



English Language Needs in Saudi Tourism and Hospitality: A Structured Narrative Review and Curriculum Framework

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality sector is expanding rapidly under the national transformation agenda associated with Vision 2030. This expansion has increased the need for professionals who can use English not only as a general communicative resource but also as a workplace instrument for service delivery, intercultural mediation, digital interaction, and customer-experience management. Yet English courses for tourism and hospitality learners often remain attached to general proficiency models that give limited attention to the pragmatic, intercultural, role-specific, and digital demands of actual service encounters. This paper presents a structured narrative review of research published between 2020 and 2025, together with relevant Saudi policy and industry documents, to synthesise evidence on English-language needs in tourism and hospitality and translate that evidence into curriculum implications for Saudi education and training contexts. The synthesis indicates that English needs in this sector are best understood as role-based communicative performances rather than isolated language skills. Key areas of need include spoken interaction, listening under accent variation, service-specific vocabulary, pragmatic softening, complaint handling, intercultural explanation, persuasive communication, professional writing, and digital customer communication. The paper proposes a Saudi-oriented framework in which English training is organised around authentic scenarios, role clusters, service recovery, intercultural mediation, multimodal communication, and performance-based assessment. Because the review is based on published and policy evidence rather than direct workplace observation, the framework should be treated as an evidence-informed model requiring further empirical validation in Saudi tourism and hospitality workplaces.

Keywords: English for Tourism Purposes, Hospitality Communication, Needs Analysis, Saudi Arabia, English for Specific Purposes, Intercultural Communication, Service Recovery, Digital Communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Saudi Arabia has moved beyond its historically dominant association with pilgrimage to become a diversified national industry involving religious travel, luxury hospitality, cultural tourism, heritage destinations, entertainment events, rural

tourism, transport services, and large-scale development projects. Under Saudi Vision 2030 and related workforce-development initiatives, tourism has been positioned as a key sector for economic diversification, employment generation, and international visibility (Human Capability

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Development Program, 2025; Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). As the sector grows, the communicative demands placed on tourism and hospitality workers also become more complex. English increasingly functions not only as an academic subject or general foreign language but also as a professional medium through which employees welcome guests, explain services, manage reservations, respond to complaints, coordinate with colleagues, describe local culture, handle emergencies, and communicate through digital platforms.

This shift has important implications for English-language education. In tourism and hospitality, language is inseparable from service performance. A front-desk employee does not merely speak English; he or she confirms bookings, explains policies, manages delays, clarifies billing issues, and protects the guest relationship when problems occur. A food-and-beverage employee does not merely know vocabulary; he or she explains ingredients, discusses allergies, recommends dishes, responds to dissatisfaction, and adjusts tone according to the guest's expectations. A tour guide does not merely narrate information; he or she interprets place, culture, and history for audiences whose prior knowledge, values, and expectations may vary considerably. These examples show that the relevant unit of analysis is not grammar alone, nor even the four macro-skills in isolation, but the communicative task as it occurs in a specific workplace setting.

The central problem addressed in this paper is the mismatch between general English instruction and the communicative realities of tourism and hospitality work. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has long emphasised that language teaching should be grounded in learners' target situations, professional roles, and communicative needs. However, tourism and hospitality English courses in many contexts still tend to underestimate pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, service recovery, role-specific vocabulary, and digital interaction. In Saudi Arabia, this gap has practical consequences because English ability is connected to employability, service quality, guest satisfaction, and the wider goal of preparing a national workforce for an internationally oriented sector.

Needs analysis provides a useful conceptual frame for addressing this gap. Rather than asking only whether learners need English in general, needs analysis asks what learners need English for, in which situations, with which interlocutors, under what conditions, and according to what standards of performance. It distinguishes between learning needs, such as learners' current proficiency and confidence, and target needs, such as the tasks, genres, and interactional responsibilities required in

the workplace. The present paper does not claim to measure the actual language use of Saudi tourism professionals through direct fieldwork. Instead, it offers an evidence-informed synthesis and curriculum framework that can guide future empirical needs analysis, programme design, and workplace-based training.

The study is guided by four questions: which English skills and sub-skills receive the strongest attention in recent research on tourism and hospitality communication; what workplace tasks constitute the main target needs of tourism and hospitality professionals; how intercultural communication, pragmatics, and digital communication expand the scope of tourism and hospitality English; and what curriculum and assessment implications can be derived for Saudi tourism and hospitality education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Research on English-language needs in tourism and hospitality is interdisciplinary because it draws on ESP, applied linguistics, tourism studies, hospitality education, intercultural communication, digital communication, and employability research. Recent ESP research increasingly views language as situated action: what matters is how speakers use linguistic resources to perform tasks, manage relationships, solve problems, and participate in professional communities (Dou *et al.*, 2023). This shift is especially relevant for tourism and hospitality because service encounters are task-based, time-sensitive, relational, and often unpredictable.

ESP begins from the assumption that language instruction should respond to the communicative purposes of a specific group of learners. In tourism and hospitality, those purposes include greeting, advising, explaining, apologising, clarifying, coordinating, documenting, persuading, and resolving problems. These are not merely linguistic acts; they are professional performances that affect the guest experience. A grammatically accurate sentence may still fail if it sounds abrupt, culturally inappropriate, insufficiently empathetic, or unclear in relation to the guest's problem. Effective service communication often depends on the speaker's ability to combine simple language with appropriate sequencing, tone, timing, and interpersonal awareness.

Studies from Saudi Arabia and other tourism contexts consistently show that oral communication is highly valued by tourism students, hospitality learners, and industry stakeholders (Alhumaidan & Alghamdi, 2023; Kusumastiti & Palupiningsih, 2021; Lertchalermtipakoon *et al.*, 2021; Trang & Phuong,

2023). Speaking and listening are central because many hospitality roles require direct contact with guests. However, the relevant skills go beyond general fluency. Tourism and hospitality professionals need to manage transactional talk, such as check-in, reservations, directions, payments, and schedules; relational talk, such as greetings, small talk, reassurance, and rapport-building; and problem-oriented talk, such as complaint handling, delay explanation, policy clarification, and service recovery.

Intercultural communicative competence is also central. Guests and service providers may differ in expectations regarding politeness, privacy, time, emotional expression, personal distance, humour, complaint behaviour, dietary norms, and the interpretation of silence or directness. Research in hospitality and tourism education has linked intercultural competence to self-efficacy, confidence, employability, and service quality (Koc, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Trang & Phuong, 2023). For Saudi tourism and hospitality, intercultural communication has distinctive importance because employees may need to explain local customs, religious practices, dress expectations, hospitality traditions, or site-specific etiquette to international visitors.

Pragmatics, or the relationship between language, context, intention, and interpretation, is especially important in hospitality communication. Service encounters depend heavily on tone, politeness, empathy, and the management of face. A response may be accurate but too blunt; an apology may be grammatically correct but emotionally insufficient; an explanation may be detailed but poorly sequenced. Complaint handling provides a clear example. Effective complaint management requires acknowledgement, empathy, clarification, explanation, action, reassurance, and follow-up. Kapa *et al.*, (2022) emphasise that memorable tourist experiences are created not simply through information transmission but through interpretation, evaluation, and interaction, which supports the need for discourse strategies rather than sentence-level accuracy alone.

Digitalisation has further changed the communicative environment in which English is used. Professionals increasingly communicate through booking platforms, mobile applications, chat services, emails, review websites, social media, and automated service tools. These channels require linguistic accuracy, procedural knowledge, tone control, speed, and audience awareness. Research on tourism education and digital language learning suggests that digital competence and communication competence are increasingly connected (Adeyinka-Ojo *et al.*, 2020; Darmayanti & Nova, 2022; Du &

Daniel, 2024; Ivanov & Soliman, 2023). In hospitality contexts, digital communication is not simply written English transferred to a screen; it involves managing immediacy, politeness, brand voice, accuracy, and documentation.

The Saudi EFL context adds further complexity. Studies on English proficiency, English-medium instruction, digital learning, and learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia indicate considerable variation in learners' language backgrounds, confidence, and practical readiness (Alqarni *et al.*, 2024; Alshammari, 2022; Manasrah *et al.*, 2023; Mohammed & Ali, 2021; Noorwali & Sabir, 2025). While some learners may have adequate grammatical knowledge, they may lack opportunities to perform workplace tasks in realistic communicative conditions. Tourism and hospitality education therefore needs to bridge the gap between classroom competence and workplace performance.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a structured narrative review design to synthesise recent research and policy evidence related to English-language needs in tourism and hospitality. A narrative synthesis was selected because the literature includes diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies, conceptual papers, tourism education research, intercultural communication studies, digital learning studies, and Saudi workforce-development documents. The purpose was not to calculate effect sizes or compare statistically similar interventions, but to identify converging themes, conceptual patterns, and curriculum implications across a heterogeneous body of literature.

The review covered publications and reports dated between 2020 and 2025. This time frame was selected because it captures recent developments in Saudi tourism, post-pandemic changes in hospitality communication, the growth of digital service channels, and renewed attention to employability and workforce readiness. Sources were identified through Google Scholar, Crossref-linked records, publisher databases, and official Saudi portals. Search terms included combinations of English language needs analysis, tourism, hospitality, Saudi Arabia, English for Specific Purposes, intercultural communication competence, service communication, hospitality education, digital communication, tourism education, and employability.

Sources were included when they addressed tourism, hospitality, ESP, intercultural communication, digital communication, employability, or Saudi workforce development; provided sufficient methodological, conceptual, or analytical detail to support synthesis; and offered

implications for language learning, training, professional communication, or curriculum design. Sources were excluded when they were outside the 2020-2025 time frame, unrelated to tourism or service communication, purely opinion-based without analytical support, duplicated, or too general to inform English-language needs analysis.

The final corpus consisted of twenty-nine sources: twenty-six scholarly sources, two official Saudi reports, and one Saudi tourism industry text.

The selected sources were coded according to seven domains: stakeholder group, tourism or hospitality setting, priority language skills, target workplace tasks, intercultural and pragmatic requirements, digital communication needs, and curriculum or training implications. Additional tags were used for employability, Saudi policy relevance, role specificity, service recovery, and assessment. The coded evidence was then synthesised thematically. Figure 1 summarises the review and synthesis process.

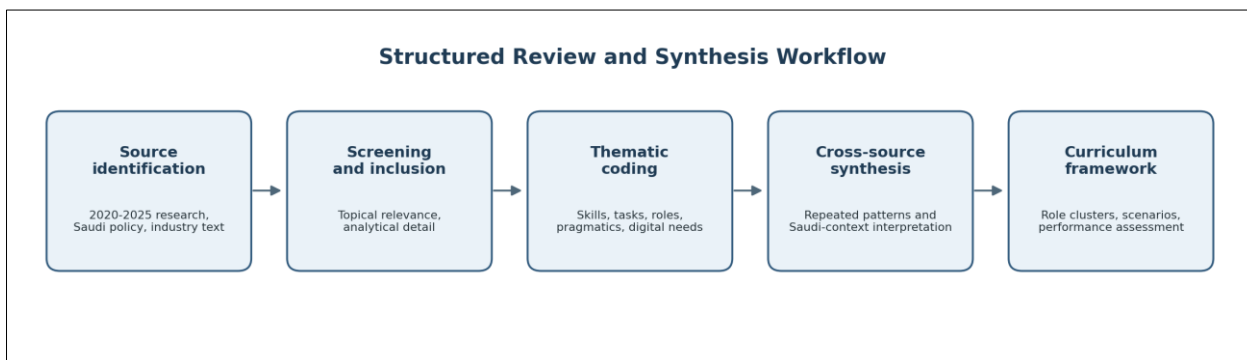


Figure 1: Structured review and synthesis workflow

This methodology has three limitations. First, the study is based on published and policy sources rather than direct interviews, observations, surveys, workplace recordings, or analysis of authentic workplace documents. It therefore identifies likely and evidence-supported needs rather than measuring the actual language use of Saudi tourism professionals in real time. Second, the Saudi-specific empirical evidence remains limited compared with the broader international literature on tourism and hospitality communication. Third, because this is a structured narrative review rather than a systematic review, it does not claim exhaustive coverage of all relevant studies. Its contribution lies in thematic synthesis and curriculum interpretation, not statistical generalisation.

4. FINDINGS AND SYNTHESIS

The synthesis indicates that English-language needs in Saudi tourism and hospitality are not adequately captured by a simple ranking of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Although oral communication receives the strongest emphasis, employees need integrated communicative abilities shaped by role, task, channel, and guest expectation. Five areas are especially important: oral interaction and listening, specialised vocabulary, pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, and digital or multimodal communication.

First, speaking and listening are the most visible English needs because they mediate direct service encounters. Tourism and hospitality workers

need to greet guests, build rapport, give directions, explain procedures, recommend services, answer questions, clarify misunderstandings, manage complaints, and coordinate with colleagues. These activities require fluency, but they also require sequencing, politeness, confidence, and the ability to adapt language to the guest's level of understanding. In Saudi tourism and hospitality, oral communication is especially important in front-office work, concierge services, food and beverage service, visitor guidance, transportation assistance, event support, and pilgrim-related services.

Listening needs are equally complex. Hospitality workers must understand guests who speak English with different accents, fluency levels, and cultural expectations. They must also interpret incomplete, emotional, or indirect speech. A guest may not say directly that they are dissatisfied; they may express irritation through tone, hesitation, repetition, or comparison with previous experiences. Listening training should therefore include accent variation, confirmation strategies, clarification questions, paraphrasing, and active listening. Employees need to learn how to respond with phrases such as 'Let me make sure I understood correctly' or 'Do you mean that the booking date has changed?' These expressions convert listening into service recovery.

Second, vocabulary is a major English need, but it should not be taught as isolated terminology. Tourism and hospitality professionals require lexical

resources embedded in tasks. These include vocabulary for reservations, payment, directions, facilities, housekeeping, maintenance, food and beverage service, allergies, cultural sites, transport, safety, emergency procedures, complaints, and digital communication. Workers also need formulaic expressions that allow them to perform service actions politely and efficiently, such as 'How may I assist you?', 'Let me check that for you', 'Thank you for bringing this to our attention', and 'I apologise for the inconvenience.' In the Saudi context, specialised vocabulary should also include cultural and destination-specific language for heritage sites, local customs, religious practices, traditional food, family-oriented spaces, dress expectations, and rules related to sacred locations.

Third, pragmatic competence is one of the most important but frequently underdeveloped areas of English for tourism and hospitality. Pragmatics determines how language is interpreted in context. In service encounters, the same message can be perceived as polite, rude, helpful, defensive, confident, or indifferent depending on wording, tone, sequencing, and timing. This is why grammar-based instruction alone cannot prepare learners for workplace communication. Service recovery is a particularly important area. Complaints, delays, booking errors, billing problems, room issues, food dissatisfaction, and policy misunderstandings are common in hospitality settings. Effective service recovery generally follows a sequence: acknowledgement, empathy, clarification, explanation, action, reassurance, and follow-up. Employees need repeated practice in this discourse pattern. They also need to distinguish between apology, explanation, excuse, and solution. For example, 'This is our policy' may be accurate but can sound dismissive; 'I understand your concern. Let me explain the policy and see what options are available' is more likely to maintain the service relationship.

Fourth, intercultural communication is part of professional English performance. Tourism and hospitality employees interact with guests whose expectations may differ from local norms and from one another. Misunderstandings may arise around time, privacy, gender norms, food, personal space, religious practices, emotional expression, complaint style, or service expectations. In Saudi Arabia, intercultural competence has two directions.

Employees need to understand and adapt to diverse visitors, and they also need to explain Saudi culture to visitors. Explaining a local custom should not sound like a warning or a lecture; it should help the guest participate respectfully in the experience. Cultural mediation is especially important for guides, visitor-service staff, event workers, and employees in heritage or religiously significant destinations.

Fifth, digital communication has become a core English need. Employees may communicate with guests before arrival, during the stay or visit, and after departure through email, chat platforms, booking systems, social media, mobile applications, online review platforms, and internal messaging systems. Each medium creates different language demands. Email requires structure, completeness, and professional tone. Chat requires brevity, speed, and clarity. Review responses require empathy, reputation management, and careful wording. Internal digital notes require accuracy, concision, and procedural relevance. Artificial intelligence and automated systems add another layer: employees may use templates, chatbots, translation tools, or automated booking systems, but they still need human judgement to check accuracy, tone, cultural appropriateness, and confidentiality.

The synthesis also shows that English needs differ by role cluster. Front-office and concierge staff need oral interaction, listening under accent variation, reservation language, billing clarification, polite problem-solving, and digital confirmation skills. Food-and-beverage staff need menu vocabulary, allergy communication, recommendation language, order repair, timing clarification, and service recovery. Guides and visitor-service employees need extended speaking, cultural explanation, storytelling, safety instructions, audience adaptation, and narrative sequencing. Housekeeping and guest-support staff need short spoken exchanges, polite request language, maintenance reporting, service follow-up, and handover communication. Supervisory and digital-service staff need briefing language, coaching language, incident reporting, review-response writing, escalation management, and concise professional writing. Figure 2 presents the integrated framework that connects these needs with curriculum design and workplace outcomes.

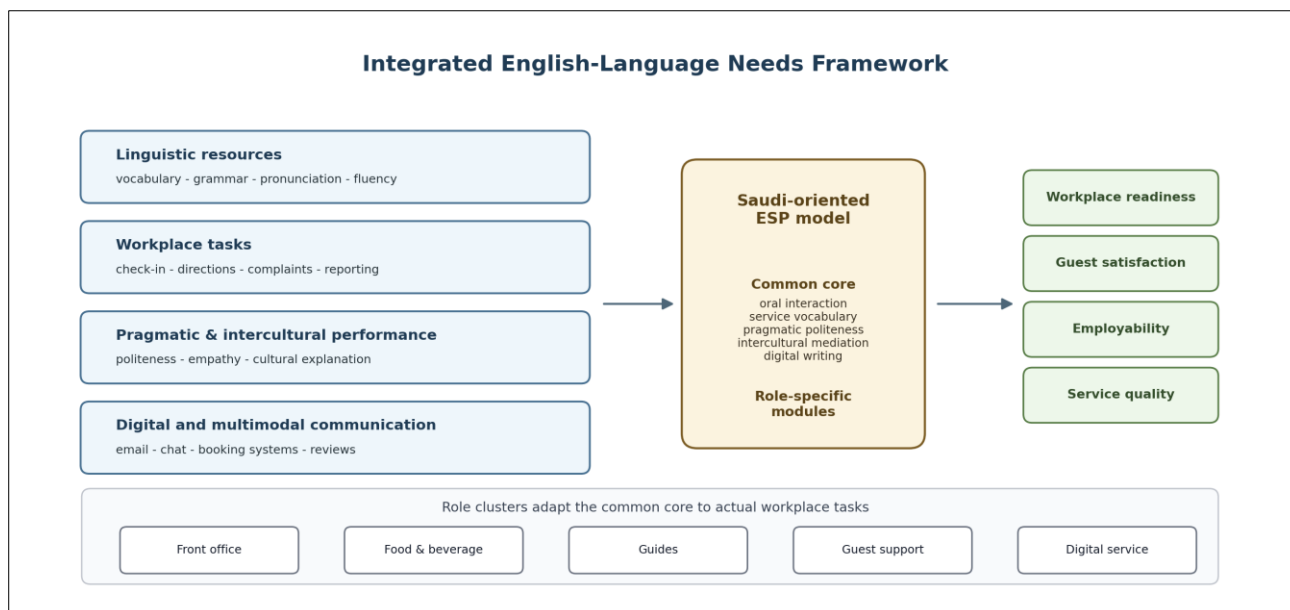


Figure 2: Integrated English-language needs framework for Saudi tourism and hospitality

5. Curriculum and Training Implications

The findings indicate that English for Saudi tourism and hospitality should be conceptualised as performance-based professional communication. The main question is not simply how much English employees know, but what kind of English they can use, in which service situations, with which guests, through which channels, and with what degree of appropriateness. This perspective has implications for curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment, employer collaboration, and future research.

First, curricula should be organised around service tasks rather than general language units alone. General proficiency remains important, but it should support workplace performance. A grammar point, vocabulary set, or speaking activity should be connected to a recognisable service function. Modal verbs can be taught through polite requests and policy explanations; past tense forms can be practised through incident reporting; conditionals can be used for offering alternatives; and adjectives can be linked to describing rooms, food, attractions, and experiences. A task-based curriculum should include scenarios such as check-in and check-out, booking changes, room problems, transport guidance, menu recommendations, dietary clarification, heritage explanation, safety briefings, emergency assistance, complaint handling, staff handover, digital confirmation, and review response.

Second, intercultural and pragmatic competence should be treated as core curriculum content, not optional enrichment. In tourism and hospitality, politeness, empathy, tact, apology, explanation, and face-saving are part of service quality. Training should include pragmatic routines

for apology, clarification, refusal, reassurance, recommendation, and complaint response. Learners should compare direct and softened versions of the same message, evaluate the effect of tone, and practise choosing appropriate language for different levels of seriousness. They should also practise explaining Saudi customs, responding to sensitive questions, and adapting communication to different visitor profiles.

Third, digital communication should be integrated into tourism English courses. Programmes should teach email writing, chat responses, template adaptation, review replies, internal notes, booking confirmations, and short service updates. These tasks should be linked to workplace constraints: limited time, need for accuracy, public visibility, brand reputation, and the possibility of escalation. Digital tasks should also be connected to spoken interaction. For example, learners can handle a guest complaint orally, write an internal note about it, and then draft a follow-up message to the guest. Such integrated tasks reflect actual service chains more accurately than isolated writing exercises.

Fourth, employers should participate more actively in curriculum design and assessment. Needs analysis should not depend only on student perceptions or teacher assumptions. Employers, supervisors, trainers, and frontline workers can provide evidence from job descriptions, service scripts, complaint records, online reviews, incident reports, guest feedback, and workplace observations. Authentic materials such as reservation forms, menus, hotel policies, destination brochures, safety instructions, review responses, service-recovery scripts, complaint logs, chat transcripts, and internal

handover notes can make classroom learning more relevant and improve learners' readiness for actual communication.

Based on the synthesis, a Saudi-oriented ESP model should be built around a common core and role-specific modules. The common core should include oral interaction, listening under accent variation, service vocabulary, pragmatic politeness, intercultural communication, and professional digital writing. Role-specific modules should then address front-office communication, food-and-beverage service, guiding and visitor interpretation, housekeeping and guest support, supervisory communication, and digital customer service. Each module should include scenarios, vocabulary, discourse patterns, intercultural issues, digital tasks, and assessment rubrics. Assessment should move beyond grammar tests and use simulations, role plays, listening-repair tasks, short written responses, service logs, and integrated speaking-writing assignments. Criteria should include accuracy, clarity, politeness, task completion, intercultural appropriateness, and problem-solving.

6. Research Gaps and Future Directions

The review identifies several gaps that require further research. Saudi tourism and hospitality need more empirical workplace studies based on interviews, surveys, observations, recorded service encounters, employer input, and analysis of authentic digital communication. More research is also needed on the English needs of specific roles, including tour guides, front-office employees, restaurant staff, event workers, transport assistants, and digital-service teams. Future studies should examine how Saudi tourism professionals manage intercultural explanation and cultural mediation in English, and they should investigate the impact of scenario-based ESP training on employability, confidence, service performance, and guest satisfaction. The development of a Saudi hospitality communication corpus would support curriculum design, materials development, and assessment.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper synthesised recent research and policy evidence published between 2020 and 2025 to examine English-language needs in tourism and hospitality and to develop curriculum implications for Saudi education and training contexts. The analysis shows that the most important needs are not limited to abstract linguistic knowledge. They involve task-based communicative abilities required for greeting, explaining, clarifying, recommending, apologising, resolving complaints, coordinating with colleagues, interpreting culture, and communicating through digital channels.

The study argues that English for tourism and hospitality in Saudi Arabia should be understood as professional performance communication. Speaking and listening are central, but their importance lies in the workplace tasks they support. Vocabulary is necessary, but it must be role-specific and formulaic enough to support service action. Pragmatic competence is essential because politeness, empathy, apology, refusal, and reassurance shape guest perceptions of service quality. Intercultural competence is particularly important because Saudi tourism professionals are expected to communicate with diverse visitors while also representing local culture. Digital communication has become a core need because guest interaction increasingly moves across emails, chats, booking platforms, reviews, and internal service systems.

The paper's main contribution is a Saudi-oriented framework that connects learning needs with workplace target needs through role clusters, authentic scenarios, intercultural mediation, pragmatic training, digital communication, and performance-based assessment. Because the study is based on published and policy evidence rather than direct workplace data, the proposed framework should be tested and refined through empirical studies involving students, teachers, employers, frontline workers, and workplace communication data. By grounding English education in authentic service communication, Saudi tourism and hospitality programmes can better prepare professionals for the linguistic, intercultural, and digital demands of a rapidly expanding global industry.

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