

Improving The English Language Curriculum for Tourism Specialists Based on A Competency-Based Approach

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Abstract: This article proposes a competency-based redesign of the English language curriculum for tourism specialists. Drawing on competency-based language teaching (CBLT), ESP/ETP research and tourism curriculum studies, it combines document analysis with design-oriented curriculum development. A framework of core, professional and transversal competences is articulated and mapped to sample modules, learning outcomes and performance-based assessment tasks. The findings highlight how a competency-based approach can align Tourism English education with workplace needs and enhance graduates' employability and communicative readiness.

Keywords: Competency-based approach, curriculum design, English for tourism, ESP/ETP, learning outcomes, tourism specialists, communicative competence, tourism education.

Introduction: The rapid expansion of the tourism and hospitality industry has intensified demands for graduates who can communicate effectively in English while demonstrating digital, intercultural and service-oriented competences. Studies in tourism education repeatedly emphasize that employers expect not only linguistic accuracy, but also the ability to handle authentic service interactions, solve problems and work in multicultural teams [5]. This creates pressure on universities to revise English language curricula for tourism specialists in line with competency-based education.

In language pedagogy, competency-based language teaching (CBLT) reframes courses around what learners are able to do with the language in real-world contexts, rather than around coverage of grammar and topics. Wong (2008) describes CBLT as an outcome-oriented approach in which objectives, learning activities and assessment are organized around clearly defined competences and performance tasks [10]. Rambe (2013) similarly argues that in a competency-based approach "what to produce rather than what to learn" becomes central, focusing on observable language performance linked to real-life communication [9].

In many higher-education programmes, however, Tourism English continues to be delivered through content-heavy syllabi organized by grammar points and general topics, with limited alignment to professional tasks such as front-office communication, tour guiding or travel operations. Research on ESP and English for Tourism Purposes (ETP) has shown that curricula need to be grounded in needs analysis, workplace discourse and clearly specified target competences to support employability [13]. At the same time, tourism management programmes themselves increasingly adopt competency-based frameworks for core disciplinary subjects, but language components are not always integrated into this shift [3], [7].

This article addresses this gap by asking:

1. Which competence clusters should underpin a competency-based English curriculum for tourism specialists?
2. How can existing Tourism English syllabi be restructured into competency-based modules with clear learning outcomes and performance-based assessment?

Methods

Research design

The study combines qualitative document analysis with design-oriented curriculum development. In line with educational design research, the aim was not only to describe existing practice but also to propose a theoretically grounded model that can be adapted and tested in different institutional contexts [4].

Data sources

Three main types of documents were analysed:

1. Theoretical and empirical literature on CBLT and competency-based curriculum design

Key works included Wong (2008), Muluh (2012), and Rambe (2013), which clarify the principles of competency-based language teaching and its implications for syllabus design and assessment [10],[8],[9].

2. ESP/ETP and tourism-specific language curriculum studies

These included articles on English for Tourism Purposes [13], professionally oriented foreign language training for tourism students [5], and ESP course design for tourism students in different countries [6], [12].

3. Competency-based tourism curriculum frameworks and guides

Tourism-focused competency frameworks and curriculum guides, such as the Alaska competency-based curriculum for tourism education [1] and studies of competency-based tourism curricula [3], [7], were examined to identify structures for clustering competences and linking them to learning outcomes and assessment.

In addition, as a contextual reference, an ESP curriculum module for tourism published by the British Council was reviewed to understand how tourism-specific communicative objectives can be articulated at CEFR-aligned levels [2].

Analytical procedures

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Competence extraction and clustering

From CBLT and tourism-education sources, statements describing desired skills, knowledge and attitudes were extracted and coded (e.g., “participate in professional consultations”, “manage intercultural communication”, “handle customer complaints”). These were grouped into broader competence clusters such as professional communicative competence in tourism, intercultural-sociocultural competence, digital and media competence, and learning-to-learn and reflective competence [3], [1].

Gap analysis of typical Tourism English syllabi

Based on examples reported in the literature, existing syllabi were conceptually reconstructed as predominantly topic- and grammar-based [8], [13]. These were compared against the competence clusters to identify missing or weakly represented areas (e.g., assessment of intercultural competence, integration of digital communication tasks).

2. Design of an improved competency-based curriculum model

Using principles from CBLT and competency-based curriculum design [9], [10], [1] the study developed:

- o a competency framework for Tourism English,
- o a set of module-level learning outcomes, and
- o examples of performance-based assessment tasks aligned with workplace scenarios.

The resulting model is conceptual and illustrative; it is intended as a basis for subsequent empirical piloting rather than as a finalized national curriculum.

Results

Competency framework for Tourism English

The document analysis yielded four interrelated competence clusters that should, ideally, guide a Tourism English curriculum.

Professional communicative competence in tourism

This cluster covers the ability to use English effectively in typical tourism and hospitality situations, such as:

- front-office and reservations communication,
- tour guiding and commentary,
- travel agency and tour operations, and
- customer service and problem solving.

Drawing on tourism-focused language studies, this competence involves not only grammatical accuracy, but also fluency, discourse management, formulaic language and genre-specific routines [5], [13].

Intercultural and sociocultural competence

Tourism professionals constantly mediate between cultures. Curriculum documents stress the importance of sociocultural knowledge, pragmatic norms, etiquette, and the ability to adjust language to the expectations of diverse guests [5]. This cluster includes:

- awareness of cultural norms and taboos,
- ability to adapt register and politeness strategies,
- handling misunderstandings and conflicts in intercultural encounters.

Digital and multimodal communication competence

Current tourism practice relies heavily on email, online booking platforms, social media and customer-

relationship management systems. Wu (2017) argues that Tourism English curricula must integrate such digital environments and train students in online interaction, written customer support and the use of multimedia resources [12]. This cluster covers:

- writing professional emails and chat messages,
- managing reviews and social media responses,
- using digital tools for virtual tours and marketing communication.

Learning-to-learn and reflective competence

CBLT literature emphasizes learner autonomy, self-assessment and reflective practice as part of competence [10]. This cluster includes:

- setting personal language-learning goals,
- monitoring progress using can-do statements,
- reflecting on strengths and areas for improvement in professional communication.

From topic-based to competency-based curriculum structure

The analysis of typical syllabi in the literature suggests that many Tourism English courses are structured around unit titles such as At the Hotel, At the Airport, Tourist Attractions, with grammar items and vocabulary lists attached [8]. While these topics are relevant, they do not guarantee that students can perform complex tasks such as handling a complaint in English or negotiating a group booking.

In a competency-based design, such units are re-organized around performance-oriented learning outcomes. For example, instead of Unit 3: Hotel Vocabulary, the curriculum might specify:

By the end of this unit, students will be able to handle check-in and check-out interactions in English, including greeting guests, confirming bookings, clarifying special requests and closing the interaction politely.

Assessment then requires students to demonstrate this ability in a simulated or real service situation, not only in written tests.

Proposed module structure

Based on the four competence clusters, a possible four-semester Tourism English programme (for undergraduate tourism majors) can be organized into the following modules:

1. Tourism Service Communication (A2–B1)

Focus: basic professional communicative competence in typical front-office, information desk and simple tour contexts.

Outcomes: handle routine enquiries, give directions,

describe services, use politeness strategies at an elementary level.

2. Tour Operations and Customer Care (B1–B1+)

Focus: managing bookings, complaints, and tour logistics; telephone and email communication.

Outcomes: process bookings, respond to complaints in writing and orally, explain itineraries and conditions clearly.

3. Tour Guiding and Intercultural Mediation (B1+–B2)

Focus: delivering tour commentary, interacting with groups, managing intercultural incidents.

Outcomes: provide engaging, factually accurate commentaries, adapt explanations to different audiences, handle misunderstandings tactfully.

4. Professional English Projects and Digital Communication (B2)

Focus: integrated projects (e.g., designing a tour product and marketing it online) and workplace-related tasks.

Outcomes: design and present a tourism product in English, manage an online campaign or virtual tour, collaborate in English in mixed teams.

Each module would include competence-aligned assessment tasks, such as:

- customer-service role-plays and simulations,
- case-study presentations,
- professional email portfolios,
- project-based assignments connected to real or simulated tourism enterprises.

Such alignment between modules, competences and assessment is consistent with recommendations for competency-based tourism curricula [1], [3], [10].

Example of learning outcomes and assessment for one module

For the module Tour Operations and Customer Care, illustrative learning outcomes might include:

- LO1: Students can handle customer enquiries about tour packages by phone or online, clarifying dates, prices and conditions (B1+).
- LO2: Students can respond to routine complaints (e.g., delayed transfer, overbooking) in oral and written form, using appropriate apologies, explanations and compensation offers (B1+–B2).
- LO3: Students can update customers about changes (schedule, destination, policy) using clear, polite and concise English (B1+).

Performance-based assessment tasks could be:

- a recorded role-play of a complaint-handling scenario, assessed with a rubric covering language accuracy, politeness, clarity and problem-solving strategies;
- a written email response to a dissatisfied customer;
- a short group presentation where students propose service improvements based on case-study data.

These tasks operationalize core competences identified in tourism language and competency-based education literature, where competence is understood as the ability to mobilize knowledge, skills and attitudes to solve real-world problems.

Discussion

The proposed competency-based curriculum model resonates with broader developments in tourism and hospitality education, where programmes increasingly adopt competence frameworks to align graduate profiles with labour-market expectations [4], [11]. However, language components in such programmes are not always systematically integrated into the same competence structures.

Alignment with CBLT principles

CBLT emphasizes:

- clearly specified learning outcomes,
- performance-based assessment, and
- alignment between workplace requirements and classroom activities [10], [9].

The model presented here follows these principles by defining competences linked to tourism tasks and designing assessment around realistic service scenarios. It thereby responds to concerns voiced in the literature that traditional, exam-oriented English courses do not prepare learners to use the language functionally in professional contexts.

Integration with ESP/ETP and tourism studies

ESP and ETP scholars have long argued that tourism-focused English courses should be grounded in needs analysis, workplace genres and authentic tasks [13], [12]. The competence clusters and sample modules proposed here build on this tradition but make the competency orientation explicit, facilitating curriculum mapping and programme evaluation.

In addition, tourism education research highlights transversal competences such as sustainability awareness, ethics and digital skills [4]. Embedding these within Tourism English through project-based modules and digital communication tasks can make language courses more relevant to contemporary

industry challenges.

Implementation challenges

Despite its potential, a competency-based curriculum entails several challenges:

1. Staff development

Teachers may require support to shift from content-coverage teaching to outcomes-driven, task-based instruction and performance assessment. Pineda Beltrán (2019) notes that teacher beliefs and assessment literacy strongly affect the implementation of CBLT in university contexts.

2. Assessment workload

Designing and rating performance-based tasks can be more time-consuming than traditional tests. Clear rubrics and feasible sampling strategies are needed to maintain reliability without overburdening staff.

3. Institutional alignment

Competency-based reforms must be reflected not only in course syllabi but also in programme-level learning outcomes, credit structures and quality-assurance processes [1], [3].

Contextual adaptation

Tourism labour markets differ significantly across countries and regions. Competence lists and performance tasks should be adapted based on local needs analysis and stakeholder consultation, as recommended in ESP curriculum guidelines.

Limitations and future research

This article is conceptual and design-oriented; it does not report empirical evaluation of the proposed curriculum. Future research could:

- pilot selected modules or tasks with tourism students,
- measure changes in communicative performance and self-reported competence, and
- investigate student and teacher perceptions of the competency-based model.

Longitudinal studies could also explore how Tourism English competences transfer to workplace performance after graduation.

Conclusion

The article has argued that improving the English language curriculum for tourism specialists requires a shift from topic- and grammar-focused syllabi to a competency-based model aligned with workplace demands. By synthesizing insights from CBLT, ESP/ETP and tourism curriculum research, it proposed a framework of four competence clusters—professional communicative, intercultural-sociocultural,

digital/multimodal and learning-to-learn competences—and illustrated how these can structure modules, learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

For curriculum designers, the model provides a starting point for mapping Tourism English courses to programme-level competences and ensuring constructive alignment. For teachers, it offers ideas for integrating authentic service interactions, intercultural incidents and digital communication into classroom practice. Ultimately, a competency-based Tourism English curriculum can contribute to producing tourism graduates who are not only linguistically proficient, but also communicatively competent, reflective and adaptable professionals in a globalized industry.

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