

# Exploring English for Tourism Purposes: A Needs Analysis of Tour Guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate, Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

The present study investigates English language communication skills needed by licensed tour guides in Al Ahsa Governorate, Saudi Arabia, in the context of the Vision 2030 programme and the burgeoning tourism industry in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To obtain the data, a quantitative survey based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was conducted on a sample of 35 licensed tour guides. The results revealed that although tour guides believed that the English language was necessary for their work, most respondents rated their speaking and interaction skills at a basic or low upper intermediate level. The areas of difficulty were pronunciation, understanding accents, and retrieval of vocabulary items. In spite of these deficiencies, respondents showed a keen desire to improve their English language skills and intended to avail of role-play, mobile-assisted learning, as well as English language courses specifically for the tourism industry. The need for English for Tourism Purposes courses which provide for the development of communicative competence is highlighted in the research findings. Developing the English language competencies of tour guides is posed as an important strategic element in bettering the quality of tourism in Saudi Arabia and increasing the nation's global competitiveness.

**Keywords:** Al-Ahsa Governorate, Saudi Arabia, English language learning, tour guides, speaking and interaction, English language needs

## 1. Introduction

The 2014 drop in global oil prices created substantial economic challenges for nations that depend on oil revenues as the main source of their nation's income. As the country with the highest oil reserves, Saudi Arabia could not escape the repercussions of this crisis. The Ministry of Finance (2020) reported that the Kingdom experienced a budget deficit of USD100 billion in 2015, consequently leading to a 26% decrease in public spending. Economic challenges such as these revealed not only the economic peril of depending too heavily on fossil fuel as the country's main source of income but also demonstrated the immediate requirement for structural economic changes. As a result, in spring 2016, the Saudi government launched Vision 2030—a comprehensive national development plan to reduce oil dependence and create economic diversification.

Vision 2030's framework outlines a complete strategy to transform Saudi Arabia into a competitive global economy with diversified industries (Alqahtani, 2022). The initiative consists of three interconnected pillars: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. The three pillars of Vision 2030 contain strategic targets and execution plans that work together to build sustainable development, improve institutional performance, and increase civic involvement (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022). The achievement of Vision 2030's success requires widespread participation from all sectors of society because individual and institutional actors must lead transformative changes.

Investment in tourism offers one way to participate in diversifying the Kingdom's income in order to achieve its Vision 2030 aim. Tourism in the Kingdom has typically been 'religious tourism' whereby Muslims visit the two holiest sites for Muslims (Mecca and Medina) in order to perform *Hajj* (i.e., pilgrimage). This form of tourism is considered one of the oldest in the world (Nicolaidis, 2016). However, in the past decade, and since the launch of Vision 2030, tourism has flourished in Saudi Arabia because of the facilities provided for visitors by the Saudi government and the heavy investment that it has put into the industry (Abuhjeeleh, 2019). As a result of the initiatives outlined in Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has witnessed substantial growth in its tourism sector. According to a report published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in February 2024, between the launch of the Vision in 2016 and the year 2023, the Kingdom welcomed over 100 million visitors. A further report published by the WTTC in June 2024 notes that international tourist arrivals in 2023 increased by 156% compared to 2019 arrivals. This surge contributed a record-breaking SAR444.3 billion (approximately USD118 billion) to the nation's GDP, accounting for 11.5% of the total economy. The report further illustrates that the tourism sector generated over 2.5 million jobs, representing approximately 20% of total national employment.

One of the most important job sectors that has been created as a result of the rapid expansion of tourism-related activities is tourism guidance. According to Alolayan (2025), Saudi Arabia has about 3000 registered tour guides. Before being licensed, tour guides have to undertake the Qualification Program of Tourism Guidance, conducted and sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism. The 7-day programme,

which is free of charge and is held in various parts of Saudi Arabia, aims to “raise the level of competence in the field of tourism guidance and [to enable guides] to acquire the necessary skills to be able to accompany visitors to visit tourist attractions, and to provide them with information and ideas that help them to make the most of the tourism experience” (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). There are only three criteria for joining the programme: the applicant must be a Saudi citizen or born to a Saudi parent, be at least 18 years old, and be healthy and fit for the job.

However, no other criteria, such as academic or English language requirements, are needed for enrolment in the programme. Needless to say, English language is the first choice of communication for individuals who do not share the same first language. English has been taught in Saudi Arabia since the discovery of oil in 1933 (Alqahtani, 2022) and is widely used in various spheres such as the media and education (Al-Rawi, 2012). Not currently requiring those wishing to enrol in the Qualification Program of Tourism Guidance to have any English language skills indicates that, should they wish to expand their tour guidance to non-Arabic speakers, each tour guide is responsible for their own English language learning. However, failure to develop their English language skills sufficiently may pose a challenge for those tour guides who wish to successfully interact with the growing number of tourists—who do not speak Arabic—visiting the country.

Therefore, this research attempts to assess a needs analysis of registered tour guides in Saudi Arabia who wish to improve their English language skills, particularly speaking and listening. These two skills (rather than reading and writing) are the main areas that tour guides need for their interaction with English-speaking tourists (Al-Malki et al., 2022). However, throughout this study these two skills will be referred to as the skills of *speaking* and *interaction* because whereas *listening* may range from passive listening comprehension to longer passages such as lectures, *interaction* is more about listening to short dialogues and responding to them, and as such is the main skill needed by tour guides. Moreover, this study employs the category of *spoken production* and *spoken interaction* in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as its reference point for the tour guides’ self-assessment (as later discussed in the study’s methodology section), or as a reference point for understanding their needs when it comes to understanding their requirements for improving the skills of speaking and interaction.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been widely defined by many scholars in the field of TESOL. For example, Mohammed and Sanosi (2024) define it as “the instruction and research of a language based on the ‘communicative needs’ of foreign learners to meet certain work, academic, or professional requirements in which the language is used for a restricted range of communicative events” (p. 973). Anthony (2018) proposed another more elaborate definition which states:

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching that targets the current and/or future academic or occupational needs of learners, focuses on the necessary language, genres, and skills to address these needs, and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general and/or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods. (pp. 10-11)

Despite its various definitions, ESP operates as an established branch of applied linguistics which focuses on developing communication skills for learners who need them in their professional, academic, or vocational environments. The teaching methods of ESP focus on student-centred instruction which adapts language content and skills to meet the needs of particular professional fields or academic subjects. The instructional design in ESP settings follows real-world communicative needs, while the curriculum draws from the actual discourse and terminology and genres that are relevant to the specific field. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the specific interests of learners drive ESP courses, which leads instruction to focus on language use in context rather than general language proficiency. The field has developed specialised subfields, including English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), to serve different learner groups (Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021; Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991). The creation of effective ESP materials needs a detailed examination of field-specific language functions and tasks to match professional realities (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Basturkmen, 2010; Robinson, 1991).

### 2.2 Needs Analysis

The development of ESP curricula depends on needs analysis because it establishes an empirical basis for determining what content to include and how to deliver it. Educators perform needs analyses to gather organised data about learner objectives together with their existing skills and self-identified weaknesses and environmental language needs. Initially, Munby’s (1978) Communicative Needs Processor (CNP) developed initial methods to identify communicative events together with their participant roles and required linguistic forms in specific contexts. Later, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) widened the discussion by identifying two types of needs: target needs and learning needs which include what the learner has to do in the target situation, what the learner lacks, and what the learner wants. In practice, needs analysis adopts multiple methodologies including surveys, interviews, and observational studies, as well as target situation analysis and present situation analysis. The results aid in the selection of teaching materials and activities that closely replicate real-world language use and workplace demands (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Berwick, 1989).

### 2.3 English for Tourism in Saudi Arabia

The tourism sector in Saudi Arabia has seen English play a more significant role because the nation aims to develop its economy through tourism and improve its international tourism reputation. The Saudi government has established tourism development as a key objective

of Vision 2030. Achieving this objective requires tour guides and other workforce members to have English communicative competence. The primary use of English in Saudi tourism encompasses welcoming and guiding international visitors, providing explanations of cultural and religious sites, handling questions and complaints, and supporting cross-cultural dialogue. The delivery of tourism services requires both functional and situational English proficiency together with knowledge of cultural and technical terminology. Research shows that Saudi tour guides require language programmes which focus on their communication needs through authentic tasks and culturally relevant materials in curriculum development (Mohammed & Sanosi, 2024).

#### *2.4 Previous Studies in Saudi Arabia*

A body of research has investigated the English language proficiency needs of Saudi Arabian tourism professionals who work as tour guides and front-line staff. For example, Al-Malki et al. (2022) examined the English-language communicative needs of Saudi Arabia's tourism workforce and, on the basis of that needs analysis, found there was a need to develop a specialised ESP teaching model for the tourism sector. The authors surveyed 77 participants from a range of tourism-sector roles (e.g., hotel managers, tour guides, academics, government officials) across Saudi Arabia. The authors establish that English proficiency stands as an essential requirement for Saudi tourism professionals to achieve successful communication with both local and foreign visitors. The needs analysis demonstrates that speaking abilities constitute the most important requirement because most tourist-staff communication happens through verbal exchanges, while listening and reading skills also play a significant role. The study indicates that tourism-related vocabulary is a top priority, while grammar and writing skills are considered less important. The research suggests that educational institutions should create specialised ESP programmes for tourism and hospitality students which align with present situation requirements instead of using standard commercial materials. The instruction should emphasise speaking and listening skills above all else, while adding specific reading and writing and vocabulary training to prepare students for Saudi tourism industry needs.

Regarding language training for tourism such as ESP courses at Saudi universities, Mohammed and Sanosi (2024) investigated the effectiveness of such courses. In doing so, they interviewed four respondents from four different tourism companies, who had previously enrolled in language courses at a Saudi university, and investigated the effect of such language courses on the language skills that were needed for tourism. They conclude that such courses did not meet the expected outcome, and therefore that English curricula at Saudi universities today do not match the industry requirements for practical communication skills as these require materials that use real-life scenarios and task-based activities and situational dialogues that are relevant to tourism in Saudi Arabia. In particular, needs analysis research has shown that learners and practitioners desire a stronger emphasis on customer service interactions, the explanation of cultural heritage, and the management of tourist inquiries.

More recently, Al Mukhallafi (2025) investigated the future of teaching English for tourism in Saudi Arabia from the Vision 2030 perspective, focusing on AlUla City. Al Mukhallafi examined current learner motivations, proficiency levels, and the gap between existing EFL instruction and the practical language needs of the tourism sector. To do so, he interviewed 100 EFL learners and 30 instructors from various universities in Saudi Arabia. His findings show that most learners rely on traditional, grammar–translation, teacher-centred instruction, which leaves speaking, listening, and oral interaction underdeveloped, while overemphasising reading and writing. A shortage of authentic tourism-related materials, limited motivation, and few opportunities to practise non-verbal cues further widen the gap. The author concludes that English for tourism in Saudi Arabia is poised for significant expansion but will only succeed if teaching practices are re-engineered to match industry demands. The author forecasts a rise in the number of English-language educators and an overall improvement in the quality of instruction, driven by the integration of online, media-rich and AI-supported learning environments.

Using technology such as AI and machine translation (MT) in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia was a central point in the study conducted by Alsaawi (2024). He evaluated the efficiency of MT for promoting Saudi Arabia's tourism sector and attempted to identify the obstacles tourists face when using MT, as perceived by translation students at Qassim University. To do so, the author surveyed 267 undergraduate translation students to assess the level of MT's impact on the tourism sector and the magnitude of obstacles tourists face when employing MT. The study finds that machine translation has a moderate impact on Saudi tourism, being valued for improving knowledge access and reducing tourists' costs but falling short of delivering fully effective communication. The key obstacles are linguistic (difficulty handling cultural references and polysemy) and technical (limitations in real-time conversation and usability for elderly users). Therefore, despite the advancement in the usage of technology as a language assistant, it is necessary to equip tour guides with the language skills that are required for their jobs.

### **3. Context of the Study**

This research was conducted in Al-Ahsa Governorate, in the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia. The governorate is named after the Al-Ahsa Oasis which covers 20,000 hectares and supports more than 1.1 million people (Tawfik & Alzahrani, 2024) and is the world's largest oasis. The region consists of six major cities and different villages and settlements. While remaining a major agricultural producer through its extensive palm groves and date production, the economy of Al-Ahsa has experienced major economic changes because of decreasing groundwater levels and shifting employment trends (Hassaballa & Salih, 2024).

Consequently, the Saudi Arabian national tourism strategy under Vision 2030 has made Al-Ahsa a key location for sustainable growth, international visitor attraction, and local employment creation, according to a 2025 report by the travel website Travelsetu. Moreover, UNESCO's 2018 designation of Al-Ahsa as a World Heritage Site has led to increased tourism interest. Therefore, understanding its value, a royal decree was issued in 2022 to establish the Al-Ahsa Development Authority in order to start strategic plans to make Al-Ahsa a

tourism hub and to meet the tourism demand. As a result, according to the Middle Eastern news website Scene Now (2025), Al-Ahsa recorded over 3.2 million domestic and international visitors in 2024, representing a 500% increase compared to 2019 numbers. Correspondingly, tourist expenditures exceeded SAR3.3 billion, indicating a 400% growth over the same period. As a result, this increase has generated major investments for infrastructure development and hospitality services as well as visitor management (Tawfik & Alzahrani, 2024).

Additionally, this industry shift has led to higher demands for trained tourism specialists who work directly with visitors as tour guides, hospitality staff, or customer service representatives. English language proficiency is an essential skill for these positions because tourism growth in Saudi Arabia—including in Al-Ahsa—is expected to continue (Abdelatif & Halim, 2024). However, despite the attention that Al-Ahsa has received as a tourist destination, and the apparent need for sufficient English skills for those who work in the tourism sector such as tour guides, little research has been conducted on the area. Therefore, this research intends to answer the following research questions:

- 1- How important is English for tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate when performing communicative events at work?
- 2- How well can tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate speak and interact in English?
- 3- Which English language areas related to speaking and interaction need improvement?
- 4- How would tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate prefer to improve their speaking and interaction in English?

#### 4. Methodology

The case of Al-Ahsa serves as a representative example through which to study the English language requirements of tourism professionals in a fast-growing tourism industry. The region's transformation from an agricultural economy to a developing tourism sector demonstrates the general workforce challenges and prospects that Saudi Arabia faces in its Vision 2030 initiative. Research about Al-Ahsa provides important information for developing ESP curricula, improving employability, and achieving national development goals. Therefore, and in order to answer the research questions, this study implements a quantitative study. A cross-sectional survey approach, employing a five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to gather responses from tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate.

##### 4.1 Data Collection Process

As noted previously, despite the number of licensed tour guides in Saudi Arabia reaching around 3000, there does not appear to be an official number of tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate itself. However, the author approached the head of the Saudi Tour Guide Association, Al-Ahsa division, who confirmed that there are more than 100 registered tour guides in Al-Ahsa and that all are members of a WhatsApp group chat. The author requested the head of the Al-Ahsa division to forward the study's questionnaire to the registered tour guides in order for them to offer answers that would help to provide the necessary data for achieving the goals of this study.

##### 4.2 Respondents

Thirty-five registered tour guides participated in the study. The sample included both males and females who were working as independent tour guides, or for local tourism companies in Al-Ahsa. Age demographics showed that 70.6% of the respondents were over 30 years old, 17.6% were between 22 and 25 years of age, and 11.8% were evenly split between the 18-21 and 26-30 age groups. All of the participants work with both international and domestic tourists.

All participants consented to participate in the study. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would be kept confidential. Moreover, they were provided with the researcher's email address and phone number to contact the researcher should they have any queries related to the study's objectives.

##### 4.3 Data Collection Tools

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive-survey design to investigate the English language speaking and interaction needs of tour guides in Al-Ahsa. It follows approaches used in a number of ESP and tourism sector research studies (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Namtapi, 2022; Prachanant, 2012). The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale to quantify respondents' perceptions of language skill importance and workplace requirements. Two senior professors specialising in ELT and technology-enhanced teaching reviewed the initial survey questions. Based on their feedback, the questions were revised where necessary. The questionnaire, created using Google Forms, was then shared with the participants via a link.

##### 4.4 Instrumentation

The questionnaire has three main parts; the first part aims to identify the demographics of the participating group (age and gender). The second part focuses on identifying their English language abilities, specifically interaction and speaking skills. The CEFR was employed to identify the participants' English language levels. The CEFR is an appropriate tool for self-assessment because it employs "can-do" statements with the subject "I", which is an effective way for self-assessment (North, 2020). Moreover, Barbaux (2016) points out that "[T]he CEFR draws on theories of communicative competence and language use in order to describe what a language user has to know and do in order to communicate effectively and what learners can typically be expected to do at different levels of proficiency" (p. 70). Therefore, the participants were asked to choose the most appropriate answer that reflects both their speaking and interaction skills in English. Although the skill of *listening* is explicitly identified in the CEFR, it was not included in the questionnaire because it focuses primarily on listening comprehension for extended speeches—such as in lectures—without any reference to interaction. Thus, the

categories of *spoken production* and *spoken interaction* in the CEFR were deemed to be the most appropriate areas of focus to serve the purpose of this study. Once the participants had selected the most appropriate answer that they believe reflects their English language skill, it became possible to categorise their levels according to the CEFR's categories: *A1-A2* (Basic User), *B1-B2* (Independent User), *C1-C2* (Proficient User).

The third part of the questionnaire investigates four areas of interest: the importance of English in the participants' jobs as tour guides; the main challenges that they encounter when interacting in English; the area of English that they would like to improve; and, finally, the learning methods that they would like to implement in order to improve their skills of speaking and interaction in English. The participants were presented with five options ranging from *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral*, *disagree* to *strongly disagree*. The questionnaire was presented in Arabic for two reasons: to ensure it could easily be comprehended by the participants; and to avoid any misunderstandings that may result from any language issues. The results were then translated into English in order to meet the targeted readerships of this study.

4.5 Data Analysis

The questionnaire data was analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise the closed-ended responses, while mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for the Likert-scale items to provide an overall picture of participants' views.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of participants is summarised in Figures 1 and 2. The gender distribution shows a predominance of female participants (58.8%), with male participants representing 41.2%. This result indicates that women are more active or more represented in the tour guiding profession, at least within this study's sample. It may also suggest a growing female presence in professions related to tourism.

Age distribution data indicate that a large majority of respondents were over 30 years old (70.6%), while smaller portions fell within younger categories: 22–25 years (17.6%), 18–21 years (5.9%), and 26–30 years (5.9%) respectively. The age composition implies that most participants are mid-career or experienced professionals with extensive field experience, which may influence both their confidence in using English and their perceptions of its importance in tour guiding contexts.

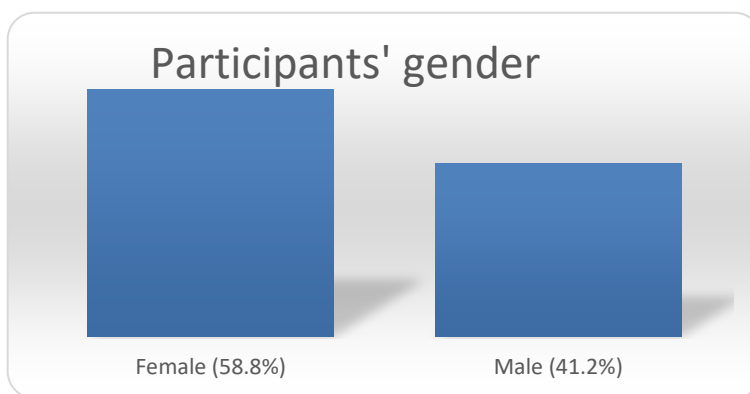


Figure 1. Gender distribution of participants

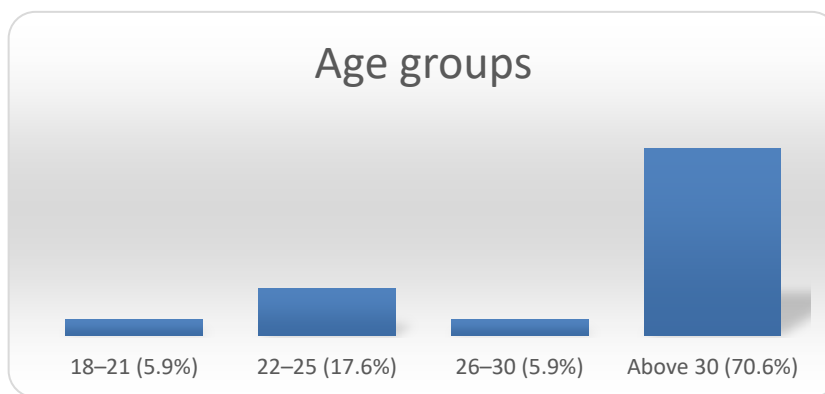


Figure 2. Age groups of participants

5.2 The Participants' English Language Skills of Interaction and speaking (Based on CEFR)

Figures 3 and 4 present the participants' self-assessed proficiency in English for interaction and speaking based on the CEFR. The distribution of responses points to generally moderate skill levels, with few individuals identifying as advanced users.

For interaction, 52.9% of respondents placed themselves at the basic level (A1–A2); 23.5% rated themselves as intermediate (B1); and only 23.6% identified as proficient (C1–C2), with an overall mean score of 2.65 (SD = 1.54). A similar pattern was evident for speaking skills, where 47% rated themselves as basic, 23.5% as intermediate, and 29.5% as proficient or near-proficient (M = 2.77, SD = 1.55). These proportions suggest that most participants can manage simple exchanges but may struggle with complex or spontaneous communication in English, especially in contexts requiring fluency, idiomatic understanding, and cultural nuance.

The absence of any respondents identifying as B2 (Independent User) for interaction also underscores a performance gap between basic and advanced proficiency. Collectively, these findings indicate that, while functional competence exists, the majority of guides operate below the level typically required for confident multilingual engagement in tourism environments.

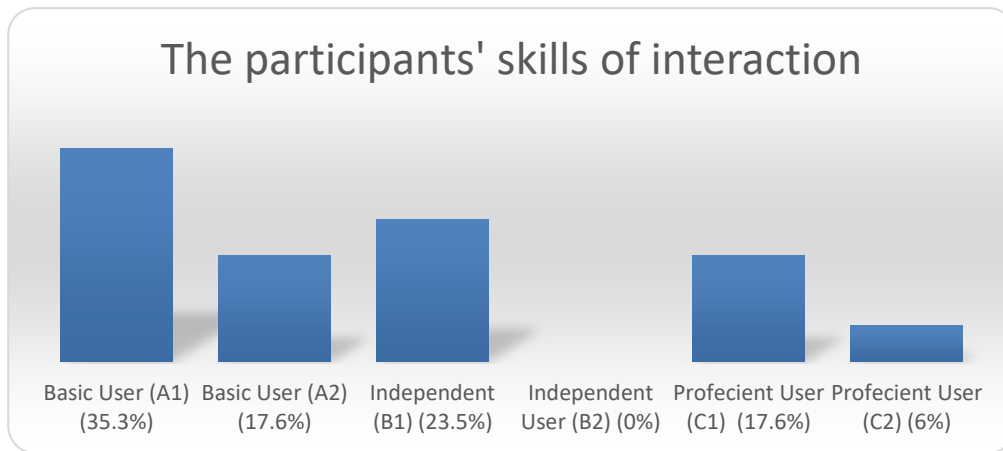


Figure 3. Self-rated English proficiency for interaction

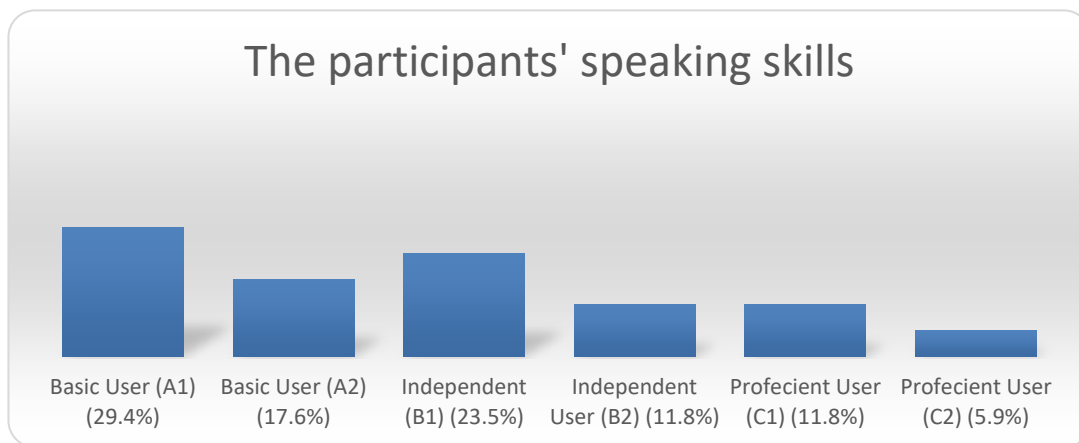


Figure 4. Self-rated English proficiency for speaking

5.3 The Participants' Use of English in Their Jobs as Tour Guides

Here, 11 questions investigated four areas of interest: the importance of English in their jobs as tour guides; the main challenges that they encounter when interacting in English; areas of English that they would like to improve; and, finally, the learning methods that they would like to implement in order to improve their English.

5.3.1 The Importance of English in Their Jobs as Tour Guides

Perceptions regarding the necessity and significance of English in tour guiding work are shown in Figures 5 and 6. A large proportion of respondents recognised English as a critical component of their professional identity. Nearly half (47.1%) strongly agreed and 23.5% agreed that they must use English continuously in their work, while only a negligible minority (5.9%) strongly disagreed (M = 4.03, SD = 1.14).

When asked about the importance of English in their job, 47.1% strongly agreed and 35.3% agreed that it was important, with no disagreement reported (M = 4.29, SD = 0.75). These results confirm an overwhelming consensus that English is not merely an ancillary skill but an essential medium for communication, service delivery, and career advancement in the tourism sector. The convergence between the perceived need for use and recognition of this importance suggests that even those with lower proficiency levels understand the strategic

value of English for professional effectiveness and job security.

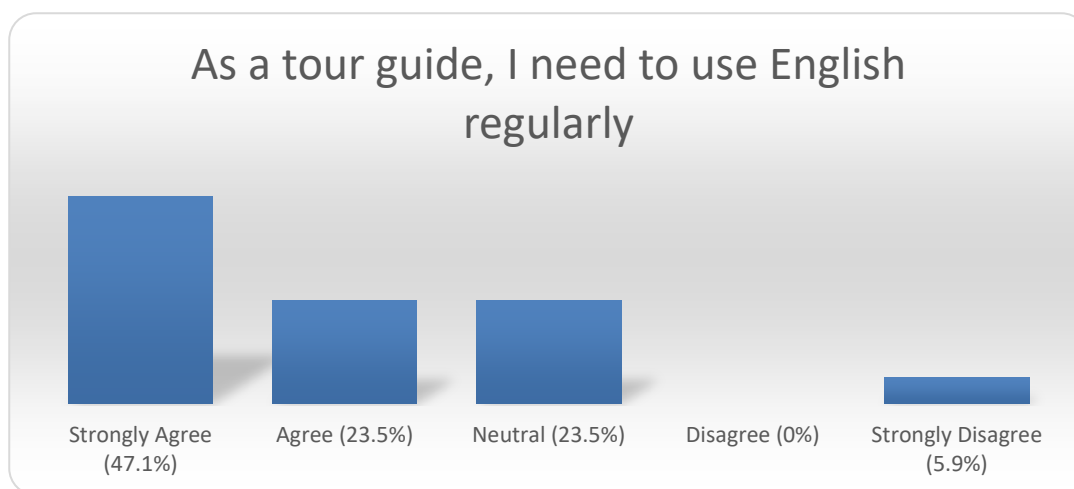


Figure 5. Responses regarding the need to use English continuously as a tour guide

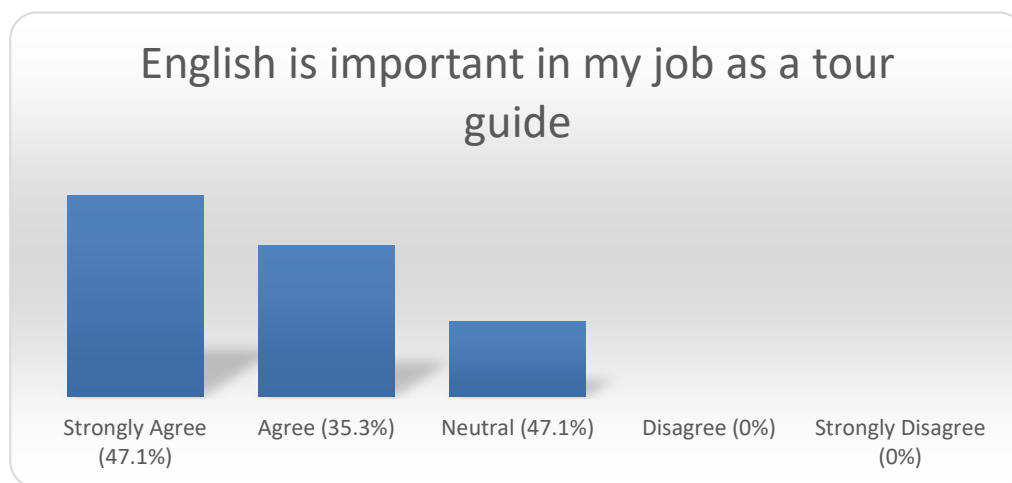


Figure 6. Responses regarding the importance of English in participants' jobs as tour guides

### 5.3.2 The Main Challenges that the Participants Encounter when Interacting in English

Despite acknowledging its importance, participants reported persistent linguistic challenges, as shown in Figures 7, 8, and 9. Regarding pronunciation difficulties, 29.4% agreed or strongly agreed that they encountered problems articulating English words clearly, while 41.2% remained neutral and 29.4% disagreed ( $M = 3.00, SD = 1.14$ ). The distribution suggests varying levels of awareness or confidence, possibly reflecting differences in training background or exposure to authentic spoken English.

For comprehension of tourists' accents, challenges were even more pronounced. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that they often struggled to understand tourists from diverse linguistic backgrounds ( $M = 3.35, SD = 1.21$ ). This finding points to accent variation as a key barrier in achieving comprehension in English, particularly in contexts where tourists' English reflects a variety of accents and dialects.

Finally, vocabulary retrieval emerged as another notable issue: 47.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they found it difficult to select appropriate English words during interactions ( $M = 3.18, SD = 1.15$ ). This finding aligns with earlier findings on limited proficiency and may contribute to guides' reduced fluency or perceived professionalism when engaging with international visitors. Together, these challenges highlight the practical limits of self-reported proficiency and emphasise the need for targeted language support in pronunciation, listening comprehension, and lexical development.

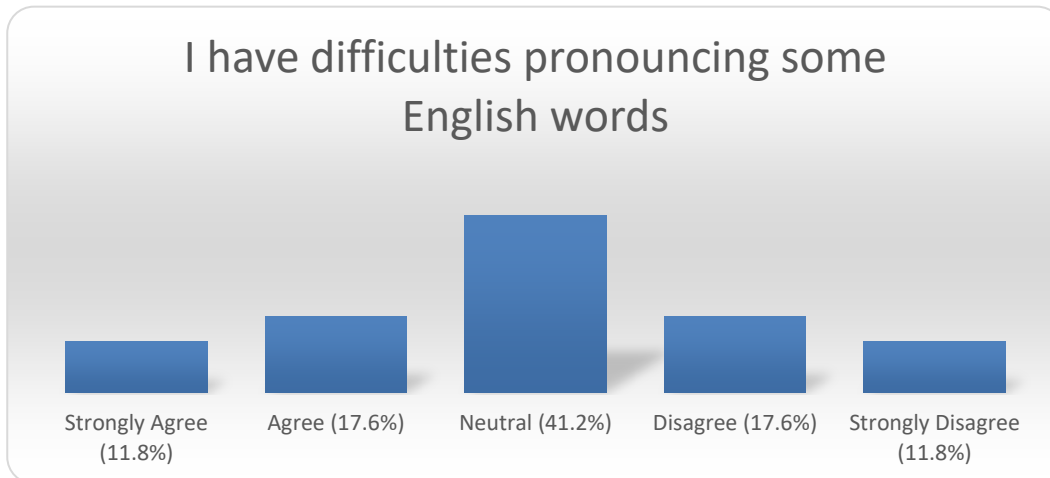


Figure 7. Responses regarding the difficulties of pronouncing some English words

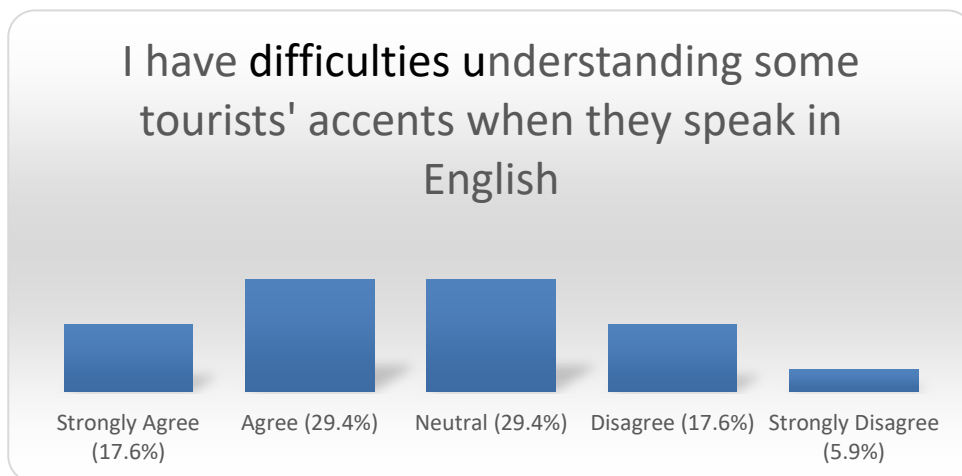


Figure 8. Responses regarding the difficulties of understanding some tourists' accents

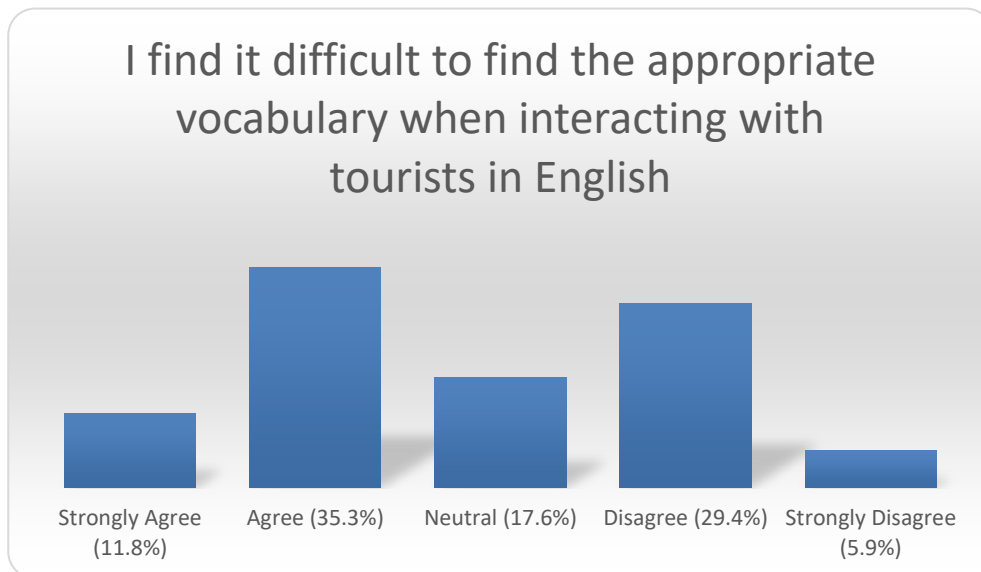


Figure 9. Responses regarding the difficulties of finding English vocabulary

### 5.3.3 The Areas of English that the Participants Desire to Develop

Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to improve their English abilities (Figures 10, 11, and 12). A

striking 82.4% strongly agreed that they wished to enhance their pronunciation, while only 5.7% expressed neutrality or disagreement ( $M = 4.65, SD = 0.86$ ). The same percentage (82.4%) strongly agreed that they wanted to improve their fluency ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.91$ ), and another 82.4% strongly agreed that they would like to expand tourism-specific vocabulary ( $M = 4.77, SD = 0.55$ ). These findings reflect a consistent and proactive attitude toward professional language development. Notably, none of the participants expressed strong disagreement across any of these statements, indicating that the drive to improve English proficiency is near universal among this cohort. This motivation, coupled with the recognition of English’s occupational importance, underscores a readiness for structured language training interventions.

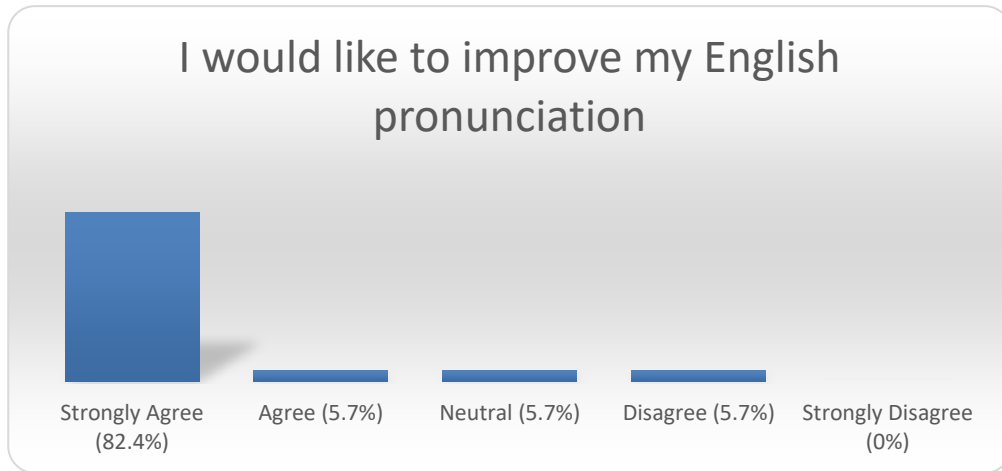


Figure 10. Responses regarding the desire to improve English pronunciation

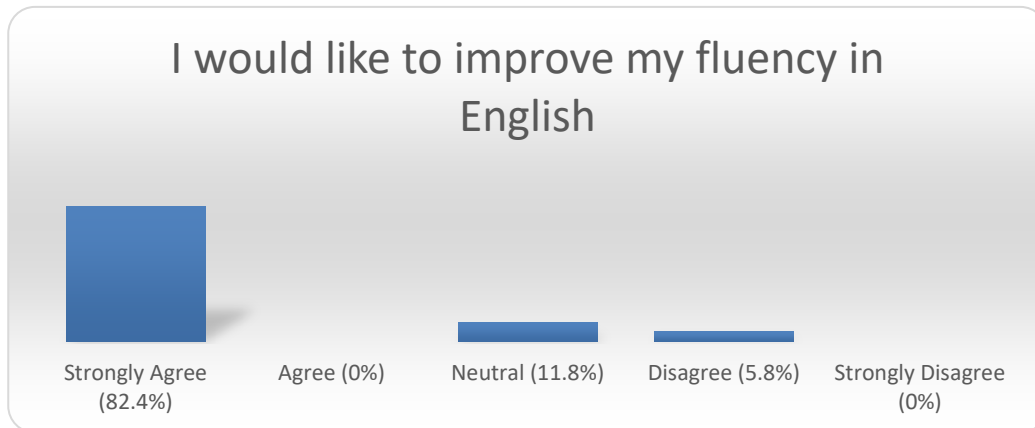


Figure 11. Responses regarding the desire to improve fluency in English

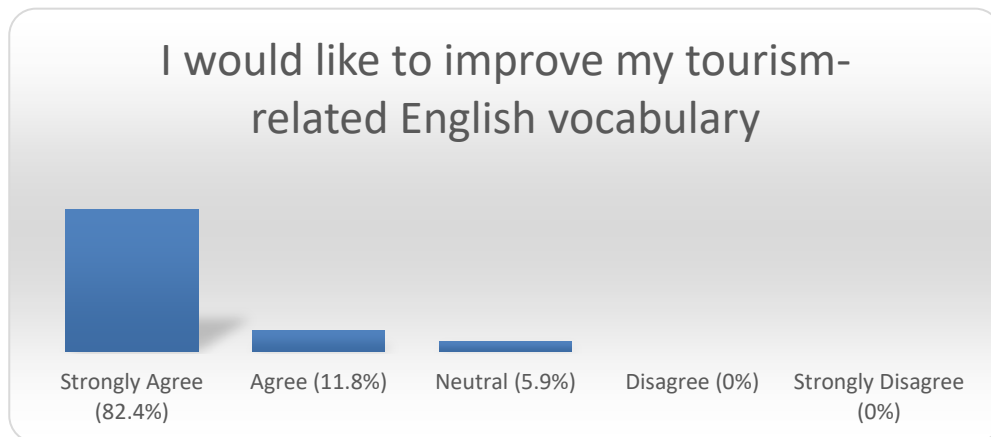


Figure 12. Responses regarding the desire to improve tourism-related English vocabulary

### 5.3.4 The Preferred Methods of Learning English to Improve Interaction and Speaking Skills

The final set of questions (see Figures 13–15) examined participants’ preferences regarding methods for developing English proficiency. Results indicate a strong inclination toward interactive and applied learning approaches. A large majority (76.5%) strongly agreed that they would like to learn English through role-play methods, with an additional 11.8% agreeing and only 11.8% remaining neutral, while none disagreed with the suggested methods ( $M = 4.65, SD = 0.72$ ). This result suggests that participants value experiential and situational learning that mirrors real-world guiding interactions.

Similarly, a substantial percentage (70.6%) strongly agreed that they would like to learn English using mobile applications, while 29.4% remained neutral. Again, there were no negative responses ( $M = 4.41, SD = 0.92$ ). This result reflects the increasing acceptance of technology-based learning tools, likely due to their flexibility, accessibility, and adaptability to individual schedules.

Finally, 64.7% strongly agreed and 17.6% agreed that they prefer attending English classes regularly, especially those focusing on tourism-related content. Only 5.9% expressed disagreement with the statement ( $M = 4.41, SD = 0.95$ ). This finding reinforces the demand for structured, context-specific instruction rather than generic language courses. Taken together, the responses highlight participants’ openness to diverse, modern, and applied learning strategies that integrate both formal instruction and digital practice.

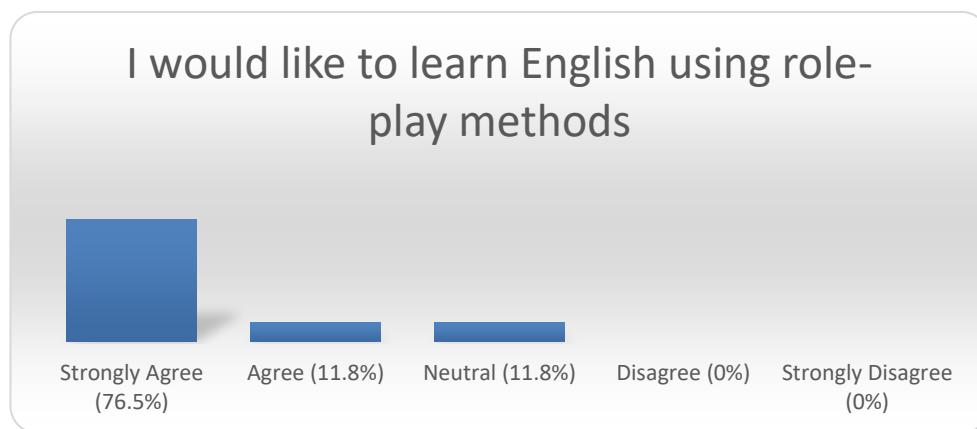


Figure 13. Responses to role-play methods

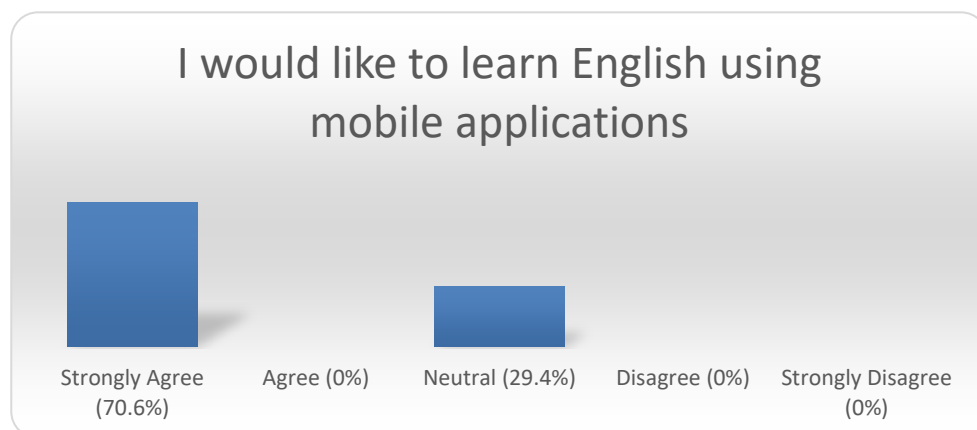


Figure 14. Responses to learning English using mobile applications

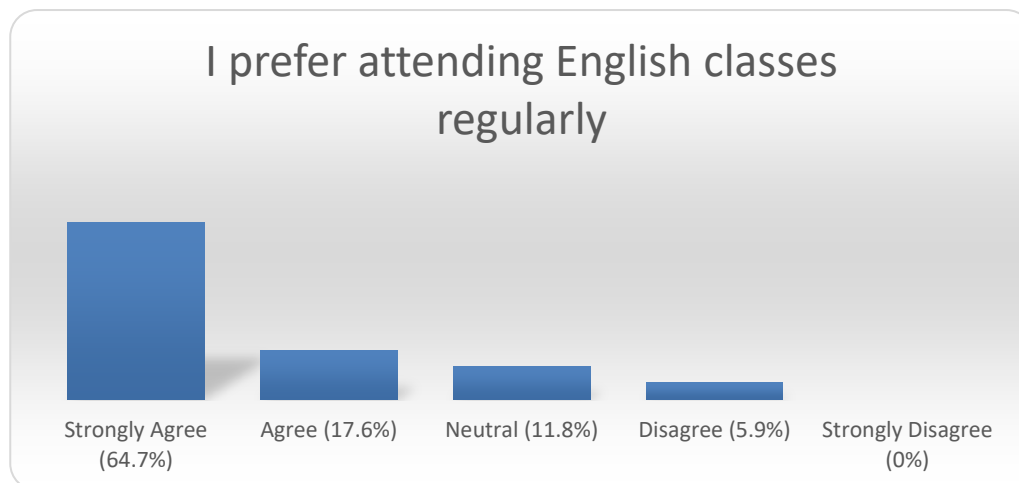


Figure 15. Responses to attending English classes that focus on tourism specifically

## 6. Discussion

The survey results from tour guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate provide a comprehensive view of the English language proficiency, the importance of English in the tour guide profession, challenges, areas of language that need improvements, and preferred methods of English learning. They reveal a workforce that recognises English as essential but which remains limited in some areas when it comes to speaking and interaction. However, the findings also show a strong drive for self-improvement and a clear preference for experiential and technology-supported learning—a combination that positions this group as highly receptive to targeted pedagogical reform. Consequently, this section attempts to provide a thorough discussion of the findings, driven by the research questions.

### 6.1 How Important Is English in the Tour Guides' Jobs in Al-Ahsa Governorate?

The overwhelming agreement on English's necessity underscores its status as the de facto medium of professional tourism communication, thus aligning with global scholarship describing English as the lingua franca of the tourism industry (Vida-Mannl, 2024). Tour guides, as cultural intermediaries, rely on language not just to transfer information but to shape visitor experience and destination perception. Bobanovic and Grzinic (2011) argue that “[i]n order to ensure the quality of hospitality services it is necessary to find common language between supply and demand sides. Since English has become an international language, it has become increasingly necessary for employees working in tourism to develop the language skills to be able to fulfil the requirements of tourists” (p. 11). The participants' consensus around English's importance demonstrates strong professional awareness and a recognition that linguistic competence directly influences service quality.

Yet, this awareness contrasts sharply with the limited proficiency reported by the respondents. The gap suggests that, while they understand English's professional value, their opportunities for meaningful language development are constrained by systemic factors—limited training resources, lack of context-specific instruction, and minimal exposure to authentic communicative environments. Mohammed and Sanosi (2024) reported this gap when arguing that the English syllabus that is taught at Saudi universities and studied by tourism students does not meet their language needs. Similarly, Al-Malki (2023) maintains that Saudi tour guides need significant English language training—especially in speaking and listening—as these are the skills needed for interactions with tourists. Therefore, while the respondents in this study realise the importance of English in their jobs as tour guides, they also realise that their speaking and interaction skills in English fall short of the desired skill levels.

### 6.2 How Well Can Tour Guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate Speak and Interact in English?

The dominance of basic (A1–A2) and lower-intermediate (B1) self-ratings reflects a plateau typical in vocational English learning. Participants appear capable of handling rehearsed or transactional exchanges but struggle with spontaneity, nuance, and cross-cultural communication—skills vital for guiding. The absence of (B2) level self-ratings for interaction indicates that few have reached operational fluency. This pattern suggests a curriculum mismatch (Al-Malki, 2023) where training often prioritises grammatical correctness and memorisation over pragmatic and interactive competence (Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021). The divergence between speaking and interaction proficiency ratings is prevalent in Al Mukhallafi's 2025 study of tour guides in AlUla city in Saudi Arabia where he found that—despite its pivotal role—speaking was not well-developed in his study subjects. Although tour guides can recite prepared content, they find it difficult to manage real-time dialogue with diverse tourists. This imbalance calls for pedagogical redesign emphasising discourse strategies and turn-taking that centre on real-time, real-world tourism encounters.

### 6.3 What Are the Main English Language Challenges That Affect Tour Guides' Speaking and Interaction Skills?

The results reveal that the respondents found that pronunciation, accent comprehension, and finding appropriate vocabulary posed the most challenging areas of language affecting their speaking and interaction skills. Regarding pronunciation, some respondents stated in

the open-ended comments that they wish to learn how to pronounce English words correctly, without worrying about being mocked by others. Al-Malki et al. (2022) report similar findings, stating that it is “extremely important in discharging [tourism professionals’] responsibilities in various fields of the Saudi tourism industry” (p. 81). However, this finding is not limited to the Saudi context alone. In Thailand, for example, the same finding appeared in the study by Sermsook et al. (2021) who state the importance of pronunciation for a group of hotel staffs that they studied.

Regarding accent comprehension, some respondents reported concerns about understanding unfamiliar varieties of English, such as Indian or Filipino Englishes. Similar difficulties in accent comprehension have been documented in studies such as Bobanovic and Grzinic (2011) and Fujita (2020). However, Al-Malki et al. (2022) reported that accent comprehension did not pose a major challenge for their respondents. The difference may be explained by the fact that Al-Malki et al.’s respondents were primarily highly qualified and educated tourism professionals such as hotel managers, academics, and government officials, whereas the respondents in the present study were tour guides who had not received formal English training. Nonetheless, this study aligns with Al-Malki et al. (2022) when it comes to the necessity to learn vocabulary related to tourism. The respondents in this study report that retrieving appropriate vocabulary was challenging when interacting with tourists in English. For instance, using appropriate vocabulary to describe tourist sites and historical locations in Al-Ahsa was a major issue for many respondents. This finding was also reported in different contexts such as Indonesia (Abdul Zalil et al., 2022; Sari, 2016) and Thailand (Namtapi, 2022; Sermsook et al., 2021).

#### *6.4 What Areas of Language Would the Respondents Most Like to Improve?*

The results show a striking desire amongst the respondents to improve their English pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. This desire does not necessarily reflect areas of language that need improvement, but rather a willingness and interest in advancing their English language interaction and speaking skills. For example, Sardegna et al. (2017) point out that there is a correlation between learning pronunciation and self-efficacy amongst language learners. It boosts their self-confidence, which impacts their skills of speaking and interaction positively. Similarly, enriching a speaker’s vocabulary, or vocabulary fluency, which is “[t]he automaticity with which the words a person knows can be recognized and processed. It is also referred to as processing speed or lexical retrieval speed” (Liu, 2020, p. 3), is a factor that influences their speaking and interaction skills positively. Both pronunciation and vocabulary are important for improving fluency, which is pivotal for tour guides who speak and interact with tourists daily (Tonić, 2010). Therefore, the respondents’ clear desire to improve pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency may not necessarily reflect their weaknesses in these areas but rather a willingness to advance their speaking and interaction skills to a higher level.

#### *6.5 How Would Tour Guides in Al-Ahsa Governorate Prefer to Improve Their Skills of Speaking and Interaction in English?*

The preference for regular, tourism-focused classes confirms that, while the autonomy that is found in smartphone applications is valued, the participants also appreciate structured instruction when it is practical, relevant, and connected to their work environment. Particularly, the strong endorsement of role-play as a preferred learning method highlights the participants’ intuitive understanding of experiential learning’s value. Role-play situates language in realistic contexts, helping learners internalise communicative routines and develop spontaneous speech competence. This finding aligns with Siddiqui’s (2024) study where he found a positive connection between role-play, communicative competence, and fluency. He argues “role-playing is one of the most effective pedagogical approaches in language learning, which enables students to engage in non-threatening activities that facilitate the concrete use of their acquired language skills” (p. 269).

On the other hand, there is a growing interest in learning the skills of speaking and interaction using smartphone applications, a finding which reflects the growing feasibility of technology-enhanced language learning. Smartphone applications such as Duolingo—for example—provide the flexibility, continuous exposure, and personalised pacing critical for professionals with unpredictable schedules. Kittredge et al. (2025) conducted a study on 567 Japanese English language learners whose CEFR level of English was B1 and who were willing to improve their speaking skills. After using a video call application for 30 days, the participants were retested; they showed an improvement of 43.7% in the post-test. Similarly, Mingyan et al. (2025) studied the effect of another smartphone application—Liulishuo—on a group of 32 English language learners in China. They conclude that there are “notable improvements in overall speaking performance, fluency, and pronunciation, underscoring its potential benefits for EFL learning, particularly in enhancing speaking skills” (p. 12). The findings in both studies could be applied to the Saudi context since learning English in the Japanese and Chinese contexts is similar to that of Saudi Arabia where the focus is still on the conventional learning of writing, reading, and grammar with little emphasis on communicative skills.

## **7. Implications**

The research shows that Al-Ahsa tour guides require immediate English language instruction because their current communication abilities fail to meet visitor needs. Although the participants recognise that English serves as their fundamental work requirement, most guides speak at basic to lower-intermediate English levels during actual interactions. The research indicates that immediate action must be taken to develop customised language training programmes which address tourism industry requirements. The educational programme should implement a tourism-specific ESP framework based on the CEFR. The educational programme should teach students to create spoken content and interact with others through activities which replicate real-world guiding tasks, including tourist question management, cultural heritage storytelling, and the handling of unexpected communication.

The research results also indicate that tour guides require specialised training to handle various English speech patterns and enhance their listening abilities. Tour guides require training to cope with multiple English accents because such training helps them recognise different

speech patterns and maintain adaptable communication. Furthermore, the research indicates that tour guides must practise particular tourism-related terms to develop their ability for spontaneous speech generation. Additionally, the study results indicate that participants want to learn through experiential methods which combine role-playing with mobile-assisted practice and tailored tourism-focused classes. The development of blended learning systems should combine in-person simulations with digital self-study materials to offer participants their preferred learning methods.

The research results require modifications to the Qualification Program of Tourism Guidance in Saudi Arabia to incorporate specific CEFR standards for speaking and interaction abilities. The implementation of standardised proficiency standards and government-backed transition programmes will help tour guides develop essential communication abilities for their work duties. The implementation of licence tiers which correspond to particular CEFR levels will motivate tour guides to continue their professional development. The research evidence supports the development of a data-driven language policy which will enhance tour guide performance while fulfilling Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 targets for tourism growth and international service excellence.

### **8. Limitations**

Multiple research constraints exist which affect how researchers should interpret the study's results. The research study recruited only a limited number of registered Al-Ahsa tour guides who accessed the survey through the local association's online group. Thus, the research data might not accurately represent all Saudi tour guides or those who work outside this specific region. The self-assessment ratings based on CEFR descriptors could lead to rating errors because participants might either overestimate or underestimate their actual speaking abilities. The self-reported ratings need special interpretation because they lack verification through speaking assessment tests.

The research design collected data at one point in time which made it impossible to monitor skill development and establish direct relationships between training duration and language proficiency. The survey research focused on speaking abilities and interaction skills but it did not evaluate other vital communication competencies which include pragmatic skills, intercultural knowledge, and extended listening abilities. The survey used Likert-scale questions to achieve quick results but these questions restricted the opportunity to obtain detailed qualitative data which would have shown participants' actual communication challenges. The survey translation process from Arabic to English during development creation might have affected response accuracy. However, to offset this possibility, the researcher conducted multiple reviews to minimise errors.

### **9. Conclusion**

The research indicates that Al-Ahsa tour guides not only recognise the value of English but also that their professional communication skills do not meet their guiding requirements. The research data indicates that participants experience two main challenges when speaking spontaneously because they struggle to pronounce words correctly, find the right vocabulary, and maintain proper accent. The research participants demonstrate their commitment to language learning through their preference for experiential education methods which include role-playing, mobile applications, and tourism-specific instruction.

The research results indicate that the tourism industry needs training programmes which deliver language instruction that matches real-world requirements. A CEFR-based ESP programme that teaches oral communication skills using modern educational approaches and continuous professional evaluation will enhance tour guides' ability to serve international visitors. The national tourism framework requires educational institutions and government officials to create standardised training programmes which will establish language proficiency as essential for professional success and career advancement. The enhancement of English skills among Al-Ahsa tour guides will lead to improved tourist experiences, while also strengthening Saudi Arabia's international position and supporting Vision 2030 sustainable development objectives.

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Dr Muneer Hezam Alqahtani is the sole author of this article and contributed to all aspects of the research, including study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing.

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Obtained.

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#### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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