

NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR ENGLISH FOR TOURISM COURSE MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning materials play a central role in English for Specific Purposes courses because they connect language instruction with learners' academic and occupational needs. Understanding students' perceptions of these materials is therefore essential for improving course relevance and learning engagement. This study aimed to investigate students' difficulties with the teaching and learning materials used in an English for Tourism course at a university in northern Vietnam and to identify their needs for materials development. A quantitative research design was employed, involving English-major undergraduates who had completed the course. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire, with the present study focusing specifically on students' responses concerning the course materials and content. The findings revealed several limitations in the existing materials. In particular, students reported that the course content did not sufficiently reflect current tourism trends, that some materials were outdated or insufficiently relevant to workplace needs, and that certain topics failed to sustain their interest and participation. The findings highlight the need for a coherent, regularly updated, and workplace-oriented materials system integrating core course content, audiovisual resources, interactive activities, and authentic tourism tasks.

Keyword: *teaching and learning materials, English for Tourism, EFL students, learning difficulties, curriculum and content*

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Tourism, a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has become increasingly important as the tourism industry requires employees to communicate effectively with international visitors, provide destination information, explain tourism products, design itineraries, respond to enquiries, and handle service-related situations. ESP courses are designed around the language, skills, and communicative practices required in a particular academic or occupational context (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Accordingly, students learning English for Tourism need not only general language knowledge but also specialised vocabulary, professional communication skills, tourism-related knowledge, and opportunities to apply English in realistic workplace situations. The effectiveness of the course therefore depends greatly on whether its content and materials reflect the learners' needs and the communicative demands of the tourism profession.

Teaching and learning materials serve as the main connection between course objectives, language input, classroom activities, and expected learning outcomes. Cunningsworth (1995) suggests that materials should correspond to course aims, learners' proficiency, language content, skills, topics, and practical needs. Tomlinson (2011) further defines materials broadly to include printed texts, images, audio, video, digital resources, and tasks designed to facilitate language learning. In an ESP course, materials should not merely present vocabulary and grammatical structures; they should expose students to relevant professional discourse and enable them to perform target tasks. Materials that are outdated, overly general, insufficiently engaging, or disconnected from workplace realities may make it difficult for students to transfer their general English knowledge to specialised communication.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of needs-based materials in tourism education. Anam and Rachmadian (2020) found that tourism students needed English for practical communication associated with tourism services

and future employment. Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2021) similarly reported that English instruction for tourism and hospitality students should be closely linked to the language skills required in professional contexts. From the perspective of tourism employees, Al-Malki et al. (2022) highlighted the particular importance of listening and speaking for understanding instructions, responding to requirements, and providing information about tourist attractions. Research into tourism reading materials has also shown that learners' perceptions and target needs should be considered when selecting and developing course content (Octaviana et al., 2021). These findings indicate that effective English for Tourism materials need to be current, contextually relevant, and closely related to authentic occupational practices.

At the institution where the present study was conducted, English for Tourism is offered to English-major undergraduates. Although the course has clearly stated objectives and learning outcomes, no unified materials system has been developed specifically for the local training context. The materials currently used are drawn from different sources and vary in target audience, level of difficulty, duration, and coverage. Several available coursebooks combine tourism with hospitality, hotel, and restaurant English, whereas the primary focus of the course is tourism. Such differences may create a gap between the intended curriculum and the materials experienced by students. However, decisions about materials development should not rely solely on teachers' observations or comparisons of available textbooks; students' perceptions provide essential evidence regarding the difficulties they encounter and the aspects of materials that require improvement.

This study therefore aimed to investigate students' perceived difficulties in learning English for Tourism, with particular attention to the limitations of curriculum, course content, and teaching and learning materials. It addressed the following research questions: (1) What level of difficulty do students experience when learning English for Tourism? (2) Which limitations of teaching and learning materials are perceived most strongly by students? and (3) What implications do the findings have for developing teaching and learning materials for the course?

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative research design was employed to investigate students' perceived difficulties in learning English for Tourism and their perceptions of curriculum, content, and learning materials. A quantitative survey was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to collect comparable responses from a relatively large group of participants and to identify the relative prominence of different difficulties through descriptive statistics (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

2.1. Research context and participants

The study was carried out at a university in northern Vietnam, where English for Tourism is included in the English-major curriculum. The course is intended to develop students' tourism-related language knowledge and communicative skills through topics associated with destinations, travel services, tourism products, itineraries, tour guiding, and professional interaction. At the time of the study, teachers used materials selected and adapted from several published and locally available sources rather than one institutionally developed course package.

The participants were 155 English-major undergraduates who had studied English for Tourism. They comprised 117 females and 38 males. Most of the respondents reported prior experience with English for Tourism, allowing them to evaluate the course content and materials on the basis of actual participation. The students reported different reasons for taking the course, including institutional requirements, personal interest in tourism, and preparation for future employment. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the responses were used only for research purposes.

2.2. Data collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire designed to examine obstacles encountered by students when learning English for Tourism. The final instrument consisted of 20 items grouped into six dimensions: Language Knowledge, Language Skills, Motivation and Autonomy, Curriculum and Content, Learning Conditions and Technology, and Social and Motivational Environment. The items were developed from the ESP literature and relevant previous studies, and the questionnaire was piloted with ten students

before the main data collection. Participants responded to each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated a greater level of perceived difficulty.

The reliability coefficients of the six dimensions ranged from .854 to .922, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .944, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant. Exploratory factor analysis produced a two-factor structure explaining 72.27% of the total variance. These results supported the use of the instrument for examining the students' perceived difficulties. For the specific analysis of materials limitations, four items within the Curriculum and Content dimension were examined: topic attractiveness, opportunities to explore new knowledge, material relevance and currency, and the extent to which the content reflected current tourism trends.

2.3. Data analysis

The collected data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means (M), standard deviations (SD), and rank order, were calculated to determine the overall level of difficulty and compare the six dimensions. The following intervals were used to interpret the five-point Likert-scale scores: 1.00–1.79 as very low, 1.80–2.59 as low, 2.60–3.39 as moderate, 3.40–4.19 as moderate-high, and 4.20–5.00 as high. The Curriculum and Content dimension and its four items were then examined in greater detail to identify the limitations most strongly perceived by the students.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings regarding students' overall difficulties in learning English for Tourism and their perceptions of limitations in curriculum, course content, and teaching and learning materials.

3.1. Students' overall difficulties in learning English for Tourism

Overall, the respondents experienced a moderate level of difficulty when learning English for Tourism (M = 3.366, SD = 1.038). Table 1 indicates that the three contextual dimensions received moderate-high ratings and were ranked above the three learner-related dimensions. Social and

Motivational Environment received the highest mean score (M = 3.622, SD = .968), followed by Learning Conditions and Technology (M = 3.537, SD = .968) and Curriculum and Content (M = 3.433, SD = .934). In contrast, Language Knowledge (M = 3.280, SD = 1.093), Motivation and Autonomy (M = 3.274, SD = 1.124), and Language Skills (M = 3.151, SD = 1.093) were interpreted as moderate difficulties.

Dimension	M	SD	Interpretation
Social and Motivational Environment	3.622	.968	Moderate-high
Learning Conditions and Technology	3.537	.968	Moderate-high
Curriculum and Content	3.433	.934	Moderate-high
Language Knowledge	3.280	1.093	Moderate
Motivation and Autonomy	3.274	1.124	Moderate
Language Skills	3.151	1.093	Moderate
Overall difficulty	3.366	1.038	Moderate

Table 1. Students' Overall Difficulties in Learning English for Tourism

The moderate overall difficulty indicates that the students were able to engage with the course but continued to encounter obstacles that affected their learning experience. More importantly, the contextual dimensions were rated more highly than the learner-related dimensions. This finding suggests that students did not attribute their difficulties primarily to limited language knowledge or language skills. Instead, classroom conditions, social and motivational factors, technology, curriculum, and course content were perceived as more prominent. The result supports the ESP principle that learning difficulties cannot be understood only in terms of individual proficiency; the extent to which a course reflects learners' target needs and provides appropriate conditions for practice is equally important (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Basturkmen, 2010).

The relatively high rating for Social and Motivational Environment may be related to students' anxiety when participating in discussion, their difficulty maintaining motivation beyond institutional requirements, and limited

interaction in large classes. Learning Conditions and Technology also emerged as a notable concern, particularly regarding class size, opportunities to interact, and the availability of audiovisual support. These findings indicate that materials development alone cannot address all the students' difficulties. Nevertheless, well-structured materials may reduce some contextual barriers by providing clear task procedures, defined group roles, appropriate audiovisual input, and staged opportunities for participation.

3.2. Students' perceptions of limitations in curriculum, content, and materials

The Curriculum and Content dimension was rated at a moderate-high level ($M = 3.433$, $SD = .934$). As presented in Table 2, the most strongly perceived limitation was that the course content did not reflect current tourism trends ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.02$). Outdated or insufficiently relevant materials received the second-highest rating ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.03$), followed by difficulty maintaining engagement when topics were unappealing ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.11$). Difficulty exploring new knowledge in areas of personal interest was rated at a moderate level ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.17$).

Perceived limitation	M	SD	Interpretation
Content does not reflect current tourism trends	3.53	1.02	Moderate-high
Materials are outdated or insufficiently relevant	3.48	1.03	Moderate-high
Topics do not sustain interest and participation	3.45	1.11	Moderate-high
Difficulty exploring new knowledge of interest	3.28	1.17	Moderate
Curriculum and Content overall	3.43	.93	Moderate-high

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of Curriculum, Content, and Materials Limitations

Of the four items, the failure of course content to keep pace with current tourism trends received the highest rating. This finding suggests that students expected the course to reflect ongoing changes in tourism products, technology, tourist behaviour, sustainability, and destination

communication. The result is consistent with the needs-based orientation of ESP, in which language content should be selected according to the practices learners are likely to encounter in target contexts (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Basturkmen, 2010). It also supports the findings of Anam and Rachmadian (2020) and Al-Malki et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of linking tourism English instruction to practical workplace communication. A closed coursebook may quickly lose its relevance in such a rapidly changing field. Therefore, core materials may retain stable background knowledge, while supplementary digital resources should provide current examples, destination data, industry developments, and video-based input that can be updated regularly.

Outdated or insufficiently relevant materials constituted the second most prominent limitation. This finding does not imply that all existing materials were unsuitable; rather, it indicates that the combination of available sources did not provide students with a consistently relevant learning experience. Similar concerns were identified by Octaviana et al. (2021), whose investigation of travel-agent students' reading materials emphasized the importance of considering both learners' perceptions and target needs. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that materials should be evaluated according to their correspondence with course objectives, learners, skills, and topics. Accordingly, the course should not depend uncritically on a single commercial textbook. A more appropriate approach would be to develop a coherent materials system in which the syllabus and learning outcomes guide the selection, adaptation, sequencing, and supplementation of different sources.

The students also reported difficulty sustaining their participation when course topics were unappealing. This finding indicates that relevance alone is not sufficient; materials need to encourage active involvement. A current tourism topic presented only through a reading text and comprehension questions may still fail to engage learners. Tomlinson (2011) emphasizes that effective materials should provide meaningful exposure and stimulate intellectual, emotional, and communicative involvement. In English for Tourism, topics can be transformed into purposeful tasks such as introducing a destination, advising a visitor, comparing tour packages,

designing an itinerary, responding to a complaint, writing promotional content, or presenting a tourism product. Such tasks may help students see the occupational value of the course while creating opportunities to reuse specialised vocabulary across reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

Difficulty exploring new knowledge in areas of personal interest received the lowest score within the dimension, although it remained at a moderate level. This result suggests that the materials offered some access to tourism knowledge but did not fully accommodate the diversity of students' interests. Tourism includes numerous areas, such as cultural tourism, ecotourism, community-based tourism, heritage interpretation, sustainable travel, destination marketing, and digital tourism services. A flexible project component may allow students to investigate topics aligned with their interests while still meeting shared language and professional outcomes. Combining international contexts with Vietnamese destinations and local tourism products may further enhance relevance and enable students to connect classroom learning with familiar professional environments.

In addition to the curriculum and content findings, several difficulties in the other dimensions provide further directions for materials development. Students reported problems learning and remembering specialised vocabulary, using tourism terms in classroom activities, understanding occupational collocations, reading long or complex sentences, and adapting from general English to ESP. They also experienced difficulties following lessons when audiovisual and technological support was limited and interacting in large classes. These findings suggest that a revised materials system should recycle key terminology across texts, audio and video input, guided practice, and occupational tasks. Activities should be staged from comprehension to controlled practice and then to communicative production. Clear instructions, models, role cards, and group-work procedures may be particularly useful for supporting students who feel anxious or have limited opportunities to interact.

Taken together, the results indicate that teaching and learning materials constitute an important, but not exclusive, part of the solution. Social and motivational conditions and learning technology were rated even more strongly than Curriculum and Content. Consequently, new materials should be accompanied by appropriate classroom

organization, teacher guidance, audiovisual facilities, and opportunities for collaborative practice. Furthermore, because the present findings are based on self-reported perceptions and descriptive statistics, they should not be interpreted as evidence that materials independently caused the students' learning difficulties. Rather, they identify perceived limitations and priorities that should be examined further through materials evaluation and classroom trials.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceived difficulties in learning English for Tourism and examined the limitations of curriculum, course content, and teaching and learning materials at a university in northern Vietnam. Overall, the findings revealed that the students experienced a moderate level of difficulty. Their perceptions varied noticeably across six dimensions. Contextual difficulties related to the social and motivational environment, learning conditions and technology, and curriculum and content were rated more strongly than difficulties associated with language knowledge, language skills, motivation, and autonomy. Within Curriculum and Content, students were most concerned that the course did not sufficiently reflect current tourism trends, some materials were outdated or insufficiently relevant, and certain topics did not effectively sustain their interest and participation.

These findings imply that improving the English for Tourism course requires a coherent and regularly updated materials system rather than a collection of unrelated sources. Core materials should be closely aligned with course outcomes and supplemented by digital resources that can respond to current tourism developments. Specialised language knowledge should be integrated with reading and listening input and with speaking and writing tasks based on professional situations. Authentic tasks, audiovisual support, repeated use of tourism terminology, clear group-work procedures, and locally relevant content may help students connect general English knowledge with workplace communication and participate more confidently in the course.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, the participants were recruited from only one university; therefore, the findings

may not be fully generalizable to students in other institutional contexts. Secondly, the quantitative survey generated useful descriptive evidence but did not capture students' detailed explanations of why they considered particular materials outdated, irrelevant, or unengaging. Finally, the questionnaire was originally designed to examine broad learning difficulties rather than to provide a comprehensive evaluation of every component of the materials system. Consequently, the findings should be regarded as an initial needs-based diagnosis.

Future studies should involve students and teachers from multiple institutions and employ mixed methods, particularly interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and systematic materials evaluation. Tourism practitioners and employers should also be consulted to ensure that the target language and professional tasks reflect workplace expectations. Moreover, prototype materials should be reviewed by experts and piloted with students. Pre- and post-course measures, performance-based rubrics, classroom engagement data, and comparisons between existing and revised materials would provide stronger evidence regarding the effectiveness of the proposed materials system.

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