ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION CHALLENGES AMONG INDONESIAN TRAVEL AGENTS IN MEDAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH INTERNATIONAL CLIENTS

[1]Tri Utami, [2]Alemina Br.Perangin-angin
[1,2]English Department, University of North Sumatera
Email: triutami136@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the challenges of English language acquisition among Indonesian travel agents in their professional communication with international clients. Despite the growing demand for English competence in tourism, little research has examined how linguistic, affective, and contextual factors influence workplace communication in this sector. Addressing this gap, the study aims to identify specific language barriers, coping strategies, and training needs within the framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). A qualitative exploratory design was employed involving ten travel agents from registered agencies in Medan, North Sumatra. Data were collected through open-ended written questionnaires and were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's procedure. The analysis yielded four main themes: limited vocabulary and pronunciation, grammatical and listening comprehension difficulties, affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence, and coping strategies alongside the need for ESP-based training. The findings reveal that English proficiency among travel agents is shaped by limited authentic exposure, insufficient output opportunities, and emotional factors that restrict communication confidence. The study highlights the necessity of contextualized ESP instruction integrating workplace simulations, pronunciation training, and confidence-building activities. These results contribute to SLA and ESP theory by emphasizing the interdependence of linguistic, affective, and contextual dimensions in professional language learning, while providing practical implications for tourism educators and industry stakeholders in designing effective English training programs.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), travel agents, tourism communication, affective factors.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents one of Indonesia's most dynamic and economically significant sectors, contributing substantially to employment, cultural exchange, and national revenue. The continuous rise in global tourism has heightened communication demands within the industry, particularly for professionals such as travel agents. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (2024), Indonesia welcomed more than 15 million international visitors in the past year, underscoring the increasing necessity for effective English communication in daily professional interactions. For travel agents, English proficiency is no longer an optional skill but a prerequisite for quality service, accurate information delivery, and successful intercultural negotiation.

English serves as the world's lingua franca in international communication (Crystal, 2012). It enables tourism professionals to connect local destinations with global audiences and facilitate meaningful cross cultural exchanges. Jenkins (2015) further emphasized that

English proficiency allows service workers to overcome linguistic boundaries and maintain professionalism in intercultural contexts. However, despite its centrality, many Indonesian travel agents continue to experience language related barriers that impede effective communication with international clients. These barriers include limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical difficulties, and insufficient listening comprehension (Rahayu & Suprina, 2017). Recent research confirms that such linguistic challenges often result in client dissatisfaction, reduced confidence, and diminished service quality (Sulasmini et al., 2024).

While previous studies have examined English use in Indonesian tourism settings, most focus on general English proficiency rather than *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)* within workplace communication (Amirbayeva, 2025). Few have explored how travel agents themselves experience and cope with communication challenges in professional contexts. Furthermore, existing studies tend to neglect the affective dimension of language acquisition, such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and self efficacy (Pratiwi, 2022). These factors though less tangible significantly influence the learning process and professional performance of tourism workers. This gap indicates the need for research that integrates both linguistic and psychological aspects of English acquisition among practitioners actively engaged in client interaction.

Theoretically, this study draws on key frameworks from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis asserts that effective language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current competence level. Swain (1995) complements this with the Output Hypothesis, emphasizing the importance of language production speaking and writing in internalizing new linguistic forms. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory further posits that language learning is a socially mediated process, facilitated through interaction and scaffolding. These frameworks collectively suggest that limited authentic exposure, minimal output opportunities, and low social interaction can constrain the linguistic growth of travel agents. Meanwhile, the ESP approach (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) highlights the importance of aligning English instruction with specific occupational contexts. In tourism, this means designing communicative activities such as booking simulations, complaint handling, and cross cultural negotiation practice, which directly reflect workplace realities (Chang, 2024).

Despite the theoretical and pedagogical advances in SLA and ESP, the integration of these frameworks into Indonesian tourism contexts remains scarce. Existing programs often rely on general English curricula that overlook professional demands. Consequently, travel agents are left to rely on self study or translation tools, which provide short term solutions but fail to foster long term language competence. This underlines a critical gap in both research and practice how Indonesian travel agents acquire, use, and perceive English in authentic workplace communication.

Addressing these issues, the present study investigates the English language acquisition challenges faced by Indonesian travel agents in Medan when communicating with international clients. It aims to identify key linguistic, affective, and contextual factors influencing their English use and to explore the coping strategies they employ. By situating the discussion within SLA and ESP frameworks, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of workplace language acquisition in tourism. The findings are expected to inform the development of tailored ESP based training

programs that strengthen both communicative competence and confidence among travel agents. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance Indonesia's tourism professionalism by emphasizing English proficiency as a tool of empowerment and service excellence.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate the challenges of English language acquisition among Indonesian travel agents in their professional communication with international clients. A qualitative approach was selected because it provides in depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and interpretations rather than statistical generalization. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that qualitative designs allow researchers to explore human experiences in natural contexts, which aligns with the aim of this study to uncover linguistic, affective, and contextual aspects of English use in authentic workplace settings.

The research was guided by two main theoretical perspectives: Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Krashen (1985) emphasized that language learning develops most effectively when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current competence level. Swain (1995) proposed that language production, such as speaking and writing, enables learners to process linguistic forms more deeply and develop fluency. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that language learning is socially constructed through collaborative interaction and scaffolding. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stressed that English instruction should be purpose-driven and tailored to learners' professional needs. Chang (2024) demonstrated that the integration of authentic workplace materials and digital tools in ESP instruction enhances learner engagement and readiness for professional communication. These frameworks collectively provide the theoretical foundation for examining how travel agents acquire and use English in their workplace interactions.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method appropriate for qualitative studies seeking rich, relevant data from individuals with specific experiences. The study involved ten participants (n = 10) currently working as travel agents in registered agencies in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia.

To ensure data relevance, participants met the following inclusion criteria: a) at least one year of professional experience as a travel agent, b) regular communication with international clients in English, and c) voluntary agreement to participate in the study.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 30 years and held educational backgrounds in tourism, hospitality, or English. Gender balance was maintained, with five male and five female participants, to capture varied perspectives. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (P1-P10) to preserve confidentiality. Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) recommended that qualitative samples reach data saturation, meaning no new information emerges from additional participants. In this study, data saturation was achieved after ten responses, ensuring thematic completeness and analytical depth.

Data were collected using an open ended written questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. This instrument allowed participants to reflect on their communication experiences, linguistic challenges, and coping strategies in professional settings. The questionnaire contained eight open ended questions, adapted from previous workplace English studies. Rahayu and Suprina (2017) developed similar instruments to assess English use among tourism professionals. Pratiwi (2022) also used open ended prompts to explore affective factors influencing communication performance.

Building on these models, the questionnaire in this study was refined to fit the travel agent context. Two language education experts reviewed the questions for content validity, assessing clarity, relevance, and completeness. Minor revisions were made to wording to ensure accessibility and contextual accuracy. Examples of questionnaire items included: a) "Describe a situation where you found it difficult to communicate with an international client." b) "What strategies do you use to overcome communication challenges when speaking English at work?" This open-ended structure encouraged participants to express personal insights in their own words, producing data suitable for thematic analysis.

Data collection was conducted over four weeks in September 2024. Each participant received an online form link accompanied by an informed consent statement outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation rights. Participants were given one week to submit their responses at their convenience. After responses were gathered, member checking was carried out via email to confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the English Department, University of North Sumatra. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework. The researcher first read the responses multiple times for familiarization. Initial codes were then generated to capture recurring ideas. These codes were grouped into categories representing similar meanings. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinct boundaries. Finally, thematic names and representative quotations were selected to illustrate each finding. An audit trail was maintained to record all coding decisions and analytical reflections. To enhance reliability, peer debriefing was conducted with two applied linguistics experts who reviewed theme definitions and consistency.

The analysis identified four central themes: 1. limited vocabulary and pronunciation challenges, 2. grammatical and listening comprehension difficulties, 3. affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence, and 4. coping strategies and the perceived need for ESP based training. This approach ensured alignment between the qualitative design and the study's exploratory research questions. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). a) Credibility was established through member checking and peer debriefing. b. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of participants and context. c. Dependability was maintained via systematic documentation of analytical decisions. d. Confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in the data rather than personal assumptions.

The researcher practiced reflexivity throughout the process. As a non native English speaker with experience in English language teaching, the researcher acknowledged potential bias in interpreting participants' responses. To reduce this bias, coding and interpretations were reviewed collaboratively with peers, and direct participant quotations were prioritized to represent authentic voices. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of North Sumatra Research Ethics Committee before data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their rights to confidentiality and voluntary withdrawal. Data were anonymized, stored in password protected digital files, and used solely for academic purposes. No identifying details were disclosed in any part of the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on participants' responses to the open ended questionnaire. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to English language acquisition challenges, coping strategies, and training needs among Indonesian travel agents. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: 1. limited vocabulary and pronunciation challenges, 2. grammatical and listening comprehension difficulties, 3. affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence, and 4. coping strategies and the need for ESP based training.

These themes are summarized in Table below.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Representative Quotes, and Interpretations

Theme	Representative Quotes	Interpretation
Limited vocabulary and pronunciation	"When clients ask detailed questions, I struggle with the words." (P1) "I often mispronounce tourism terms." (P9)	Participants have general English competence but lack industry specific vocabulary and pronunciation accuracy.
Grammatical and listening comprehension difficulties	"I get confused forming long sentences." (P3) "Clients speak too fast or use idioms." (P6)	Limited exposure to authentic English restricts grammatical accuracy and comprehension of fast, idiomatic speech.
Affective barriers (confidence and anxiety)	"I hesitate even when I know the words." (P10) "I'm afraid of making mistakes." (P5)	Emotional factors fear, anxiety, and low confidence hinder communication and fluency.
Coping strategies and need for ESP training	"I use translation apps." (P4) "We need more role play practice." (P8)	Participants rely on short term coping mechanisms but express a strong need for structured ESP based programs.

Most participants reported difficulties related to insufficient vocabulary, particularly in tourism specific contexts such as itinerary explanation or technical booking procedures. P1 explained, "When clients ask detailed questions, I struggle with the words," while P9 added, "I often mispronounce technical terms like 'reimbursement' or 'cancellation." These findings indicate that while participants can handle everyday English interactions, they experience lexical gaps when faced with domain specific communication. This aligns with Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who emphasized that professional English learning should be tailored to occupational vocabulary. The results also reflect Krashen's (1985) notion that limited exposure to comprehensible input constrains vocabulary acquisition.

However, not all participants showed equal difficulty. Two respondents (P2 and P7) reported moderate comfort with vocabulary due to prior exposure to English speaking clients, suggesting that contextual experience mitigates lexical limitations. This variability highlights the importance of sustained, authentic English interaction rather than uniform training. Six participants expressed challenges in sentence construction and understanding native speaker speech. P3 noted, "I get confused forming long sentences," and P6 mentioned, "Clients speak too fast or use idioms that I don't understand." Swain (1995) argued that opportunities for output speaking and writing help learners improve grammatical accuracy. Participants in this study confirmed that infrequent speaking practice limited their grammatical development. Similarly, Krashen (1985) emphasized the need for consistent input

exposure; participants' limited interaction with fluent English speakers restricted comprehension of natural speech rhythm and idiomatic expressions.

Interestingly, two participants (P4 and P9) reported improvement in listening skills through self directed exposure to English media such as YouTube travel vlogs. This shows individual variation and self initiated adaptation, reinforcing that English learning outcomes differ depending on motivation and input accessibility. Emotional factors emerged as a prominent theme across participants. Many admitted feeling nervous or fearful during English interactions. P5 stated, "I often hesitate to speak because I'm afraid of making mistakes," while P10 said, "Even when I know the words, I hesitate because I fear mispronouncing them."

Krashen (1985) described such emotional barriers as part of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, where anxiety blocks learners' ability to process input effectively. This was evident in participants' hesitation and avoidance of spontaneous communication. However, the degree of anxiety varied. P2 and P6 expressed moderate confidence when interacting with patient or supportive clients, implying that the communication environment influences emotional comfort. Vygotsky (1978) highlighted that supportive social interaction fosters learning through scaffolding a concept reflected in participants' reports that peer encouragement reduced nervousness.

These results demonstrate that affective barriers are context sensitive rather than uniform, suggesting that confidence building activities could significantly improve communicative performance. To manage linguistic and psychological challenges, participants used a variety of coping mechanisms. P4 and P9 reported frequent use of translation applications such as Google Translate to assist with technical vocabulary. P8 emphasized, "We need more role play practice; theory alone is not enough." These strategies demonstrate learner autonomy but also highlight a lack of formal, structured training. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) advocated that ESP instruction should integrate authentic, job related materials. Chang (2024) added that incorporating digital tools and simulation based learning enhances professional readiness.

Most participants had never attended specialized ESP training programs. Those who did (P3 and P6) reported that generic English courses did not address specific communication needs, such as explaining policies or handling client complaints. This underscores the necessity of industry targeted instruction that combines practical scenarios, pronunciation drills, and confidence building exercises. The four themes collectively address the study's main research question: What linguistic, affective, and contextual factors influence English acquisition among Indonesian travel agents when communicating with international clients? 1. Linguistic factors were reflected in limited vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar competence. 2. Affective factors included fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence that hinder communication. 3. Contextual factors involved limited authentic exposure and insufficient ESP-based training opportunities.

These findings align with SLA and ESP theories, illustrating that English proficiency develops through meaningful exposure, output opportunities, and supportive learning environments. Krashen (1985), Swain (1995), and Vygotsky (1978) each contributed frameworks explaining how language acquisition is shaped by input, output, and social interaction. Importantly, the findings avoid overgeneralization by acknowledging participant variation and differing levels of challenge. Some agents demonstrated greater adaptability, while others remained

constrained by linguistic and emotional barriers. No quantitative statistical tests were used, as this study focused on qualitative depth rather than numerical effect sizes. However, transparency was maintained by including both strong and weak examples of communicative performance, ensuring that all data not only favorable results were represented.

The findings of this study reveal the multidimensional nature of English language acquisition among Indonesian travel agents, encompassing linguistic, affective, and contextual dimensions. When interpreted through the frameworks of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), these results illuminate how language proficiency is shaped not only by exposure and practice but also by confidence, motivation, and situational relevance. From a linguistic perspective, participants demonstrated an adequate foundation in general English but faced significant challenges with domain specific vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy. These limitations are consistent with Krashen's (1985) assertion that restricted access to comprehensible input hinders the acquisition of complex linguistic forms. Similarly, Swain (1995) emphasized that limited opportunities for meaningful output particularly in speaking restrict learners' ability to process and internalize grammatical structures. Participants in this study, who rarely engaged in extended English communication, reported both lexical gaps and difficulty constructing longer, formal sentences. These experiences mirror findings by Rahayu and Suprina (2017), who observed that Indonesian tourism professionals often lack the linguistic precision required for formal client communication.

Pronunciation also emerged as a recurring barrier, particularly when dealing with technical or tourism related terms. Participants' fear of mispronunciation often discouraged them from speaking at all. This finding reinforces the role of input quality in SLA exposure to authentic pronunciation models is crucial for phonological accuracy. The absence of such input in participants' workplace environments limits their progress and perpetuates dependence on translation tools or avoidance strategies.

The study also highlights the strong influence of affective factors such as fear, anxiety, and self doubt. Many participants admitted that nervousness and fear of making mistakes reduced their willingness to speak English, even when they had sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a useful explanation for this phenomenon: high anxiety levels impede learners' ability to process input effectively. Vygotsky (1978) offered a complementary perspective, suggesting that learning is socially mediated and that emotional support from peers or mentors can lower affective barriers. Several participants in this study reported feeling more confident when they practiced English with colleagues or interacted with empathetic clients, which supports the sociocultural notion that language learning thrives within supportive and collaborative environments.

Participants' coping strategies further illustrate how learners adapt in the absence of institutional support. Most relied on translation applications, self study through online videos, or informal peer practice to manage communication challenges. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued that ESP instruction should align directly with learners' professional contexts, while Chang (2024) demonstrated that integrating digital learning tools and authentic workplace materials into ESP programs enhances learner engagement and professional readiness. The participants' responses echo these theoretical claims: their reliance on self-initiated coping reflects the lack of

formal, context-specific English training, reinforcing the urgent need for ESP based interventions tailored to the tourism industry.

Integrating these findings within SLA and ESP perspectives shows that language acquisition among tourism professionals is influenced by three key mechanisms input exposure, output practice, and social interaction. Krashen (1985) focused on exposure, Swain (1995) emphasized production, and Vygotsky (1978) underlined social collaboration; together, these theories explain why participants' progress remains limited in contexts with scarce authentic communication opportunities. The mismatch between general English education and workplace-specific needs, as outlined by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), further constrains professional language competence. The study thus contributes empirical evidence supporting the call for contextualized, workplace-driven language programs rather than one-size-fits-all all curricula.

While these insights are valuable, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small sample of ten participants, all from Medan, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Because the data relied on self reported responses, some experiences may reflect personal perception rather than objective measurement. Nonetheless, qualitative research aims for depth rather than breadth, and the present study provides meaningful contextual understanding of real communicative challenges faced by travel agents. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how targeted ESP interventions such as scenario-based role play or pronunciation workshops affect language proficiency and confidence over time.

The findings hold practical implications for tourism education and English language pedagogy. Training programs for travel agents should prioritize scenario based learning, pronunciation drills, and vocabulary development related to tourism specific interactions. Confidence-building activities such as peer simulations and guided feedback sessions could reduce affective barriers. Moreover, integrating digital learning platforms could extend access to authentic input and promote independent practice outside formal training environments. These recommendations are grounded directly in the participants' reported experiences and align with established ESP and SLA principles. Ultimately, the discussion emphasizes that English proficiency among travel agents is not solely a matter of linguistic skill but also of psychological readiness and contextual learning. Strengthening these dimensions through targeted, evidence-based ESP instruction can better equip tourism professionals to communicate confidently and effectively within the global market.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the challenges of English language acquisition among Indonesian travel agents in their professional communication with international clients. Drawing from the frameworks of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the findings illustrate how linguistic, affective, and contextual factors interact to shape communicative competence in workplace settings. Rather than viewing English proficiency as a purely cognitive skill, this study highlights its multidimensional character dependent on adequate exposure, meaningful output, and affective readiness within authentic communicative contexts. Theoretically, the study contributes to the understanding of how SLA principles particularly those proposed by Krashen (1985), Swain (1995), and Vygotsky (1978) operate within a professional ESP environment. It extends Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) perspective by demonstrating that English

instruction must be context driven and responsive to workplace realities. Practically, the results suggest the need for targeted ESP based training modules that emphasize domain specific vocabulary, pronunciation, and scenario based interaction. Incorporating digital tools, as advocated by Chang (2024), may also enhance exposure to authentic materials and improve learner motivation. These insights are particularly relevant for language educators, curriculum developers, and tourism organizations seeking to strengthen communicative competence within Indonesia's growing tourism sector.

While the study provides valuable insights, its findings are context-specific and should be interpreted with caution. The small sample size and self-reported nature of the data limit generalizability. Future research could adopt larger or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effectiveness of ESP interventions in tourism communication. Despite these limitations, this study offers both theoretical and practical contributions by showing that effective English acquisition for tourism professionals requires an integrated approach that combines linguistic accuracy, emotional confidence, and contextual relevance.

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