Needs Analysis of English Language Skills for the Saudi Tourism Sector

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 22 Oct 2023 Accepted: 24 Jul 2025 Available online: 13 Aug 2025 **Keywords:** ESP English for tourism Business English Curriculum design Saudi tourism	The need for English language proficiency among professionals and global citizens has led to an immense interest in designing appropriate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabi that cater to the actual needs of specific sectors. Among these sectors, tourism is a vital one that contributes to the national economy, creates employment opportunities, and promotes international relations. Despite the growing interest in tourism and new ESP areas in Saudi Arabia following the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 strategic plan, there is a lack of studies on syllabus design that are based on needs analysis in the Saudi Arabian context. This study aims to address this gap by administering a three-construct questionnaire to 47 Saudi tour guides to identify the most required functions, needed skills, and encountered difficulties in their profession. The results indicate that tour guides are mostly asked to introduce themselves and give directions to tourists. Consequently, they identified speaking and listening as the most needed skills. Further, they reported that they face challenges with foreign accents and in expressing their thoughts. The target needs list generated from this study can inform future tourism syllabus design, and further research is recommended to validate and elaborate on these findings.

INTRODUCTION

There is a global consensus that English is the language of international communication. This fact has made it the ideal language in almost all fields, including education, science, media, and the Internet (Zahedpishehet et al., 2017). In business sectors, English is the backbone of professional practice as it fosters effective communication with the wider population (Astawaa et al., 2018). Accordingly, educational systems aspire to prepare their prospective professionals with appropriate English linguistic competencies that enable them to be efficient members of their professional communities and tailored according to their specific needs (Hutchinson &

Waters, 1987). This action is necessary in response to the high need for competent professionals with specialized skills in English, which enables countries to cope with the development in various aspects (Al-Tarawneh & Osam, 2019). It was further enhanced by the development of linguistic theories that shifted from a mere description of language to a deeper study of how language is used in different settings, resulting in the well-known field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)

The significance of using the English language in different workplaces can be better exemplified by English for tourism, where "mastering foreign language skills is essential" (Abdel Ghany & Abdel Latif, 2012, p. 93) as it is a tool for interacting with people from different linguistic backgrounds. Tourism is an industry that contributes to several important areas besides earning foreign currency, such as increasing job opportunities, supporting environmental protection, promoting national culture, and fostering a sense of patriotism (Abdel Ghany & Abdel Latif, 2012; Prachanant, 2012). Furthermore, various businesses are connected to tourist activities such as transportation, lodging, food, and services (Astawaa et al., 2018). All these facts prepare competent professionals for the sector, which is part of the strategic plans that ensure its efficient operational performance.

The tourism industry has recently gained significance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a key economic sector, aligned with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. This initiative aims to diversify revenue streams beyond oil and its byproducts (Aljabour, 2017) and promote sectors such as technological innovation, privatization, renewable energy sources, and tourism. According to the National Tourism Strategy under Saudi Vision 2030, the country aims to develop the tourism industry. This plan requires improving English language teaching practices (Albiladi, 2022) to prepare a highly skilled workforce equipped with effective language skills, particularly in English, and to meet the communication demands of diverse and international clients which entails the need for multilingualism and translanguaging (Alqahtani, 2022). Consequently, the language needs related to the tourism sector's target situation have evolved and become more extensive.

Globally, tourism has experienced significant changes driven by technological advancements, sustainability concerns, and shifting traveler preferences. This change has been substantial since the introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), including UN SDG 8 "Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth," SDG 12 "Responsible Consumption and Production," and SDG 13 "Climate Action," which have contributed to the growth of eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and digital tourism.

These trends necessitate a workforce proficient in various languages to provide tourists personalized and culturally sensitive experiences. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) emphasizes the importance of multilingualism as an integral part of the tourism experience and development (UN Tourism, n.d.), as it enhances the visitor experience and fosters global understanding. Aligning with these global trends, Saudi Arabia's tourism sector also focuses on educating students and professionals about the SDGs related to tourism. This approach prepares them to handle tourism-related tasks more effectively and equips them with the necessary language skills to navigate the evolving demands of global tourism.

Despite recognizing the importance of the English language for the successful implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, there is a lack of acceptable outcomes that match this recognition (Al Mukhallafi, 2019; Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). This lack has resulted in poor English proficiency among tour personnel, as observed by the researchers during field training visits and discussions with graduates and present students. The study hypothesizes that this gap exists because tourism courses are relatively new in Saudi Arabia, and even the existing ones are not designed based on research-based rubrics. As far as the researchers know, there is no formal published needs analysis to identify the English language requirements for tourist personnel, even though they are expected to use English in real-life situations using a syllabus created by industry experts. Consequently, the current syllabi do not meet the actual demands of tourist workers. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing a target needs list of the required competencies that enable prospective tour guides to achieve their tasks efficiently. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the most important language functions performed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia?

RQ2: What are the most important English language skills needed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia to perform their tasks?

RQ3: What are the most prominent language difficulties faced by tour guides in Saudi Arabia?

The study is deemed significant as it addresses the critical role of effective communication in enhancing the tourist experience in Saudi Arabia and how to improve the ESP syllabus to foster it. By identifying the essential language functions and skills tour guides require, the research can provide significant insights that can inform curriculum development. Additionally, understanding the language difficulties tour guides face can lead to targeted interventions, ultimately improving service quality and promoting the growth of the tourism sector in the region. Accordingly, this study contributes to academic knowledge and supports the strategic development of tourism in Saudi Arabia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English for specific purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) originated from the recognized need for English courses tailored to the specific requirements of particular professions and academic disciplines. Classic definitions, such as those offered by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), describe ESP as an approach shaped by the explosive growth in scientific, technical, and economic activities worldwide and rooted in three main areas: Globalization of communication: The dominance of English as the medium for international interaction led educators to recognize the need for specialized varieties of English appropriate for various fields. Functional linguistics: Emphasizing language use in authentic contexts, this standpoint highlights the distinct nature of workplace communication, prompting instructors to consider which language forms best fit which contexts. Learner-centred educational psychology: Adopting a focus on learners' needs and characteristics, ESP uses needs analysis as its backbone, based on the idea that courses aligned with learners' professional and personal interests enhance motivation and learning outcomes.

Recent research in ESP addresses significant empirical developments and practical frameworks for syllabus design. In this regard, Vance (2021) provides a comprehensive review of ESP's development, focusing on the methodological integration of corpus linguistics, genre analysis, and task-based learning. ESP classrooms today utilize real-life occupational tasks and data-driven syllabi to foster sociocultural competence alongside linguistic skills. The emphasis is on practical, contextualized instruction, preparing learners for actual communicative needs in professional fields.

Min (2020) synthesizes findings from 16 empirical studies across fields such as engineering, medicine, business, and hospitality. The review reveals that needs analysis is foundational in ESP research, but challenges remain in bridging the gap between classroom language and workplace requirements. In particular, the study highlights the importance of: Ongoing collaboration between language and subject instructors and negotiating course specificity to suit both immediate learner needs and flexible future demands.

A critical subset of ESP research focuses on the tourism and hospitality sector, where communication demands are uniquely complex. Lin et al. (2014) conducted a mixed-method needs analysis with hospitality management undergraduates in Taiwan, identifying key takeaways for ESP syllabus designers. They identified speaking and listening as the most essential skills for tourism professionals, particularly in customer service, guiding, and problem-solving roles. Additionally, they discovered that authentic, workplace-based activities in the curriculum promote practical skills, preparing students for real industry challenges. Although collaborative curriculum development, involving input from academic staff and industry professionals, ensures the course remains relevant to current labor market demands.

Emphasizing workplace alignment, Montano and Corría (2021) advocate for an ESP curriculum that moves beyond static vocabulary instruction. Their research recommends integrating communicative, scenario-based modules tailored for tourism, incorporating the local context and diverse student backgrounds.

All these studies agree that every practical course begins with a systematic investigation of learners' actual language needs and workplace tasks.

Needs analysis approach

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued that every English course, including general English courses, is designed to meet specific needs that must be analyzed. Thus, it may seem a hasty selection to associate NA with ESP. However, they remarked later that "what distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but the awareness of the need" (p. 53). Subsequently, NA helps determine the type of ESP course a student needs by identifying what they gain from language learning, as stated by (Lou et al., 2020), while general English courses are unclear in defining their needs or how these needs can be accomplished. Accordingly, NA is considered an essential component of ESP practitioners, including course designers, instructors, testers, and scholars.

Many types of NA have been proposed. Firstly, Munby (1978) detailed the procedures for NA in a set of steps termed Communication Needs Process (CNP). In CNP, "we take account of the variables that affect communication needs by organizing them as parameters in a dynamic relationship to each other" (p. 32). When implementing this model, CNP involves questions to determine communication variables including topic, participants, and medium.

According to Champers (1980), language in the context of needs analysis refers specifically to the language utilized in the target situation, where the primary focus is on identifying communicative needs and how they manifest through the analysis of communication within the target situation, a concept he refers to as Target Situation Analysis (TSA). Brown (2016) expands on this, stating that TSA identifies the specific tasks for which students require the language. Thus, *target needs* can be defined as the communicative requirements and specific tasks identified by analyzing the language used in real-life target situations (Brown, 2016; Champers, 1980).

The target needs of the learners can be determined in terms of necessities, lacks, and wants (Munby, 1978).   Necessities are what the learners must know to perform their future tasks effectively. For example, what linguistic skills can be mastered to guide tourists efficiently? On the other hand, lacks are established by determining the gap between the learners' current and target proficiency levels. This will help decide whether learners need instruction on specific points. Finally, wants mean the learners' views of their own needs, which may sometimes conflict with the needs stated by analysts because wants are subjective and vary from one person to another.

To account for this dilemma, Brindley (1989) differentiated between objectives and subjective needs. For him, objective needs are those observed by analysts based on facts and observations, while subjective needs are those felt by learners themselves and related to affective and cognitive factors. Later, Brown (2022) expands the classification of NA and identifies three categories: Present Situation Analysis (PSA), Target Situation Analysis (TSA), and Learning Situation Analysis (LSA). The first addresses students' proficiency levels, the second accounts for the tasks for which the students need the language, and LSA is about the process required to achieve the tasks. This taxonomy corresponds to the former in that "TSA includes objective, perceived and product-oriented needs; an LSA includes subjective, felt and process-oriented needs; a PSA estimates strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, and learning experiences." (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 124). However, Pracanant (2012) acknowledged that NA involves learning about the learners' current knowledge and skills as well as what they still need to acquire or perform.

Whatever the type or the steps of the NA, Researchers acknowledged that it is a crucial step in designing curricula and syllabi for language teaching and learning (Richards, 2001). Beside being motivating for learners, as it presents courses that not only address their needed skills, NA is also considered effective as it "enables learners to "transfer these study skills to their real-life tasks" (Ramirez, 2015, p. 381). This means that any ESP course or curriculum design should take learners' needs analysis as a starting point as it is "the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a very focused course" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 121). Munby's (1978) CNP

approach was adopted as a framework for the study to inform the questionnaire design, focusing on learners' *necessities* and *lacks* as discussed in the methods section.

Saudi vision 2030

The context of the present study can be better understood when recalling the huge reforms that occurred in Saudi Arabia after the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016. This ambitious strategic plan was summarized in three principles: "a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation" (Aljabour, 2017). The thriving economy is believed to be achieved by introducing alternative income-generating resources other than oil and gas. Accordingly, investment in various sectors, including tourism, was encouraged and strongly supported by the leadership.

Emerging from the Saudi Vision 2030, the National Tourism Strategy of Saudi Arabia aims to "strengthen Islamic and national identity, grow and diversify the economy, increase employment, and enhance government effectiveness" (The Saudi Ministry of Tourism, 2023). These objectives were achieved by hosting 100 million visits by 2030, supporting the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 10%, and creating around 1.6 million job opportunities. These ambitious objectives must be accompanied by massive reforms and actions in all related aspects, the most important of which is promoting the workforce that can transform the strategy into reality. To this end, it was from the beginning believed that the "highly educated younger generation is one of the most important pillars of this vision" (Al Mukhallafi, 2019, p. 209).

One heavily discussed aspect of education development concerning Vision 2030 was EFL and its reality and perceived contribution to achieving the vision. In this regard, varied viewpoints were proposed. For example, Saudi Vision was considered a strong instrumental motivator for EFL learners (Almegren, 2022) as the English language is now more associated with job opportunities and social recognition. Nevertheless, other views state that the current low levels of EFL learning would hinder achieving the Saudi Vision 2030 principles, simply because it outputs learners far from international workforce standards (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017) required to achieve the thriving economy stated in the vision. Accordingly, it is envisaged that reviewing the current courses, especially those related to domains associated with the Saudi Vision 2030, should be considered a strategic educational objective. This can be achieved by providing appropriate ESP courses based on robust NA procedures.

As it is clear in this review, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP focuses on tailoring language instruction to the specific professional needs of learners, recognizing that different fields require different language skills. In Saudi Arabia's tourism industry, identifying the key language functions tour guides perform is essential for designing practical ESP courses. On the other hand, Munby's (1978) CNP model provides a systematic approach to identifying these needs by analyzing the variables that affect communication in specific situations. Applying this model to tourism helps determine the particular linguistic skills that tour guides need to communicate effectively with international visitors. By integrating these perspectives, it becomes clear that the study's research questions are crucial for developing targeted language training programs. This alignment with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 highlights the need for a skilled workforce capable of meeting the needs of diverse and international clients.

Previous studies

The tourism industry is a major source of employment worldwide, contributing to exports and reflecting national identity through globalization and mobility. As a result, researchers have explored various aspects of the industry, including how to cultivate a linguistically competent workforce that can support its objectives. Numerous studies in this field have adopted NA approaches to develop relevant teaching materials for the tourism industry. However, as tourism is a recent development in Saudi Arabia, few studies examine the Saudi context.

Prachanant (2012) surveyed 40 tourism employees based in Thailand on the needs of tour guides to perform their tasks properly. The study also investigated the expected function of tour employees and the difficulties they face in performing these functions. Using a mixed questionnaire, the results revealed that speaking is the most essential need, followed by listening. It was also found that giving information, providing services, and offering help were the most required functions. However, executing these functions is hindered by their inability to understand foreigners' accents and unfamiliar vocabulary. Similarly, Ratminingsih et al. (2018) employed a mixed-method research design to explore the target needs of 56 Indonesian tour guides. After observing, surveying, and interviewing the participants, the results revealed that the respondents suffer from poor speaking skills, face difficulties in listening, and urgently need conversation skills training.

Other studies focused on teaching material intended for prospective tour guides. In this regard, Wijayati and Khafidhoh (2021) suggested a conversation-based teaching material for the purpose. The study founded its method on interviews with different stakeholders, including workers in the field, students, and teachers. It finally suggested that the model includes 11 categories, each with expression context and example. The categories include the main functions expected from the tour guides, such as greeting, giving suggestions, describing things, offering opinions, giving advice, etc. Although the model seems informative and convenient, no details about contextual considerations of using the model, assessment of students, or proper linguistic knowledge required were provided. A more structured teaching material was suggested in another study (Suparsa et al., 2021). After analyzing the suitable discourse for tour guiding through observation and interviews with different stakeholders of the profession, the study recommends integrating sociocultural aspects in the teacher's language teaching interaction. Also, it acknowledged the role of the teacher in including adequate cultural aspects in language teaching. This can be done by giving formal grammatical language forms.

The tourism industry in Saudi Arabia has experienced significant growth and expansion since the introduction of Saudi Vision 2030. Prior to this, tourism was mainly limited to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, with a focus on hotel operations and specific tourist destinations. As a result, few studies have examined the overall state of tourism in Saudi Arabia, including the English language proficiency of workers in the industry. Among the few studies in the strand is (Al-Malki et al., 2022), which investigated the communicative needs of the Saudi tourism workforce. The study surveyed 77 workers in the tourism industry regarding the skills they needed to perform their job tasks. The findings showed that the skills required are listening,

speaking, reading, and vocabulary, respectively. Finally, the study proposed an ESP teaching model based on these needs. The model places the learner at the focus of suggesting four areas to be involved: PSA, intrinsic motivation, communicative needs, and extrinsic motivation.

The existing literature on English language skills for tour guides reveals significant research gaps, particularly in contextual relevance, comprehensive skill assessment, identification of language difficulties, and curriculum development. While previous studies have examined needs analysis in other countries, there is an observable paucity of research that addresses the issue in Saudi Arabia. The researchers believe that the Saudi tourism sector's unique cultural and operational context may yield different results and implications for similar contexts and countries. Additionally, there is a lack of detailed exploration into the specific language functions and skills required by Saudi tour guides and an insufficient examination of the language difficulties they face. Furthermore, although some studies suggest teaching materials, they frequently lack empirical validation or contextual adaptation. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing tailored instructional resources that effectively meet the needs of tour guides in this rapidly evolving industry. This is what the present study aims to contribute to.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The research design utilized in this study is a descriptive quantitative design. The data are analyzed using the descriptive quantitative method, which employs justifications or discussion questions. This technique is frequently employed to expose the true nature of events.

Participants

The study participants were selected based on specific criteria. There were 47 participants whose ages ranged from 20 to 40, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Participants characteristics

Gender	Male	Female	
	29	18	
Education	Diploma	Bachelor	Masters
	9	11	27
Total		47	

The sample for this study was selected using the convenience sampling method. The selection criteria included that participants (1) had studied in Saudi Arabia, (2) held a university degree in a field related to hospitality and tour guiding, (3) had not received any further English language training outside of Saudi Arabia, and (4) were currently employed as full-time tour guides. Though no criterion was set to determine the nationality of the selected guides, all

the participants were Saudi. The study's purpose was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Research instrument

The questionnaire

The questionnaire design used in this study is based on the theoretical frameworks and findings of several previous research studies. Firstly, Munby's (1978) CNP model, which identifies learners' necessities and lacks, was used to draft the questionnaire's focus on the essential language functions and skills needed for tour guides. The questionnaire of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) was used to assess language functions in the tourism context, as it emphasizes tailoring language instruction to specific professional needs. Additionally, Prachanant's (2012) research on the language needs of Thai tour guides offers practical insights that guided the questionnaire's content.

The questionnaire begins with a section asking respondents about their demographic information. It then includes three sections: Section one includes five-point Likert scale questions about language functions required from tour guides (ranging from 5 for Strongly Agree to 1 for Disagree). Section two includes ranking questions where participants were asked to prioritize their needs of linguistic skills and aspects in order of importance, and section three focuses on language difficulties through six five-point Likert-scale questions. The questionnaire primarily focused on learners' necessities and lacks, as described by Munby (1978). Since wants are more related to LSA, which is beyond the scope of this study, no items related to wants were included in the questionnaire.

Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which a study accurately reflects or measures the specific concept the researcher is attempting to measure. The researchers established the face and content validity of the questionnaire by consulting four experts, including two workers at a tourism company and two university professors specialized in TESOL and Applied Linguistics. The research proposal and questions were provided to the experts, who were asked to evaluate the relevance of the questions, their linguistic structures, and their effectiveness in measuring the intended outcomes. The experts mostly agreed on the items but offered suggestions related to the language functions to be learned and the difficulties faced by tour guides. The questionnaire was revised based on their feedback.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of results obtained from an experiment, test, or measuring procedure across multiple trials. In this study, the researchers piloted the questionnaire with 23 interns from a tourism institution and used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to evaluate its reliability. The questionnaire yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.77, which is considered sufficient for use as a data instrument according to (Larson-Hall, 2010), who acknowledged a level between 0.7 and 0.8 as an acceptable level of Cronbach's alpha.

Data collection

The data for this research were collected over three weeks from a sample of 47 tour guides operating in Saudi Arabia. To facilitate the collection process, the questionnaire was developed using Google Forms for efficient data gathering and analysis. The survey link was distributed to the participants via email to ensure easy access to the questionnaire. Follow-up reminders were sent through email and WhatsApp to enhance response rates and encourage participation. In alignment with the College's Research Unit's recommendations following their review of the research proposal, informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection to ensure they were fully informed of the study's purpose and their rights as participants. All 47 tour guides who received the survey completed it, resulting in a 100% response rate.

Data analysis

After receiving the data, the researchers utilized Microsoft Excel to analyze the data and generate graphs and tables from the results. We used descriptive statistics measures, specifically the means of the Likert scale values, to show the average of the responses to account for sections one and three of the questionnaire, i.e., language functions and language skills. For the ranking questions, we used frequencies to order the skills according to their importance as perceived by the respondents. Finally, the findings were mapped to account for any alignments between reported needs, required functions, and perceived difficulties as presented by the participants. The results of those stages of analysis are presented and discussed below.

RESULTS

The current study was conducted to investigate the most important language functions that Saudi tour guides need to perform in their profession, identify the language skills needed by tour guide professionals in Saudi Arabia, and identify the linguistic obstacles facing tour guides and hindering them from performing their job appropriately. After collecting and analyzing the responses to the questionnaire, we found the following results:

Language functions

The results of items related to language functions are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

The average of language functions performed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia

Language function	Average
Introducing myself and others to the tourists.	4
Giving directions to the tourists I guide.	4
Giving information to the tourists.	3.9
Offering help to the tourists.	3.8
Making suggestions to the tourists.	3.5
Apologizing.	3.2
Asking for permission.	2.4

The above table shows that most participants agreed that introducing oneself, giving directions, and offering help are the most important language functions performed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia.

Linguistic skills, aspects, and communication skills

Linguistic skills

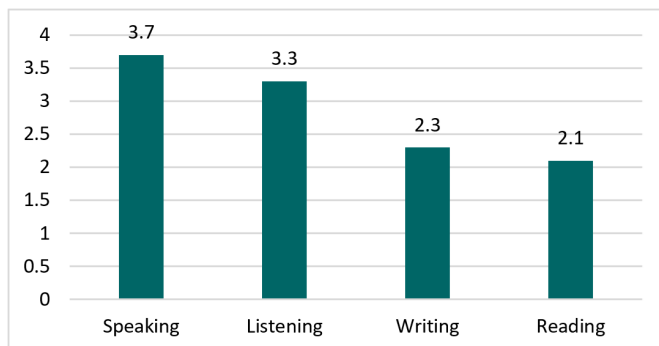Figure 1 shows the average of the four skills needed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia:

Figure 1 The average of the most needed skills by tour guides in Saudi Arabia

As shown in the above figure, the speaking and listening skills were selected by the participants as the most essential skills needed by tour guides in Saudi Arabia.

Linguistic aspects

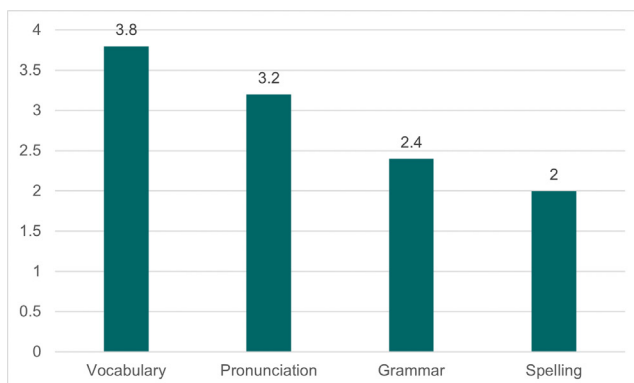Figure 2 shows the most important linguistic aspects needed by a tour guide in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 2 The most important linguistic aspects needed by tour guides

From the figure above, it is concluded that vocabulary is the most essential linguistic aspect needed by a tour guide, followed by pronunciation. At the same time, spelling is perceived as the least important aspect of language for tour guides.

Communicative skills

The following figure shows the most important language-related communicative skill a tour guide needs.
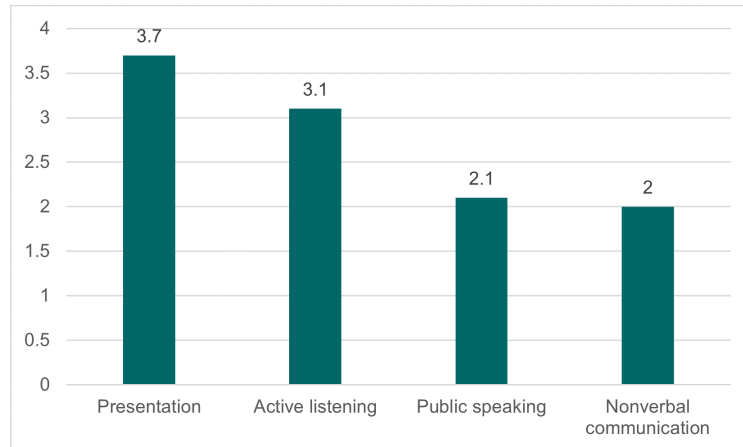

Figure 3 The most needed communicative skills by tour guides

According to Figure 3, presentation is the most important communication skill needed by the tour guides, followed by active listening. On the other hand, public speaking and nonverbal communication were underestimated as necessary communicative skills for the participants.

Language difficulties

The most prominent language difficulties that face tour guides in Saudi Arabia are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

The most prominent language difficulties for tour guides in Saudi Arabia

Language difficulty	Average
Understanding tourists because of their accent or pronunciation.	4
Expressing my thoughts and ideas in speaking.	3.9
Understanding some linguistic idioms and expressions from English-speaking tourists.	3.8
Misunderstanding tourists because of cultural differences.	3.2
Interpreting reading materials.	2.8
Writing various documents related to my job.	2.6

Table 3 shows that the most prominent language difficulty faced by tour guides is understanding tourists because of their accent or pronunciation, followed by expressing their thoughts and ideas in speaking, and difficulties in semantic aspects related to vocabulary and idioms. It is further noted that difficulties related to reading and writing are not reported as significant challenges to the participants.

In summary, Table 4 outlines and ranks the essential linguistic and communicative skills for prospective Saudi tour guides based on their importance as perceived by the study participants.

Table 4
Summary of the target needs and required tasks of Saudi tour guides

Rank order*	Needed language skills	Required tasks	Needed language aspects	Communicative skills
1st	Speaking	Self-introduction	Vocabulary	Presentation
2nd	Listening	Giving directions	Pronunciation	Active listening
3rd	Writing	Giving information	Grammar	Public speaking
4th	Reading	Offering help	Spelling	Nonverbal communication

*Note. Items are ordered according to their importance as perceived by the respondents.

It was anticipated that there would be a significant level of consistency between the reported needs, the required functions, and the encountered difficulties. Although such consistency is present, it is not entirely symmetrical when these variables are compared. Figure 4 provides a detailed mapping of the relationship and alignment of linguistic skills with functions and difficulties. The arrows in the figure highlight which linguistic skills are crucial for performing specific aspects. When the corresponding skills and functions align in the same status, it indicates a level of consistency between them, and the same is considered between functions and aspects.
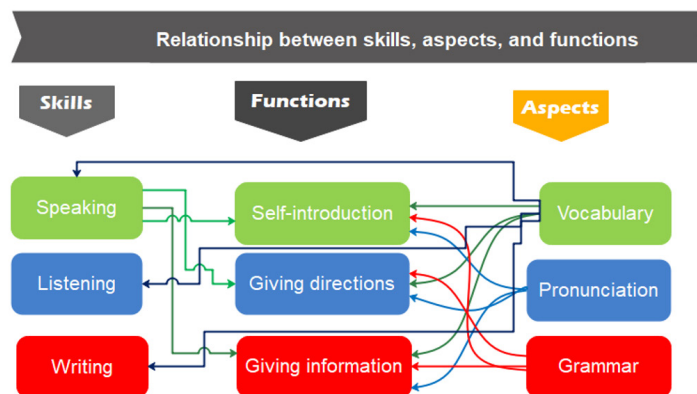

Figure 4 Mapping of the relationship and alignment of linguistic skills with functions and aspects

Figure 4 shows a strong alignment between the most needed skill, which is speaking, and the primary required functions, such as introducing oneself, giving directions, and providing information. Listening is the second most important skill, especially when giving directions, as it is essential for effective communication alongside speaking. Among the linguistic aspects, vocabulary is the most important because it influences all functions. Pronunciation, closely related to speaking, is the second most crucial aspect. Figure 5 below shows how these language skills and aspects relate to the difficulties reported.
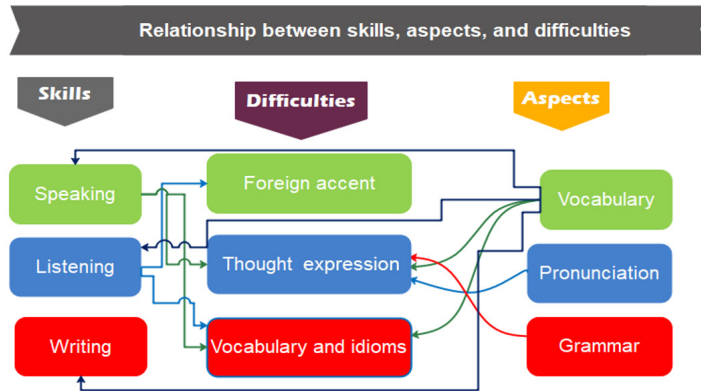
Figure 5 Mapping of the relationship and alignment of linguistic skills with difficulties and aspects

The first reported difficulty is related to neither the first needed skill nor the aspect. Further, the second difficulty is related to the first skill and the first aspect, while vocabulary and idioms were ranked last. This reflects less consistency between the results.

DISCUSSION

To set the scene for exploring the needs of the tour guides, the respondents were surveyed on the tasks and functions mostly required of Saudi tourism workers. The results revealed that self-introduction was the most required function, followed by giving directions and information. On the other hand, asking for permission and apologizing were regarded as the least required tasks. This finding was anticipated as they seem to be terms of reference for tour guides. However, the order of importance of such tasks was not expected. It was envisaged that giving directions, information, and help would be more critical to tour guides than presenting oneself. Also, using polite conversational techniques such as apologizing, asking for permission, and offering suggestions was expected to gain higher status. Such contradiction with the researchers' anticipation can be traced back to other needs of the participants, which are reported in their responses. In other words, the same participants acknowledged that they need more competencies in speaking skills, which can be proved by their low awareness of these politeness techniques in their work.

The findings showed that most tourism employees in this study rated speaking and listening skills as highly needed. This finding aligns with nearly all previous studies that examined tour guides' skill needs, such as Prachanant (2012) and Ratminingsih et al. (2018). It further implies that tourism syllabi should heavily emphasize speaking and listening because the job is interactive. Writing and reading were underestimated by the participants, which seems logical because of the limited use of these two skills in their jobs.

Considering other linguistic aspects, vocabulary was nominated as the most needed aspect for tour guides. The result seems logical and corresponds with the first finding, as rich vocabulary is a key factor for successful speaking and listening. Previous studies also identified

vocabulary as a key need for tour guides in international, regional, and Saudi contexts, as found by Al-Malki et al. (2022), Aldohon (2014), and Prachanant (2012). The importance of vocabulary for tourism students is not an exception from its significance to ESP courses in general, as suggested by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), who considered technical and sub-technical vocabulary a key need for all ESP learners. Another study (Zahedpisheh et al., 2017) found that teaching vocabulary for tourism classes is essential as it can serve to expand more than one skill at a time.

The most needed communicative skills are also related to the findings of previous studies and correspond to the other results of the present study. Presentation skills are regarded as the most needed, and their connection to speaking skills and vocabulary, the other top needed language skill and aspect, is undeniable. Further, active listening was ranked second-needed communicative skill, just as listening was ranked second-needed language skill. Similar to its corresponding skills, i.e., writing and reading, nonverbal communication was ranked the least needed skill. Presentation skills for tour guides involve many tasks, which were also ranked in the top first statuses, including presenting information about tour attractions and giving directions to enrich the tourists' experiences. All these skills require high speaking and listening proficiency, as reported by the participants.

This study also examined the challenges tour guides encounter while performing their tasks. The findings revealed that foreign accents, expressing thoughts, and unfamiliar vocabulary were the most significant obstacles faced by tour guides. Previous research has also identified pronunciation as a problem for tour guides. For instance, Prachanant (2012) highlighted foreign accents as a key challenge, while Aldohon (2014) found that the fast pace of English-speaking tourists was problematic for tour guides. Also, unfamiliar vocabulary as a challenge to tour guides is not an unprecedented result by this study, as it was also yielded by both studies mentioned above. Further, Wijayati and Khafidhoh (2021) reported a lack of appropriate expression for achieving guiding tasks as a problem for tour guides, to which they suggested responding by designing a context-based conversational syllabus for tour guiding. Other results of the present study coincide with the findings on difficulties. The top encountered difficulties are associated with the top needed skills. However, an exception is observed in that the participants underestimated the difficulty of cultural misunderstanding, although it frequently appeared in the literature as a challenge that tour guides face (Suparsa et al., 2021). This underestimation should not reduce the importance of integrating cultural awareness in tour ESP syllabi. Previous research and recommendations from international organizations such as the United Nations emphasize fostering cultural understanding. Consequently, developing awareness of cultural differences should remain a priority when designing curricula for tour guides, ensuring they are well-equipped to navigate intercultural interactions despite participants' perceptions.

Practical applications of language functions

Based on the results of the study, which support former theories of ESP and previous studies in this regard, the major implication of the revealed findings is to use the reported needs to design a tour-guide syllabus that takes into account the most required functions, the most

needed skills, and the most encountered difficulties. Methodologically speaking, the syllabi should be conversational, based on a sociocultural approach, and focus more on speaking and listening skills rather than an extensive emphasis on reading, writing, and grammar. Such a syllabus should be delivered using a communicative teaching method, and students should be evaluated according to their actual use of the embodied communicative activities. In such a syllabus, examples of real-life interactions such as those provided in Table 5 below should be incorporated.

Table 5
Examples dialogues for tour guides

Language function	Example dialogue
Introducing myself and others to the tourists.	TG: *Hello everyone, my name is …., and I will be your guide today. This is my colleague …, who will assist us.*
Giving directions to the tourists.	TG: *To reach the next landmark, please follow me down this path.* T: *Which way do we go?* TG: *Take a right at the palm tree.*
Giving information to the tourists.	TG: *This is the Masmak Fort, which is known for its historical significance; it was built in 1895.* T. *What makes it special?* TG: *It has been a landmark ever since.*
Offering help to the tourists.	TG: *If you have any questions or need assistance at any time, please feel free to ask me.* T: *Can you help us with our itinerary?* TG: *Of course!*
Making suggestions to the tourists.	TG: *I recommend trying the local cuisine at the restaurant just around the corner.* T: *Is it good?* TG: *It's one of the best in the area!*
Apologizing.	TG: *I apologize for the delay; we had to wait for the previous group to finish their tour.* T: *How long will we wait?* TG: *It shouldn't be much longer.*
Asking for permission.	TG: *Is it alright if I take a group photo here?* T: *Sure, go ahead!*

The dialogue provides examples of real-life interactions between tour guides and tourists. These highlight the practical applications of both language skills and functions in the tourism context. Incorporating these, or similar, dialogues in the Tourism syllabus can bridge the gap between theoretical language functions and their practical use in everyday tour guiding scenarios.

Building on these implications, it is recommended that future research provide a more detailed account of the processes and methodologies involved in designing ESP-based syllabi explicitly tailored to the Saudi tourism context. Such studies should address the local industry's unique linguistic and professional requirements and offer clear, step-by-step frameworks that other researchers and educators can adapt to facilitate the replication of effective ESP curriculum design strategies across various international tourism settings, thereby contributing to both local and global advancements in professional English education.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the needs of tour guides in Saudi Arabia. To achieve its objective, we utilized a questionnaire of three constructs to gather data on the most required functions, the most needed skills, and the most encountered difficulties by tour guides. The results revealed that speaking and listening are the most needed skills, vocabulary and pronunciation are the most needed aspects, and that self-introduction, giving directions and information are the most required tasks from tour guides. The participants further reported that they suffer challenges regarding following foreign accents and understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. These obstacles emphasize the need to include materials and activities in the syllabus that focus on pronunciation, vocabulary development, and accent understanding. By integrating these components into syllabus design, the curriculum can better equip future tour guides with the comprehensive skills they need to succeed in the profession, rather than merely emphasizing general speaking and conversational skills.

These findings have insightful implications that should be implemented after taking into account further measures to avoid potential limitations of the current study. The limitations of this study are represented in the structure of its sample and the mono-methodology design that it followed. Although tour guides are key players in the field who can decide on their needs, further stakeholders' perspectives should be considered. Further, triangulation of the questionnaire data with analysis of the current tourism syllabus and incorporation of qualitative data would provide more reliable findings. Accordingly, further research is recommended to utilize research samples including academics, ESP specialists, and tourism institutions representatives and adopt a mixed-method approach.

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