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THE ROLE OF FUNCTIONAL ENGLISH FOR FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES IN TOURISM AND THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

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Abstract
This paper explores the relevance of the Functional English for front-line employees in the tourism and hotel sector, where effective communication has an essential role to play in service delivery and satisfaction of the customers. The research is qualitative and descriptive with a library-based approach, using secondary sources such as books, journal articles and research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), hospitality communication, and tourism management. The results indicate that English is the main language used as a medium of communication as a lingua franca in international tourism and is the language used by employees and guests from different linguistic backgrounds. The study also emphasizes that Functional English is vital to being able to carry out routine workplace activities like greeting guests, booking and confirming reservations, giving information and dealing with complaints. It also indicates that communication skills make a huge impact on service quality, customer satisfaction and reputation of the organization. The study also highlights that the use of Functional English has grown online and requiring for both spoken and written communication skills as a result of digital transformation. Although communication is an integral part of the English for hospitality services (EHS) role, there is still a lack of training and limited practical exposure, leading to communication barriers. Overall, the study findings demonstrate that ESP-based training programs play a vital role in supporting employees' communication competence and in boosting the performance of the entire tourism and hospitality service.

Keywords: Functional English; Tourism; Hospitality; ESP; Service Quality

Introduction
Tourism and hospitality is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing industry of the global economy. It plays an important role in the economy of a country, job creation, cultural exchange and international cooperation. Tourism is a highly internationalized industry which is becoming more and more dependent on good communication between service providers and tourists, as people increasingly cross national borders. Language, in this context, becomes a basic means to interact, delivery services and improve the overall customer experience. English is one of the main languages spoken around the world (Abdelrady et al., 2025, 2026); as a language, it is now the language of choice for communication internationally (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024), and it has become the lingua franca in tourism and hospitality (Crystal, 2012; Richards, 2015; Bhatia, 2017). So the use of English as a language of communication is now a necessary skill for employees working in tourism occupations.

As the tourism and hotel sector has become more and more global, so too has the need for English in the business. The divide between the two has become more frequently with the rise of many international travelers and the need for English in the hospitality sector. Many visitors to countries where English is not the main language, therefore English is the most useful language for communication between visitors and service providers (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025). Hotels, travel agencies, restaurants, airlines and tourism organizations regularly communicate with guests from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Under these circumstances, good English communication skills can enable employees to give correct

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information, comprehend customer needs and develop good communication relationships with guests. Therefore, it becomes essential for the management to have a good command of English to ensure effective communication and provide excellent service to customers (Prachanant, 2012; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2017; Morrison, 2019).

In the tourism and hospitality industry, front-line employees are in a very special position as they are the face of the organization when they directly interact with customers. These staff members are hotel receptionists, concierge staff, guest relations officers, travel consultants, tour guides, restaurant servers and customer service representatives. As they are frequently the first step of interaction for visitors, their communication abilities have a major impact on the customers' impression of the service and professionalism of the organization. Positive interaction can help to improve customer satisfaction and encourage them to revisits, while negative interaction can cause misunderstandings, frustration, and negative perceptions of the service (Nickson, 2013; Baum, 2016; Walker, 2021).

Along with the technical knowledge, the ability of front-line employees to communicate in the appropriate manner in the workplace is effectiveness. The requirement highlights the need to use Functional English as a language for specific occupational purposes. Functional English differs from general English in that it concentrates on language skills needed to successfully undertake job-related tasks as opposed to general language skills (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024). These skills involve welcoming visitors, providing directions, describing the features of the hotel, accepting reservations, solving problems, addressing issues and resolving complaints. Thus, the role of the tourism and hospitality employees in communication is directly related to functional English (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Basturkmen, 2010).

The notion of functional English is related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that focuses on the teaching and learning of English in relation to its users' professional and occupational functions. In the context of tourism and hospitality, they need to know special vocabulary and phrases, and be able to communicate and speak in a manner that will make them understood by international guests. The use of suitable terms in various service contexts is important as it is not only about information; it is also about building, expressing courtesy, being professional and visitors. In this view, the Functional English has two roles: communicative and relational roles in the workplace (Blue & Harun, 2003; Basturkmen, 2010; Johns, 2013). Another aspect of Functional English is improving the quality of service. In the hospitality sector, service quality is well known to be one of the most relevant factors affecting customer satisfaction. Communication helps workers to grasp the customers' needs properly and act on them efficiently. Good communication in English by front-line employees allows them to better serve the needs of guests, solve guest concerns and complaints and offer tailored support. These interactions also help shape the experiences that guests have and enhance the reputation of tourism organizations. On the other hand, poor communication can lead to poor service, and customer dissatisfaction, which can negatively impact business performance (Nickson, 2013; Kotler et al, 2017; Walker, 2021).

In today's digital world, the importance of Functional English is very clear (Akram et al., 2021, 2022; Mahnaz & Akram, 2026). The tourism and hospitality sector are experiencing dramatic changes in how they communicate thanks to technological advances. In today's world, it is becoming mandatory for personnel at the front-line employees to communicate via emails, online booking systems, guest review platforms, social media sites, and digital guest-service applications. In such communication, situations require the mastery of English, as well as the ability to communicate effectively in English in written and technology-mediated ways (Ramzan et al., 2021). However, in today's hospitality industry, Functional English is not just

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about talking face to face communication; it is a multidimensional skill that is vital for success in hospitality sector. (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Richards, 2015; Wood, 2015).

In addition, English skills play a vital role in employees' professional growth and progression. In numerous tourism and hospitality sectors, language skills are viewed as a desirable attribute for tourism and hospitality professionals as it contributes to their employability and promotion prospects. The ability to communicate well is a desired skill for employees to have in multicultural environments, for leadership positions and for meeting the demands of the global tourism market. Therefore, Functional English is not only useful for the organisation in terms of better services but is also useful for personal career development and future success (Prachanant 2012; Baum 2016; Morrison 2019).

1.1 Problem Statement

English is the language of international travel and tourism/hospitality, but most front line employees do not have a level of Functional English sufficient to communicate effectively at workplace. Issues of communication are common when employees engage with international guests, causing misunderstandings, poor service, and customer dissatisfaction and loss of organizational reputation. Although the ability to use English language in the tourism sector has been identified as an important factor, few studies in the literature have focused on the contribution of Functional English in the workplace in terms of guests' service and professional effectiveness of the front-line employees. Thus, research is needed that is more focused on the role of functional English in successful communication and service delivery in the tourism and hotel industry.

1.2 Significance of the Research

The findings from this study are important and new as it will help in understanding the usefulness of the functional English in the tourism and hospitality industry. The results can help hotel managers, tourism operators and language-training policy makers to draw up appropriate language-training courses that are targeted at the communicative requirements of front-line employees. The study also has implications for the area of ESP, in showing the correlation between language skills and performance in the workplace. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of communication skills in promoting guest satisfaction, service quality, and organizational success. The emphasis on Focus on Professional English in the workplace make the research useful to employees who wish to improve their language skills in the workplace and remain flexible in the challenges of a globalized tourism sector.

2. Literature Review

Tourism and hospitality is one of the most linguistically-intensive service sectors in the world economy. Due to the steady increase of international travel and mobility, communication between services and tourists has become more complex and multilingual. In this context, English has become the dominant language of communication that allows people with diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate with each other (Crystal, 2012; Richards, 2015; Bhatia, 2017). As English becomes more prominent in the tourism industry, it is clear that this language is a means of functioning and is functional in ensuring the smooth delivery of services and the improvement of customer experience in the international tourism environment. As Crystal (2012) states that English has become the international language as it is used broadly in various fields like business, tourism and education etc. in international fields. This international status has rendered it as the language of communication in many professional situations in which participants may not share a common mother tongue. In addition, Richards (2015) contends that tourism is communicative by nature as it requires the constant exchange and interaction between the service provider and the client. As Bhatia (2017) notes, English in professional contexts is not a single entity but context-specific, defined by the workplace, discourse, and institutional needs, practices, and expectations.

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Functional English has strong theoretical roots in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) where the teaching of language is determined by learners' occupational and professional needs. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is an approach that all decision making, in terms of content and method, is made on the basis of the learners' reasons for learning English. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) further discuss ESP, focusing on needs analysis, authenticity of materials and relevance to real world discourse. Basturkmen (2010) also points out that ESP is highly goal oriented and aims at preparing the learner to communicate, which is the most important need of human beings in the specified professional field, like tourism and hospitality. ESP is closely linked to functional English, which focuses on functional skills of language in the workplace, not on grammar. Hospitality workers have to do certain communicative tasks in their work, like welcoming guests, taking reservations, disclosing information, and dealing with complaints. As a result, Johns (2013) believes that ESP instruction is especially advantageous in language learning for real life communicative needs. Another aspect of hospitality communication that is emphasized by Blue and Harun (2003) is its task orientation and the need for particular linguistic structures and polite expressions for achieving service efficiency and professionalism. Communicative competence is another important theoretical factor that is important in understanding Functional English. Hymes (1972) first introduced the concept and claimed that social appropriateness as well as grammatical accuracy is needed for effective communication. Canale and Swain (1980) added four components to this model: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Such skills are vital in tourism and hospitality contexts, as the employees need to adapt their language to the needs, cultural expectations, and situational demands of their guests (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Walker, 2021).

In the tourism/hotel sector, front-line employees play a vital role in the business as they are the face of the firm and directly face guests. According to Nickson (2013), the attitudes of these workers are vital in shaping guests' perception of the quality of service they receive. Walker (2021) also says that front-line employees should be polite, clear and responsive in every interaction as they are responsible for making the first impression. In addition, Morrison (2019) points out that employees are service ambassadors who create organizational image and guest satisfaction through their language use. Empirical studies always indicate that English is used very often in the day to day business of a hotel. Numerous studies have also been conducted by various researchers on the language proficiency used by tourists in their interaction with tourists' service providers. Prachanant (2012) found that for several tasks relating to the business of tourisms, namely giving direction, making bookings, and answering inquiries from tourists, the employees of the tourism industry use English regularly. The study also found that poor English skills can cause communication breakdowns and inefficiencies in service delivery. Likewise Nickson (2013) states that language barriers can lead to poor communication, which can harm not only customers' satisfaction but also the performance of any organization. The results confirm the need for the use of Functional English in the hospitality sector.

There is a strong correlation in the service quality literature between communication and customer satisfaction. Understanding and addressing customer needs has significant impact on customer satisfaction, which is directly related to the service providers' ability to understand and serve customers, according to Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2017). Hospitality organizations depend on employee communication skills for trust and for securing repeat business, adds Morrison (2019). Walker (2021) also notes that good communication experiences can foster guest satisfaction, while bad communication experiences can foster guest dissatisfaction and negative service evaluations. The use of digital platforms and written communication is becoming a growing part of modern tourism communication, along with spoken interaction. As Buhalis and Law (2008) technology has revolutionized the way tourism

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is done with the advent of online booking systems, digital marketing and virtual customer service. In addition, Wood (2015) suggests, front-line employees must communicate in English via email, online chat systems, and social media. This is also reflected in the way that Functional English has become a multi-modal skill involving both oral and written language skills, as noted by Richards (2015).

The growing importance of intercultural communication is another key aspect highlighted in the tourism and hotel sector. Tourism is a process with which people from different cultures interact with each other, so intercultural competence is very important when providing tourism services. In this context, Bhatia (2017) emphasizes the importance of being aware of cultural differences in language use, politeness strategies, and interaction styles. English is used as a communication medium in multicultural contexts in which speakers are able to negotiate across cultural and linguistic barriers successfully (Crystal, 2012).

It is well established that training and development in functional English skills are important for enhancing workplace communication skills. The training in ESP should be designed according to the needs and workplace requirements of learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Basturkmen (2010) agrees with this perspective stating that task-based learning and authentic workplace materials are important. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) also emphasize that good ESP programs should be based on authentic communication situations that are encountered by workers in the workplace. Hospitality businesses are increasingly investing in language training programmes, which are structured and are designed to improve the performance and quality of services provided by employees (Baum, 2016). Such training programs are designed to boost the confidence in communication, diminish language barriers and expand guest interaction abilities. The idea that targeted English training can be very effective in improving employees' capacity to undertake real workplace communication tasks is also supported Prachanant (2012). As a whole, the literature indicates that training in functional English is a strategy for organizational success and employee development.

Briefly, the literature as a whole clearly evidence that Functional English is a critical skill in the tourism and hospitality sector. It is well grounded in ESP theory and communicative competence models and is vital in achieving successful communication in the workplace. Based on the researches of Crystal (2012), Richards (2015) and Kotler et al. (2017), it can be seen that the ability to speak English has a direct impact on the quality of service, guest satisfaction and organizational performance. Thus, the functional English is not only a language skill but also a vital element in the hospitality world in the international context.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative, descriptive, and library research. The researcher uses qualitative method because the study is exploratory in nature to gain insight into the importance of Front Line employees in the tourism and hotel sector. The descriptive method is used to describe the results of the study and the library is used to obtain information. All the data sources used for the research are the secondary data source which consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and published reports on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), communicative competence, hospitality communication and tourism management. Relevance, academic credibility and a thematic strand of the literature to Functional English in professional contexts is followed. Thematic analysis is performed, where the patterns and ideas in the literature that are important are categorized, identified and interpreted. Key topics include: English as a global language of tourism; English in the workplace: ESP principles in workplace communication; Communative needs of front-line employees in the hospitality industry; Language proficiency and service quality; Digital communication in modern tourism. This was an interpretative, theory-driven study as opposed to an empirical study (no primary data was collected, e.g., no surveys, interviews). The use of

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triangulated academic sources and scholarly literature, however, helps to ensure credibility, making the findings more valid. In general, this approach is suitable for gaining a solid conceptual understanding of Functional English and its contribution to effective communication, service provision and working effectively in the tourism and hospitality sector.

4. Results and Findings

The results of this study based on thematic analysis of existing literature found that Functional English is an important and irreplaceable factor in the tourism and hotel industry. In all the studies reviewed, there is consensus that in the context of international tourism, English is the dominant language employed as a lingua franca for communication between the service provider and guest from various linguistic backgrounds (Crystal, 2012; Richards, 2015; Bhatia, 2017). This makes Functional English not a 'nice to have' but a core part of the job of front-line employees in the international hospitality sector.

The analysis also shows that Functional English is vital for the front-line employee's ability to carry out their everyday tasks at work. Some of these involve greeting and welcoming guests, giving service information, handling bookings, or handling customer queries or complaints. These interactions constitute an integral part of customer service experiences in the hospitality industry, where communication directly influences guest experiences (Prachanant, 2012; Nickson, 2013). There is a consistent literature, however, that indicates that poor skills in Functional English can lead to hesitation, misunderstandings, and diminished confidence among employees and this has a negative impact on the efficiency of services delivered. Another important finding is that there is a direct link between the competence in Functional English and the perception received on the quality of the services received. Research has shown that guest who have a higher level of English communication skills can better understand the guest's needs, can be more responsive and uphold professional interactions. This means higher guest satisfaction, increased trust and repeat business (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2017; Morrison, 2019). However, it is common to see a lack of English proficiency, which can be linked to communication issues and lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and poor service experiences, impacting organizational reputation.

The results also reveal that Functional English in the modern workplace in the hospitality industry is not limited to verbal communication but also involves text and digital communication. The advancement of technology in tourism has led to the increasing demand for using English in emails, online booking systems, customer feedback systems and social media communication channels in tourism operations (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Wood, 2015). This means that traditional communication is changing into a new communication environment which is more multimodal and where employees need to be able to communicate accurately and know how to communicate digitally. Furthermore, communication barriers in the tourism and hospitality industry have been mentioned in the literature as a continuing problem. The barriers that are mainly associated with these are lack of language training, limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to genuine communication and low confidence level of employees in interactions with international guests (Prachanant, 2012;Nickson, 2013). These can lead to incomplete delivery of the message, less efficiency in service delivery, and, at times, service failure, making a well-structured language development programs an essential part of any hospitality organisation.

Finally, the results are very positive for the effectiveness of ESP-based and occupational language training programs in enhancing the skills in functional English. Studies show that programs that are based upon occupational tasks are highly effective in improving the communicative competence, communicative confidence, and communicative ability of employees in their jobs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998' Basturkmen, 2010). Structured language development programs are correlated with improved

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levels of service consistency and guest satisfaction. It is generally concluded that the results of this study support the idea that Functional English is one of the key factors in operational success, in-service improvement and professional development in the tourism and hotel sector.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicated that functional English plays a pivotal role in hospitality and tourism industry, as functional English is not merely used a tool of communication but also a necessary working requirement. In fact, English is widely used as a dominant language in transnational communication in all professional fields across the world. According to Crystal (2012) and Richards (2015), English is not more the language of native speakers but it is the language of the world because of its widespread usage in various professions. The use of English not merely facilitates communication but actually affects service performance. The present findings also extend this argument about English as a global language because in the context studied, the use of English is found to directly impact service performance, rather than just enabling communication. One of the important implications of the results is that the front-line employee is a "structurally-sensitive" and performs a vital role in service delivery because he or she sits between organizational systems and guest expectations. As a mediator, communication is not neutral in itself, but it actively shapes guests' perceptions of the quality of services. Nickson (2013) and Walker (2021) emphasize the fact that employees of hospitality industries are "service actors", whose interactional behaviour will affect the evaluation of the hospitality industry by the guest. This paper further backs this claim with the findings of the present study, which show that the service experience can be undermined by small communication problems, including hesitation, lexical limitation and inappropriate phrasing, and that can negatively impact perceived professionalism.

The results also indicate that Functional English is closely related to cognitive demands in service work. Not only do they need to converse in English, but they must also decipher what it is the guest is saying, deal with ambiguity, and react quickly. This is in front-line with the communicative competence theory that considers the importance of sociolinguistic and strategic competence as well as grammatical competence in communication (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). The evidence shows that while many people in the hospitality industry do not know the words to use, many failed in the service because they lack strategic communication skills in the unknown service situations. Moreover, the results indicate that Functional English directly impacts service efficiency, guest trust and organizational reputation. This aligns with the service marketing point of view where communication is regarded as one of the fundamental factors affecting guest satisfaction (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2017; Morrison, 2019). The study finds that, however, the quality of service in the hospitality sector is not always measured objectively, and therefore the linguistic level of the service is made manifest as a sign of professionalism, even if it is not necessarily a measure of the professionalism of the person providing the service.

The study also finds that digital transformation has changed the nature of Functional English in its very nature. The way hotel guests communicate with each other has evolved beyond just in-person interaction, with guests now communicating online, through automated booking systems, and by providing feedback to the hotel. Both Buhalis and Law (2008) and Wood (2015) believe that tourism is now in a phase of technologically mediated interaction, and that for a variety of reasons there is a growing need for written competence in English in the digital world. The present results add to this by proposing that a different set of skills is necessary for digital Functional English: that of being clear in written discourse, tone management and cross-platform adaptation. Another important problem pointed out is the lack of communicativeness among the employees on the ground. The results show that the communication problem is not due to lack of English, but of lack of adequate or practical English training in the workplace.

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Prachanant (2012) and Basturkmen (2010) state that ESP teaching should be based on needs, however, the present study indicates that much of the hospitality sector is still teaching generic language skills and not providing task-specific training. There is always a gap between the academic English and usage of English in the real world to fulfill the market demand. The study suggests that functional English helps employees in their professional development and growth and also enhances their interpersonal communication skills. In this regard, English for special purpose (ESP) is a special kind of course which is helpful for the employees to develop their field related English expressions and functional usage of the language when it is required from them.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate the role of functional English for the front-lines employees in tourism and hospitality industry while taking care of guests. The study found that functional plays a key role in hotel and tourism industry in delivering quality services to the guests since the whole industry is depended upon strong English communication skills. The role of English as an international language and lingua franca has further enhanced the value of functional English in tourism and hospitality industry. The study found that front line employees are required to have good communication skills in greeting and welcoming the international guests, giving them information, handling reservation for them and complying professionally with their complaints. The research also points out that the teaching of Functional English has not only evolved from spoken interaction to digital communication with emails, online booking systems, and social media, but has also undergone a technological shift in the hospitality industry. Even though the ability to communicate is crucial, many employees still struggle with being able to communicate because of the lack of training and exposure to real work situations. Hence, the importance of structured ESP training programs, targeting real-life communication skills in the hospitality industry field, is highlighted. Overall, Functional English proves to be an important variable for the success of employees, the quality of the services they deliver and the success of business in the international tourism and hotel sector.

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