the level of engagement to improve academic performance (Panggabean, 2018). This concept has been adapted to facilitate easier auditory comprehension and knowledge acquisition through teaching others. Positive interaction between the teacher and students is also essential (Hilmi & Summiyani, 2023). In the hospitality and tourism sector, this can be applied through cascading training, where those in senior positions train their subordinates, who in turn train those below them in the hierarchy, thereby reinforcing the knowledge acquired previously.

Another method is the direct method of teaching, which involves using only the target language without recourse to the learners' mother tongue (Pangeran, 2025). Visual aids serve as a tool to facilitate the understanding of unfamiliar words (Panggabean, 2018). The priorities of this method are listening and speaking skills, using clear sentence structures, with grammar taught to a minimal extent. Learners practise the language through repetition and understanding of meaning. To create a win-win culture (Shaw & Ivens, 2002) within an organisation, barter-based training arrangements — where an organisation provides accommodation and facilities to a guest-trainer in exchange for English instruction — can serve as a cost-effective and innovative solution (Valenzuela-Garcia, 2018).

Several additional strategies have been implemented and recommended, including English training programmes tailored to hospitality contexts, the use of visual aids, regular monitoring of guest feedback, and the use of technology-assisted communication tools. Proposed training materials focus on listening practice with diverse English accents, essential vocabulary, common expressions, and practical dialogues related to front office operations, restaurant and room service, and housekeeping interactions (Al-Jufri et al., 2024). These strategies are consistent with the findings of Prachanant (2012), who recommended that tourism English curricula prioritise functional language skills over grammatical accuracy.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This study has examined the critical role of English literacy in the tourism and hospitality industry through a comprehensive review of existing literature. Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

First, English proficiency is not merely an ancillary skill but a fundamental requirement for hospitality professionals operating in an increasingly globalised marketplace. English serves as the primary medium of communication between staff and international guests, directly influencing customer satisfaction, brand perception, and revenue generation. The literature consistently demonstrates that hotels and tourism establishments with English-proficient staff receive higher guest satisfaction ratings and stronger customer loyalty.

Second, language barriers pose significant and multifaceted challenges to hospitality operations. These include delayed response times, reduced service quality, staff frustration and turnover, compromised safety during emergencies, and negative guest reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor. These challenges are particularly acute in regions where English is not widely spoken, such as parts of Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

Third, several effective pedagogical approaches exist for improving English competence among hospitality professionals. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes, the active learning method, and the direct method of teaching each offer distinct advantages. Institutional initiatives, such as those implemented at MDIST, demonstrate how curricula can be designed to prepare graduates for the linguistic demands of the industry.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Hospitality organisations should invest in structured English training programmes tailored to their specific operational contexts, prioritising functional communication skills, industry-specific vocabulary, and emergency communication protocols.

2. Educational institutions offering tourism and hospitality programmes should integrate ESP courses into their curricula, ensuring that graduates possess the communicative competence required by the industry.

3. Hotels should consider innovative and cost-effective training solutions, such as barter-based arrangements with English-speaking guests and the use of technology-assisted communication tools.

4. Future research should employ primary data collection methods, such as surveys and interviews with hospitality employees and guests, to empirically measure the impact of English training programmes on service quality metrics.

5. Policymakers in tourism-dependent economies should develop national workforce development strategies that include provisions for English language training in the hospitality sector.

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