

# **The Importance of English Language Proficiency in International Tourism Entrepreneurship**

**Agustina**

<sup>1</sup>Master's Program English of Education, Muhammadiyah University of Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

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## **ABSTRAK**

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This study explores the significance of English language proficiency as a strategic asset for entrepreneurs in the international tourism sector. As the global lingua franca, English facilitates communication with international clients, enhances service quality, and enables market expansion. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the study draws from interviews and open-ended questionnaires with tourism entrepreneurs to examine how English proficiency impacts business operations, customer interactions, and growth potential. Findings reveal that while many entrepreneurs recognize the importance of English, challenges such as low confidence, limited vocabulary, and lack of formal training persist. The study concludes with strategic recommendations to improve English communication skills in tourism, advocating for tailored language training programs and supportive policy interventions.

## **Kata Kunci:**

English Language Proficiency, International Tourism, Entrepreneurship, Communication Skills, Business Growth

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In today's interconnected global economy, the tourism industry functions as a bridge between cultures, markets, and communities. For entrepreneurs engaged in international tourism, success hinges not only on their business acumen but also on their ability to communicate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Among the many languages used in global commerce, English has solidified its position as the dominant medium of communication in tourism-related interactions (Crystal, 2003).

English proficiency enables tourism entrepreneurs to present their products and services professionally, respond to inquiries from international clients, manage cross-cultural service experiences, and build long-term customer relationships. These functions are critical for achieving customer satisfaction and sustaining growth in competitive global markets (Hallett, 2019; Gani & Yusuf, 2021). Consequently, English is no longer a supplementary skill but a core asset in the entrepreneurial toolkit.

This study is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives. First, Communicative Competence Theory emphasizes not just the ability to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to use language appropriately in context (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980).

Second, Human Capital Theory views language skills as a form of investment that increases an individual's productivity and market value (Becker, 1964). Together, these perspectives frame English proficiency as both a communicative necessity and a strategic economic resource.

Despite the centrality of English in global tourism, existing literature largely focuses on general communication practices and overlooks the nuanced experiences of entrepreneurs in non-English-speaking regions. A significant gap remains in understanding how language proficiency intersects with entrepreneurial practices, particularly at the micro-enterprise level where informal learning and digital engagement are prevalent. While previous studies (e.g., Sharma, 2017; Gani & Yusuf, 2021) highlight the benefits of English fluency in expanding market reach, they often neglect the structural and psychological barriers that limit entrepreneurs' access to effective language training.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to investigate the real-world impact of English language proficiency on tourism entrepreneurship in non-English-speaking contexts. Specifically, it examines how entrepreneurs perceive and apply their English language skills in daily business operations, identifies key challenges in achieving communicative competence, and proposes practical strategies to enhance language training and policy support. By drawing on Communicative Competence Theory (Hymes, 1972) and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), the study situates English proficiency as a dual resource—both social and economic.

In doing so, this research contributes to the literature by extending current understandings of language use beyond formal contexts, emphasizing the lived experiences of entrepreneurs in digitally mediated and multilingual service environments. It also aligns with recent discussions on language as entrepreneurial capital (García & Orellana, 2013), thereby reinforcing the relevance of targeted interventions for capacity building in the tourism sector..

## **2. METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to understand how English language proficiency influences the practices of international tourism entrepreneurs. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires, allowing for both in-depth narrative and thematic comparison.

## **2.1 Participants**

A total of 12 tourism entrepreneurs were selected through purposive sampling, all of whom regularly interacted with international clients. Participants included tour guides, travel agency owners, hotel managers, and eco-tour operators with at least one year of experience serving foreign tourists.

## **2.2 Data Collection Procedures**

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via digital platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp. Each session lasted 30–45 minutes and followed a flexible interview guide. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to those unable to participate in interviews, providing additional perspectives.

## **2.3 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the transcribed data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure, the data were coded, categorized, and organized into major themes that reflected common patterns in English usage, perceived challenges, and entrepreneurial outcomes.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study confirm that English language proficiency is an essential skill for tourism entrepreneurs navigating global markets. In a sector that thrives on cross-cultural interactions, the ability to communicate effectively in English plays a direct and multifaceted role in business success. Participants across various tourism-related roles—including tour operators, travel agency owners, and hospitality providers—consistently emphasized how English supports the delivery of customer-centered services, builds business credibility, and enables access to broader international networks.

Participants with strong English skills reported a greater ability to clearly explain tour packages, negotiate service expectations, and resolve customer complaints, often resulting in more positive guest experiences and stronger online reviews. Furthermore, proficiency in English allowed entrepreneurs to build long-term relationships with international clients, maintain partnerships with overseas travel agencies, and adapt to the growing influence of digital tourism platforms, where English is the dominant mode of communication. However, the study also highlights a significant proficiency gap among tourism entrepreneurs. While most participants recognized the importance of English for business

expansion, many admitted to struggling with limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and a lack of confidence in formal or complex conversations. This gap is especially pronounced among entrepreneurs who had minimal access to formal language education and relied instead on self-taught methods or sporadic interaction with foreign tourists.

This finding points to a mismatch between the high demand for English language skills in tourism and the inadequate support systems available to help entrepreneurs meet that demand. In many cases, especially in rural or underdeveloped tourist destinations, there is limited institutional support, such as affordable language courses, tourism-focused English curricula, or practical training programs aligned with real-world communicative needs. This disconnect hampers both individual entrepreneurial growth and the broader competitiveness of the tourism sector.

The findings strongly support the Communicative Competence Theory (Hymes, 1972), which asserts that effective language use involves more than grammatical accuracy. In the tourism industry, successful communication depends on pragmatic competence, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability—skills that allow entrepreneurs to tailor their message appropriately to different contexts and cultures. For instance, using polite expressions, reading non-verbal cues, or knowing when to switch between formal and informal registers are all part of effective communicative performance in cross-cultural settings.

Moreover, the results reinforce the relevance of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which views education and skill development—such as language learning—as a form of investment that yields future returns. Participants who had improved their English skills reported experiencing concrete business benefits, including increased bookings, better networking opportunities, and enhanced service quality. In this context, English proficiency is not merely a linguistic asset, but a strategic tool for entrepreneurial development.

To address the identified language gap and promote more equitable growth in the tourism sector, the study recommends the development of practical, tourism-specific language training programs. These should be easily accessible, contextually relevant, and focused on the specific communicative situations encountered by tourism professionals. Effective approaches may include: Short, intensive workshops on customer service communication and handling complaints in English; Mobile learning tools or language apps designed for tourism contexts; Partnerships between tourism agencies and educational institutions to develop custom language modules; Mentorship programs where more experienced English-speaking entrepreneurs support peers in language development;

Government-funded initiatives that provide language training as part of tourism development strategies. By investing in such targeted support systems, tourism stakeholders—from individuals to institutions—can help reduce the language barrier and foster a more globally connected and competent tourism workforce. This not only benefits entrepreneurs but also improves the overall visitor experience, strengthening the destination's reputation in the international market.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the vital role of English language proficiency in the success of international tourism entrepreneurship. Through qualitative data gathered from tourism practitioners, it became clear that English serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a key to unlocking broader business opportunities, enhancing customer satisfaction, and building global partnerships.

Entrepreneurs who possess strong English skills are better equipped to handle cross-cultural interactions, manage international bookings, deliver engaging tour narratives, and present their services with professionalism. These capabilities contribute directly to their credibility, visibility, and business growth—especially in a globalized market where English often acts as the bridge language.

However, the findings also revealed persistent challenges, especially among entrepreneurs with lower proficiency. Common difficulties include limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, and a heavy reliance on informal learning. These barriers can restrict entrepreneurs from fully engaging with foreign clients or expanding into wider markets. From a theoretical standpoint, the study supports the relevance of Communicative Competence Theory, which emphasizes that effective communication in real-world contexts requires more than grammar—it demands social and strategic use of language. Additionally, Human Capital Theory explains how language skills function as an economic investment that can improve performance and competitiveness.

In light of these findings, it is crucial to develop more accessible and context-relevant English training programs for tourism entrepreneurs. Local governments, tourism departments, and educational institutions should collaborate to provide tailored language support that reflects the authentic communication needs of this sector.

In conclusion, mastering English is not simply an added skill for tourism entrepreneurs—it is a core component of their professional toolkit. Supporting the development of English

proficiency within the tourism industry is an investment not only in individual businesses but in the broader economic and cultural exchange that tourism promotes globally.

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