

The Contribution of English Proficiency to the Development of Soft Skills in Tourism Students

Ahmad Hanan¹, Tawali²

Department of English, FBMB UNDIKMA

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Abstract

This study examines the role of English language proficiency in developing students' soft skills in students enrolled in tourism study programs. Using a descriptive quantitative design with correlational design, the data were collected from 100 students enrolled in tourism courses using a structured questionnaire. The research indicated a moderate positive correlation between English competence and students' soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and intercultural competence. The strongest correlation was between English competence and communication competence, highlighting the facilitating function of English as a medium for enhanced professional communication in the context of tourism. The study opines that learning English language as part of tourism education should not only focus on linguistic ability but also the acquisition of soft skills to make the students more employable. It provides suggestions for teachers, curriculum designers, and future researchers to integrate English education with soft skill training through communicative and experiential learning approaches.

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Corresponding Author:

Ahmad Hanan

Department of English, FBMB UNDIKMA

Email: ahmadhanan@uindikma.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The period of globalization in the 21st century has turned the tourism industry into one of the most dynamic and rapidly developing branches of business. It is a service-oriented sector, and it is based not only on technical skills but also on individuals' ability to communicate clearly and present interpersonal skills. In the case of tourism students, the development of the soft skills—communication, team work, problem-solving, and intercultural skills—is essential in order to meet the requirements of the industry. As defined by Zhang and Zhang (2022), soft skills are the essential skills that define one's performance in customer-facing careers such as tourism and hospitality.

English, being the lingua franca of global tourism, is an important influence on these soft skills. English proficiency is not just a function of learning grammar and vocabulary but also a door to more extensive communication skills and intercultural competence. As per Kim and Lee (2021), English proficiency enhances the confidence and ability of learners to handle different social and professional interactions, which has a direct correlation with the development of soft skills. Therefore, English education must be well-planned to assist in the development of these vital skills.

Several studies emphasize the dependency between English proficiency and the development of soft skills. For example, based on research carried out by Harun and Ahmed (2023), students who were more proficient in English showed better collaboration and problem-solving abilities in simulated tourism projects. These findings have implications that English education should not be divorced from soft skills training but needs to be

integrated into the pedagogical approach to tourism studies. Therefore, instructors play pivotal roles in curriculum design that engages language and professional skill development.

Nevertheless, in the majority of learning environments, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries, English teaching is still largely abstract and lacking authentic, practice-oriented application. Tourism students learn English through typical classroom teaching in the form of rote learning rather than applied engagement. According to Nugroho et al. (2024), without a shift towards experiential and communicative learning patterns, students stand the risk of graduating without being ready for practical tourism contexts in the real world. This soft skills readiness deficit in language learning is a challenge to both educationists and institutions.

With the dominance of English in professional skill-building, especially in an internationally interconnected field like tourism, this study aims to examine how English proficiency can contribute to building soft skills in tourism students. It wishes to identify the unique language-related activities that contribute to better communication, cooperation, and flexibility, and thereby make recommendations for curriculum reform and pedagogy improvement.

This study is guided by several research questions centred on investigating the intersection of language competence and professional development in tourism education. Firstly, it would like to understand how knowledge of the English language influences the learning of soft skills among tourism students. Secondly, it would like to find out what particular soft skills such as communication, team work, problem-solving, or cultural flexibility are most influenced by students' proficiency in English. Third, this study tries to determine the pedagogical methods that can be employed to integrate English language learning with the acquisition of soft skills effectively in tourism education programs.

In alignment with the research questions, this study has three primary objectives. The first is to investigate the relationship between English language proficiency and the learning of soft skills among students enrolled in tourism-related programs. The second objective is to determine the most impacted soft skills by effective communication in English from a student. Lastly, this research aims to propose viable and innovative pedagogical strategies for teachers to integrate English classes with teaching soft skills in tourism education so that students will be adequately equipped to meet actual industry requirements.

This research is significant to different stakeholders in higher education and the tourism industry. For teachers, it provides an understanding of how English instruction can be maximized to facilitate the overall growth of students. For curriculum planners, it gives evidence-based suggestions on how to structure transdisciplinary learning experiences that combine language learning with soft skill development. For learners, this research emphasizes the importance of being proficient in English not just for learning but as a tool for improved employability in a competitive, service sector. Additionally, for the tourism and hospitality industry, the findings emphasize recruiting graduates with a combination of technical competencies, language proficiency, and people skills.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study utilizes descriptive quantitative research with a correlational design. The foremost objective is to explore the correlation between the English language proficiency and the learning of soft skills among tourism students. This design allows the researcher to measure the degree and direction of association between two variables—English proficiency and soft skills—based on empirical data. A quantitative design is suitable as it allows for statistical analysis and inference of results to a larger student population under similar educational contexts.

The population under study are undergraduate students of tourism from those selected universities or colleges in Indonesia, particularly those enrolled or who enrolled in English courses. Purposive sampling technique were used to select participants with particular conditions: (1) currently studying a tourism study program, (2) studying at least one English course, and (3) involved in soft skills-oriented activities such as internships, project work, or presentations. The targeted sample size is approximately 80–120 respondents, which is sufficient for correlation analysis (Sugiyono, 2021).

There are two principal variables in this research. The independent variable is the level of English language proficiency, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities of the students. The dependent variable is the soft skills level of the students, namely communication, teamwork, flexibility, problem-solving, and intercultural sensitivity. These soft skills are measured using a systematic questionnaire with validated soft skills models in tourism education (Pranić et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2023).

Data were collected using a self-report survey questionnaire, delivered online via Google Forms or hand-to-hand during class. The survey consists of three sections: (1) demographic information, (2) self-rating of English proficiency using the CEFR scale, and (3) self-rating of soft skills via a Likert scale (1–5), adapted from valid instruments used in recent tourism education studies. Prior to distribution at full level, the instrument has been pilot-tested among a small group of students (10–15 respondents) to check reliability and comprehensibility.

Collected data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentage) were used in order to provide description of demographic profile, English proficiency level, and soft skill level of the respondents. In order to know the relationship between the two variables, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was employed. 0.05 ($\alpha = 5\%$) has been used to test if the correlation is statistically significant. In addition, a regression analysis can be utilized to identify the extent to which the English proficiency can be utilized to predict the number of soft skills for the tourism students.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were gathered from 100 students of tourism from some universities in Indonesia. The subjects filled out a questionnaire to assess English language ability and perceived soft skills. Descriptive statistics revealed that the majority of the students possessed an intermediate level of English ability, wherein 34% of the students were categorized as B1 and 29% as B2 according to CEFR standards. In terms of soft skills, the highest mean scores were in teamwork ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.58$) and communication ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.63$), and the lowest were in problem-solving ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.71$).

Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between English proficiency and overall soft skills ($r = 0.476$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that the students who reported higher proficiency in English also self-rated higher on soft skills. Among the five individual soft skill components, communication skills had the highest correlation with English proficiency ($r = 0.593$, $p < 0.01$), followed by intercultural competence ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.01$), and teamwork ($r = 0.386$, $p < 0.05$). These results validate that English language ability is strongly related to the acquisition of critical soft skills among tourism students.

The outcomes of this study highlight the mounting agreement in current research regarding the importance of English language ability in fostering employability skills, especially in service industries like tourism. The moderate high correlation between soft skills and English proficiency supports Pranić et al.'s (2024) assertions that emphasized the integration of language development and professional skills in tourism education to align

with international market demands. English-proficient students who are more fluent will enjoy enhanced intercultural communication, which means enhanced adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving.

The robust association with English and communication skills also aligns with the theoretical model presented by Kim and Lee (2021), where they described that if English fluency allows learners to express ideas confidently and communicate more effectively in multilateral settings, then English communication must not only be considered a linguistic skill but also a soft skill, particularly in the area of tourism, wherein guest communication easily occurs in English. This also finds resonance in the experiential learning principles set by Vasconcelos et al. (2024) who suggest collaborative, language-rich learning environments to enable the development of soft skills.

Strangely enough, the weaker alignment with problem-solving capability might mean that even if English facilitates interaction among people, it will never directly influence the thoughts of the students unless applied in task environments. According to Guo et al. (2023), curriculum development should move beyond mere language instruction to incorporate outcome-oriented designs whereby problem-solving situations as found in reality are performed via English as an instrument of delivery.

Overall, the conclusions lean towards utilizing integrative curriculum approaches that look at English both as a discipline and as a tool for building soft skills. English language tasks such as group presentation, simulation, and intercultural projects need to be given importance in tourism courses in order to enhance both language ability and soft skills at the same time.

4. CONCLUSION

This study sought to clarify the role of the level of proficiency in the English language in shaping the soft skills of tourism students. Based on the results of data analysis, it is possible to conclude that there is a moderate positive correlation between students' English proficiency and their soft skills, particularly in communication, teamwork, and intercultural competence. These findings reveal that English capability is not only a language tool; it is a fundamental facilitator of work and people competence in the tourism industry.

English competence and communication skills had the strongest correlation, which indicates that competent communication in English positively boosts the interpersonal skills of students, which are extremely important in tourism-related contexts. Though the correlation was not very high with other of the soft skills such as problem-solving and adaptability, overall results reinforce that language learning stands at the pinnacle of student work readiness determination.

Thus, the study highlights the importance of creating English language courses in tourism education not only for linguistic competence but also for the acquisition of soft skills. Courses that integrate communicative, task-based, and experiential learning approaches to language acquisition are most likely to produce graduates who are both English language proficient and equipped with the soft skills necessary to succeed in the tourism sector.

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