

Challenges and Pedagogical Needs in English for Tourism: Preparing Cultural Mediators in Toraja

Yizrel Nani Sallata¹, Viktor Siumarlata²

¹ Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Toraja, Indonesia; yizrel@ukitoraja.ac.id

² Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Toraja, Indonesia; viktor@ukitoraja.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

English for Tourism requires learners to communicate not only linguistic information but also culturally embedded meanings. In heritage tourism contexts such as Toraja, students are expected to explain local traditions, respond to tourists' spontaneous questions, and mediate cultural understanding. This study explores the linguistic, communicative, and intercultural challenges faced by English for Tourism students in Toraja and identifies their pedagogical needs. A qualitative descriptive needs analysis was conducted over eight weeks during field-based tourism learning activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three English for Tourism students and one professional tourist guide, reflective journals from nine students, and field observation notes. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns related to language use, intercultural interaction, and cultural explanation. Four major themes emerged. First, students experienced linguistic difficulties in explaining culturally specific Toraja concepts, particularly terms and rituals without direct English equivalents. Second, they faced communicative demands in spontaneous interactions, including accent comprehension, anxiety, discourse organization, and pragmatic adaptation. Third, students needed stronger cultural mediation skills to explain symbolic meanings and sensitive traditions accurately. Fourth, participants emphasized the need for experiential, culture-based learning, including field practice, guiding simulations, model scripts, and exposure to diverse English accents. The findings indicate that English for Tourism competence in Toraja extends beyond general English proficiency. Students need integrated training in language, intercultural communication, cultural interpretation, and experiential practice. The study recommends locally grounded and ICC-informed curricula that prepare students to act as cultural mediators in authentic tourism contexts.

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Corresponding Author:

Yizrel Nani Sallata

Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Toraja, Indonesia; yizrel@ukitoraja.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

As tourism increasingly becomes a space of international interaction, the importance of English for Tourism (EFT) continues to grow. Within the tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), needs analysis plays a central role in developing instruction that reflects learners' real communicative demands and target situations (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Basturkmen, 2010). In tourism contexts, communication extends beyond transactional exchanges. It also requires learners to perform narrative, interpretive, and explanatory tasks. These interactions demand not only grammatical competence but also the ability to explain cultural meanings, respond spontaneously, and adapt communication to diverse audiences.

Tourism communication is inherently intercultural. Tourism practitioners and students are expected not only to describe cultural objects or attractions but also to interpret values, histories, and symbolic meanings for visitors from different cultural backgrounds (Salazar, 2012). Byram's (1997) framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) emphasizes the importance of cultural knowledge, interpretive skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness in intercultural interaction. In the context of English for Tourism, this perspective suggests a very central idea. It suggests that learners must function as cultural mediators who can contextualize sensitive traditions, anticipate misunderstandings, and negotiate meaning appropriately and respectfully.

These intercultural demands are particularly relevant in Toraja (Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi), one of Indonesia's most prominent cultural tourism destinations. Toraja tourism involves complex cultural attractions such as *Tongkonan* traditional houses, *Rambu Solo'* funeral ceremonies, Kete' Kesu' heritage villages, and symbolic woodcarving traditions. International visitors frequently ask questions related not only to observable practices but also to the meanings, beliefs, and values underlying these traditions. Recent local studies have emphasized the importance of integrating Toraja cultural content into English for Tourism curricula. Research conducted at UKI Toraja and surrounding contexts has also been conducted. The research indicates that locally relevant materials and field-based learning activities improve students' engagement and readiness to explain cultural practices to tourists (Sallata et al., 2022; Sallata & Tondok, 2023). These studies support the development of culturally grounded and experiential EFT instruction.

Despite these developments, important gaps remain. Existing studies primarily focus on material development and classroom-based interventions, while limited attention has been given to how students actually experience communication challenges during real or simulated interactions with international tourists. In particular, there is still insufficiency. Such insufficiency is qualitative and field-oriented research which document the linguistic difficulties, intercultural mediation practices, pragmatic adjustments, and cultural explanation strategies required in the Toraja tourism context. This gap is significant because Toraja presents unique communicative demands. Students are required to explain culturally sensitive rituals, symbolic practices, and Indigenous concepts. Those things may not easily translate into English or align with foreign visitors' cultural expectations. Understanding these challenges is essential for designing EFT curricula that are context-sensitive, culturally responsive, and pedagogically relevant.

This study performs a qualitative, field-oriented needs analysis to identify the linguistic, communicative, and cultural challenges encountered by EFT students in Toraja. It aims to generate pedagogically actionable recommendations for culturally relevant EFT curricula. The study enhances ESP/EFT scholarship by incorporating interviews with students and a professional guide, student reflective journals, and field notes. This approach provides empirical specificity and practical insights for local curriculum development, addressing literature calls for context-sensitive, experiential, and ICC-informed English for Tourism Professional (ETP) design.

Addressing this gap, the present study conducts a qualitative, field-oriented needs analysis. This is to explore the linguistic, communicative, and intercultural challenges experienced by EFT students in Toraja. Drawing on interviews with students and a professional tour guide, reflective journals, and field notes, the study provides empirical insights into how learners negotiate tourism communication in

culturally complex situations. This study contributes to ESP and English for Tourism scholarship in three ways. First, it expands EFT research by focusing on intercultural mediation and real communicative practices rather than classroom performance alone. Second, it highlights the uniqueness of the Toraja context as a site of culturally sensitive tourism communication. Third, it offers practical recommendations for developing ICC-informed, experiential, and locally grounded EFT curricula (Byram, 1997; Kolb, 1984; Basturkmen, 2010).

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive design to investigate students' authentic linguistic, communicative, and cultural challenges encountered during interactions with international tourists. The design enabled researchers to investigate participants' experiences without significant theoretical imposition. The analysis of data employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, a method that provides a systematic and adaptable framework for identifying recurring themes within qualitative datasets.

2.2 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selection was based on their direct involvement in tourism-related field interactions. The participants consisted of three English for Tourism students (S1–S3), one experienced professional tourist guide (TG), and nine students who submitted reflective journals (R01–R09).

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years old and 54 years old (the tourist guide). They possessed intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency levels, as reflected in their academic performance and participation in tourism communication activities. The student participants had prior experience interacting with domestic and international visitors during field-based tourism activities. The tourist guide was selected due to extensive professional experience in guiding international tourists in Toraja. This participant composition provided complementary perspectives on linguistic difficulties, intercultural communication practices, and cultural mediation challenges within authentic tourism settings.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over an eight-week period during field-based tourism learning activities. The interactions observed in this study involved authentic and semi-structured encounters with international visitors. The interactions took place in tourism sites across Toraja, including cultural villages and traditional attractions.

Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and field observation notes. Interviews were conducted with three English for Tourism students and one professional tourist guide. The interviews were to explore communicative challenges, cultural explanation difficulties, and interaction strategies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and consisted of 8–10 guiding questions. Examples of interview questions included: (a) "What difficulties did you experience when explaining Toraja culture to tourists?" (b) "How did you respond when tourists asked culturally sensitive questions?" (c) "What aspects of English communication felt most challenging during the interaction?"

In addition, nine students submitted reflective journals documenting their experiences, emotional responses, and communicative difficulties encountered during field interactions (Moon, 2006). Field observation notes were also recorded to provide contextual understanding of interactional situations, although they were not treated as primary analytical data.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, supported by insights from Kabir (2024). The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, reflective journals, and field notes to achieve data familiarization. Initial coding was conducted manually and inductively by identifying recurring linguistic, communicative, and cultural issues across the dataset. For example, statements related to "difficulty explaining ritual meanings" were initially coded as cultural explanation difficulty, while comments concerning "adjusting language for foreign tourists" were coded as pragmatic adaptation. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic patterns such as intercultural mediation challenges and communicative adaptation strategies.

Themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, consistency, and alignment with the dataset. To enhance analytical rigor, the researchers employed analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2009; Wicks, 2017) and reflexive journaling (Tracy, 2014) to document interpretive decisions and minimize potential researcher bias.

The analysis was conducted manually to allow close engagement with participants' narratives and contextual meanings. Thematic sufficiency was considered achieved when no substantially new patterns emerged during subsequent coding cycles.

2.5 Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate and provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of the data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms and participant codes (e.g., S1, TG, R01) were used in all transcripts and reports. Any identifying information was removed from the dataset to protect participants' privacy. This study was conducted in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines and received approval from the relevant academic authority of the researchers' institution.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged from the interview and reflection data. Each of the themes is presented and discussed in the following:

3.1. Findings

3.1.1 Theme 1. Linguistic Challenges in Explaining Toraja Culture

Students experienced substantial difficulties when explaining culturally embedded Torajan concepts in English. Many local cultural terms and ritual expressions lacked direct English equivalents, making accurate explanation challenging. Participants frequently struggled not only with vocabulary selection but also with organizing explanations coherently, especially when describing ritual sequences and symbolic meanings.

One participant explained that *"some cultural terms cannot be translated directly"* and expressed concern that *"the meaning will change"* (R07). Another student admitted difficulty in explaining the Rambu Solo' process because the explanation became *"disjointed"* (S3). Students also reported communication barriers related to unfamiliar accents and fast speech from international tourists.

These findings suggest that the challenge is not merely linguistic but also interpretive. Students are required to perform cultural translation rather than literal language translation. This indicates that English for Tourism competence in Toraja involves the ability to negotiate meaning across languages and cultural systems simultaneously.

3.1.2 Theme 2. Communicative Demands in Real Tourism Interactions

Students described tourism communication as highly dynamic and unpredictable. Many participants experienced anxiety when responding to spontaneous questions from tourists, particularly when they needed to provide immediate explanations in English. Communication difficulties also emerged from differences in tourists' cultural expectations and interaction styles.

The professional tourist guide emphasized that communication strategies must be adjusted according to visitors' cultural backgrounds, noting that *"European tourists should be clear and direct"* while some Asian tourists may prefer more indirect communication (TG). Several students also acknowledged difficulties maintaining coherence during extended explanations, especially when nervous or uncertain.

These findings demonstrate that successful tourism communication depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on interactional adaptability. Students must manage real-time communication, interpret social expectations, and maintain communicative flow under pressure. This highlights the importance of pragmatic and intercultural competence in tourism-oriented English learning.

3.1.3 Theme 3. Cultural Mediation as a Core Competence

Participants demonstrated awareness that tourism communication requires more than factual knowledge about cultural attractions. Although students were familiar with visible cultural practices, many felt they lacked deeper understanding of symbolic meanings and cultural values underlying Toraja traditions.

One participant admitted, *"I only know the surface, not the meaning"* (S2), while others expressed fear of misrepresenting sensitive rituals such as death ceremonies and animal sacrifice. The professional guide stressed that cultural explanations should include broader contextual values, particularly beliefs related to honoring ancestors and communal identity.

These findings indicate that students are expected to function as cultural mediators rather than simple information providers. The ability to contextualize sensitive cultural practices becomes essential in helping international visitors understand Toraja traditions respectfully and accurately. This reinforces the importance of intercultural communicative competence in English for Tourism education.

3.1.4 Theme 4. Strong Need for Experiential, Culture-Based Training

Students consistently emphasized the importance of experiential and context-based learning activities. Participants believed that classroom-based instruction alone was insufficient for preparing them to handle authentic tourism interactions. Real and simulated guiding experiences were considered more effective for developing communicative confidence and practical language skills.

Several students also expressed the need for more structured learning support, including model scripts, field practice, and exposure to different English accents. One participant specifically mentioned the need for *"example sentences to explain Tongkonan or Rambu Solo'"* (R09).

These findings suggest that English for Tourism learning should prioritize experiential and culturally grounded pedagogy. Students require opportunities to practice authentic interaction, negotiate cultural explanations, and adapt communication strategies in realistic tourism settings. This supports the need for curriculum models that integrate field-based learning with intercultural communication training.

3.2 Discussion

Theme 1 highlights that English for Tourism competence involves more than general English proficiency. Consistent with ESP theory (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), the findings demonstrate that learners require culturally specific vocabulary, discourse organization skills, and listening abilities directly connected to tourism communication tasks. The difficulty students experienced in explaining

concepts such as Tongkonan and Rambu Solo' illustrates the limitations of general language instruction when learners must communicate culturally embedded meanings. This supports Basturkmen's (2010) argument that ESP instruction should integrate domain-specific language and communicative practices relevant to professional contexts.

However, the findings also extend existing ESP perspectives. It shows that tourism communication in culturally rich destinations such as Toraja requires learners to engage in cultural interpretation rather than simple lexical translation. Students are not merely transferring information but negotiating meanings across linguistic and cultural systems. The difficulties related to sequencing ritual explanations and maintaining coherence further indicate a very central notion. The notion is that discourse competence is central to effective cultural explanation, supporting Nation & Macalister's (2010) emphasis on explicit instruction in discourse functions relevant to authentic communicative tasks.

In addition, listening challenges also appear. These challenges involve unfamiliar accents and rapid speech reinforce Rose and Galloway's (2019) argument regarding the importance of exposure to diverse English varieties in global communication contexts. In the Toraja tourism setting, these linguistic demands become particularly. This is because students must simultaneously process language, cultural content, and intercultural expectations in real-time interactions.

Theme 2 demonstrates that successful tourism communication depends heavily on interactional and pragmatic adaptability. The findings align with interactional competence theory, which conceptualizes communication as the collaborative construction of meaning during real-time interaction (Young, 2011). Students' anxiety when responding to spontaneous tourist questions reveals several challenges. The challenges are managing turn-taking, contingency, and communicative flow under unpredictable conditions.

The findings also support previous research suggesting that classroom learning often inadequately prepares students for spontaneous interaction in authentic communicative environments (Zondag, 2024). However, this study extends existing research. This extension shows how interactional competence becomes especially complex in intercultural tourism settings where communicative expectations vary according to visitors' cultural backgrounds. The guide's observation regarding differences between European and Asian tourists illustrates very important aspects. The aspects show that students must continuously adjust directness, politeness, and explanatory style based on sociocultural expectations.

This reinforces Kasper and Rose's (2003) argument concerning the importance of pragmatic competence in intercultural communication. At the same time, the findings highlight that pragmatic flexibility in tourism contexts is not merely a linguistic skill but a form of situational intercultural responsiveness. Research by Munir and Yavuz (2024) further supports the importance of adaptive communicative strategies in real-time interaction. In the Toraja context, these abilities are particularly crucial. This is because students often engage with culturally sensitive topics while simultaneously managing interpersonal expectations from diverse international audiences.

Theme 3 positions cultural mediation as a central competence in tourism communication. The findings strongly reflect Byram's (1997) framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), particularly the importance of interpretive skills (*savoir comprendre*) and critical cultural awareness. Students' uncertainty in explaining symbolic meanings and sensitive rituals indicates a serious challenge. That indicates that effective intercultural communication requires deeper cultural interpretation rather than surface-level factual knowledge.

The findings support recent arguments that intercultural competence develops through reflective engagement with cultural narratives and meanings rather than memorization of isolated cultural facts (Snigdha, 2022; Abduvaytovna, 2025). At the same time, this study extends ICC discussions by demonstrating how cultural mediation operates in a highly localized Indigenous tourism context. Toraja traditions involve symbolic, ritualistic, and emotionally sensitive practices that require careful contextualization for international visitors unfamiliar with local belief systems.

The guide's emphasis on explaining the broader values behind rituals aligns with Salazar (2012), Souhail (2023), Steiner and Carol (2006), and Huang (2022), all of whom stress the importance of contextualized cultural interpretation in tourism communication. However, the Toraja context reveals that intercultural mediation is not only about promoting understanding but also about protecting cultural dignity and preventing misrepresentation. This makes cultural mediation both a communicative and ethical responsibility for tourism learners.

Theme 4 highlights the pedagogical importance of experiential and context-sensitive learning for English for Tourism students. The findings strongly support experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which argues that meaningful learning emerges through cycles of experience, reflection, and application. Students' preference for field practice, simulations, and authentic listening exposure suggests a key idea. The idea is that communicative competence develops more effectively when learners engage directly with realistic tourism scenarios.

The findings are consistent with previous research. The research shows that experiential and task-based learning enhance communicative confidence and context-sensitive language use (Trihastutie & Fadilah, 2019; Souzandehfar & Ibrahim, 2023). Similarly, Kanoksilapatham and Suranakkharin (2019) found that simulation-based tourist interaction tasks improve learners' ability to manage spontaneous communication and intercultural cues.

This study extends those perspectives by demonstrating that experiential learning is particularly important in culturally complex tourism destinations such as Toraja. In this such complex destination, students must navigate linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural challenges simultaneously. Authentic field interaction enables learners to develop themselves. They are able to practice language as well as to develop intercultural sensitivity, contextual explanation strategies, and communicative confidence. These findings suggest that English for Tourism curricula should move beyond classroom-centered instruction toward immersive and culturally grounded pedagogical models.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that English for Tourism competence in Toraja cannot be reduced to language proficiency alone. Tourism communication in this context requires the integration of linguistic competence, interactional adaptability, intercultural mediation, and experiential learning. By focusing on Toraja as an underrepresented cultural tourism setting, this study contributes to ESP and tourism communication scholarship. This happens by showing how local cultural complexity reshapes communicative demands and pedagogical needs. The study therefore extends existing theories of ESP, ICC, and experiential learning. The extension illustrates how learners in Indigenous and culturally sensitive tourism contexts must function simultaneously as language users, cultural interpreters, and intercultural mediators.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that effective communication in tourism settings requires English for Tourism students in Toraja to develop not only general language proficiency but also culturally embedded vocabulary, discourse organization skills, interactional adaptability, and intercultural competence that enable them to interpret and communicate local cultural meanings to international visitors. The findings further highlight the importance of experiential and culturally grounded learning in preparing students to act as cultural mediators within heritage tourism contexts. By providing evidence from the underrepresented context of Toraja cultural tourism, the study contributes to the literature on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Tourism, and intercultural communicative competence. However, the study is limited by its focus on a specific cultural and geographical context, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other tourism settings. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of culturally responsive instructional interventions, such as cultural explanation tasks, intercultural reflection activities, and simulation-based guiding practices, and employ longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how intercultural competence develops over time across diverse tourism and cultural contexts.

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