

Learning English on the Job: Workplace Interaction and Communicative Development among Indonesian Local Tour Guides

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Abstract

English communication is essential for local tour guides, yet limited attention has been given to how guides with little formal language education develop communicative competence through everyday tourism work. This qualitative case study explored how local tour guides at Tumpak Sewu Waterfall, East Java, acquired and used English through natural interaction, the communication challenges they encountered, and the contribution of workplace experience to their communicative development. Twenty guides with diverse educational backgrounds and one to four years of guiding experience were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations of authentic guiding activities and analyzed using recursive thematic analysis. The findings revealed three interconnected patterns. First, formal education generally provided only an initial linguistic foundation, whereas practical English developed through repeated interaction with international tourists, self-directed media use, personal vocabulary notes, peer practice, and the reuse of expressions encountered at work. Second, participants' principal difficulties concerned unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, and real-time comprehension rather than vocabulary alone. They managed these difficulties by requesting repetition, inferring meaning from context, adjusting speech, using gestures, and, when necessary, consulting translation applications. Third, sustained workplace interaction strengthened tourism-related vocabulary, fluency, confidence, sociolinguistic adaptability, and strategic competence. More experienced guides tended to rely less on translation technology and more on clarification, contextual interpretation, and interactional repair. These findings position the tourism workplace as an experiential language-learning environment in which communicative competence develops through the interaction of authentic exposure, reflection, self-directed learning, and repeated practice.

Keywords: communicative competence; experiential learning; informal English learning; local tour guides; workplace interaction

1. Introduction

In local tourism, English is not simply a medium for delivering memorized descriptions but a situated and adaptive resource through which guides mediate places, cultural meanings, and relationships between destinations and international visitors (Lee et al., 2023; Sharma, 2020; Weiler & Black, 2015; Wilson, 2018). Guides interpret historical, cultural, and environmental features, coordinate itineraries, communicate directions and safety information, answer unanticipated questions, and maintain rapport with linguistically and culturally diverse visitors (Al-Okaily, 2022; Ren et al., 2024; Tanaka, 2023). These responsibilities unfold amid changing weather, visitor expectations, group dynamics, logistical constraints, and differences in communicative proficiency (Arslan & Akkuş, 2024; Ren et al., 2024; Tanaka, 2023), becoming especially demanding when guides encounter unfamiliar accents, culturally embedded meanings, or situations beyond prepared scripts (Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Lin, 2023; Tanaka, 2023). Communicative competence in guiding must therefore integrate linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, intercultural, strategic, and interactional resources rather than consist of grammatical accuracy and tourism vocabulary alone (Abdullah et al., 2022; Harara et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency support intelligible descriptions and instructions (Abdullah et al., 2022; Gani & Damayanti, 2018; Harara et al., 2024; Ho, 2020), while discourse competence enables guides to organize



commentaries, foreground relevant details, and shift flexibly among explanation, instruction, and dialogue (Bessiere & Ahn, 2021; Gratch, 2020; Hansen & Mossberg, 2017). Sociolinguistic and intercultural competence support adjustments in formality, lexical choice, speech rate, explanatory detail, and verbal or nonverbal conduct according to visitors' repertoires and expectations (Harara et al., 2024; Koc, 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Trang & Phuong, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). When problems arise, strategic competence enables meaning negotiation through clarification, repetition, reformulation, lexical substitution, comprehension checks, and embodied or contextual resources (Al Jahwari et al., 2016; Kaur, 2017; Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021; Tanaka, 2023; Thongphut & Kaur, 2023; Wilson, 2018). Effective communication need not therefore be error-free when interlocutors monitor responses, adapt their choices, and collaboratively repair misunderstanding (Kaur, 2017, 2020; Pietikäinen, 2018; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018). The tourist experience ultimately depends on how guides combine language with cultural interpretation, rapport, responsiveness, and practical problem-solving (Huang et al., 2015; Hwang & Lee, 2019; Kul et al., 2025; Weng et al., 2020).

Because this adaptive communication is repeatedly enacted at work, the tourism workplace can become both a site of language use and an environment for language learning. Experiential and workplace-learning perspectives hold that knowledge develops through authentic participation, feedback, reflection, and modified subsequent action (Albrecht et al., 2022; Decius et al., 2019; Lotfi et al., 2025; Yachin, 2018). Recurrent encounters expose guides to unfamiliar accents, expressions, culturally patterned practices, and task-specific demands that prior instruction may not anticipate (Albrecht et al., 2022; Arum, 2024; Cheng et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2020). Misunderstanding a question, lacking an expression for a local concept, or recognizing that an explanation has failed can reveal a linguistic gap and turn a service encounter into a potential learning occasion. Interlocutors' responses, repair sequences, and contextual or embodied cues can first help diagnose the problem and sustain the ongoing activity (Douglas et al., 2020; Eskildsen & Theodórsdóttir, 2017; Lilja & Piirainen-Marsh, 2019; Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2018). Guides may subsequently seek explanations from tourists or colleagues or consult digital and machine-translation resources (Inayati et al., 2025; Lai et al., 2018; Lotfi et al., 2025; Niño, 2020), then test, retain, modify, or abandon the emerging language in response to later communicative outcomes (Decius et al., 2025; Eskildsen & Theodórsdóttir, 2017; Lilja & Piirainen-Marsh, 2019; Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2018). This movement from experience and problem recognition through reflection and resource seeking to renewed performance resembles an experiential and self-regulated learning cycle (Decius et al., 2019, 2025; Lotfi et al., 2025; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). It is situated because linguistic meaning and usefulness emerge within workplace activities and relationships (Albrecht et al., 2022; Arum, 2024; Eskildsen & Theodórsdóttir, 2017; Strømmer, 2016), and largely informal and socially supported because workers identify immediate needs and draw on selected resources and assistance while performing their roles (Arum, 2024; Decius et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2018; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). Exposure alone, however, does not guarantee development; learning may be constrained by limited interaction, task organization, workplace positioning, time pressure, and insufficient awareness, motivation, or support (Arum, 2025; Lising, 2023; Strømmer, 2016; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022).

Accordingly, guides' development is better understood as an interconnected learning ecology in which formal instruction, workplace interaction, peer collaboration, and self-directed engagement have complementary functions (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Sangrà et al., 2019; Stockwell & Wang, 2024). Formal education may establish foundational grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and routine expressions but cannot fully reproduce spontaneous, occupationally specific communication with international visitors (Hong et al., 2022; Namtapi, 2022; Peters et al., 2019). Authentic encounters reveal accent variation, lexical gaps, unfamiliar expressions, and difficulties explaining culturally or environmentally specific information (Li & Jeong, 2020; Namtapi, 2022; Sato & Loewen, 2018), although repetition, attention, prior knowledge, and relevance influence whether encountered language is learned incidentally (Peters & Webb, 2018; Peters et al., 2019; Puimège & Peters, 2020). Peer interaction can reinforce learning through vocabulary exchange, discussion of difficult encounters, rehearsal, and assistance from experienced colleagues (Crans et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2022; Komppa et al., 2024). Vocabulary notebooks support selection, contextualization, and

review (Carney, 2024; Plaku & Karapici, 2024; Vela & Rushidi, 2016), whereas audiovisual media extend exposure to pronunciation, formulaic language, and diverse spoken models (Montero Perez, 2020; Peters & Webb, 2018; Puimège & Peters, 2020; Pujadas & Muñoz, 2019). Translation tools may provide temporary help with meaning and lexical retrieval, but their developmental value depends on critical evaluation, retention, and later independent use (Jiang et al., 2024; Kelly & Hou, 2022; Lo, 2025; Musk, 2022). These channels are mutually connected: an interactional problem can generate a learning need, peers or digital resources can help address it, and later encounters can test and consolidate the resulting language (Crans et al., 2021; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Stockwell & Wang, 2024). Thus, formally introduced knowledge may be recontextualized at work, while workplace language may be extended through deliberate study beyond the immediate encounter.

This interaction-centered perspective is particularly relevant to Indonesian local tourism, where guides may follow heterogeneous educational and career pathways and combine varying levels of formal preparation with workplace-based, peer-supported, and self-directed learning (Ramadhani & Vaughan, 2025; Rohkhayati et al., 2021; Susanty et al., 2021; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). Tumpak Sewu Waterfall in East Java provides a pertinent bounded setting because local residents participate in its community-based management and guide domestic and international visitors (Abror & Fachruddin, 2025). Although the participants had diverse educational backgrounds and unequal access to formal English and tourism training, their work required direct communication with international tourists. Indonesian evidence shows that guides orient visitors, explain natural, historical, and cultural features, communicate itineraries and practical information, manage unexpected problems, and sustain service relationships (Hardani et al., 2024; Setiawan et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024; Yanti et al., 2024). In nature-based destinations, weather changes, route and group management, emergencies, and other safety conditions intensify the need for immediate decisions and clear instructions (Hardani et al., 2024; Setiawan et al., 2025; Widiantara et al., 2025). Studies from Jakarta, Lombok, Bali, and Toraja identify unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, cultural differences, and unexpected misunderstandings that fixed scripts cannot always resolve (Arfani et al., 2021; Asmin, 2022; Umrah et al., 2018; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). Guides respond through approximation, circumlocution, code-switching, appeals for assistance, time-gaining devices, repair, and nonlinguistic signals (Arfani et al., 2021; Umrah et al., 2018; Yudistian et al., 2020), while learning through tourist interaction, feedback, peer exchange, repetition, experimentation, and independent print, audio, and digital resources. Tumpak Sewu thus enables a context-sensitive examination of how occupational demands, authentic interaction, and informal learning converge without treating its guides as representative of all Indonesian guides.

Despite this relevance, Indonesian research remains fragmented across three strands: occupational needs, interactional problem-solving, and English-learning pathways. Wahyuningsih et al. (2024) found that Malang guides particularly needed speaking, tourism vocabulary, and listening across accents, while Setiawan et al. (2025) showed that guiding involved both recurrent functions, such as greeting, directing, and describing, and situational demands concerning safety, complaints, weather, and local products. By contrast, Yanti et al. (2024) found that limited contact with international tourists reduced the immediate need for spontaneous speech and increased the usefulness of scripted and written support, indicating that communicative needs depend on the frequency and character of workplace encounters. Interactional studies show how guides address these needs under linguistic constraint: Umrah et al. (2018) documented stalling, approximation, circumlocution, prefabricated expressions, message abandonment, and nonlinguistic signals, whereas Yudistian et al. (2020) identified approximation as particularly frequent among surf guides who learned English predominantly through self-directed interaction with foreigners. Learning-oriented research further shows that guides use socio-affective and cognitive strategies, including collaborative information exchange and clarification requests (Rohkhayati et al., 2021), and follow heterogeneous formal, informal, and mixed trajectories shaped by interaction, media and translation practices, identity, access to social and cultural capital, and aspirations for mobility (Ramadhani & Vaughan, 2025). These studies indicate that tourist encounters generate language needs, expose limitations, elicit adaptive strategies, and stimulate learning, yet they generally treat these outcomes separately. Little is therefore known about how problems

in particular encounters are noticed and addressed, how guides mobilize formal and informal resources in response, and how language and strategies are retained, modified, or reused in later interaction.

Addressing this gap, the present qualitative case study explores how local guides at Tumpak Sewu learn and use English through workplace interaction with international tourists. It examines their communicative demands and difficulties, strategies for maintaining mutual understanding, formal and informal learning resources, and perceptions of how repeated occupational experience reshapes vocabulary, fluency, confidence, strategic competence, and interactional adaptability. Its novelty lies in connecting these dimensions within one developmental account extending from communicative demand and problem recognition to real-time repair, reflection, resource seeking, and subsequent language reuse or modification. The study thus treats tourists as both service recipients and potential sources of input, feedback, and interactional experience, while viewing guides as active workplace learners who combine English, gestures, local knowledge, digital tools, peer support, and accumulated experience. It does not assume that exposure causes development; instead, guides' accounts and observations of authentic practice are used to identify processes and conditions associated with perceived communicative change. In doing so, the study extends informal and experiential language-learning research to an underexamined Indonesian occupational context and informs tourism-English provision incorporating authentic tasks, accent diversity, communication-repair strategies, reflection, and self-directed learning.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Setting

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative single-case study design to investigate workplace-related English learning and perceived communicative development among local tour guides. A qualitative case study was appropriate because the phenomenon was examined within the social, occupational, and physical context in which it occurred and through multiple sources of evidence, enabling an in-depth and context-sensitive explanation of participants' practices and experiences (Harrison et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2019). The case was defined as the process through which local guides learned and used English through workplace interaction at Tumpak Sewu Waterfall, Lumajang Regency, East Java, Indonesia. It was bounded spatially by the tourism site, socially and occupationally by active local guides who communicated with international tourists, and temporally by the data-collection period in early 2026. The 20 participating guides were therefore treated as participants within one bounded case rather than as 20 separate cases.

Tumpak Sewu Waterfall was selected purposively because interaction with international tourists constituted a recurring component of local guiding work. The setting provided opportunities to examine English use during naturally occurring activities, including welcoming visitors, describing attractions, providing directions and safety information, answering questions, and managing communication difficulties. Selection of the site was based on its direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation rather than on an assumption that it represented all tourism workplaces in Indonesia.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants were 20 local guides working at Tumpak Sewu Waterfall. They were selected through purposive criterion sampling, which enables the recruitment of participants whose characteristics and experiences are directly relevant to a clearly defined qualitative phenomenon (Gentles et al., 2015). To be included, participants were required to (1) be actively working as local guides at Tumpak Sewu Waterfall, (2) have direct experience communicating with international tourists, and (3) have experience using English during guiding activities. Variation was sought within these criteria in terms of educational background and length of guiding experience so that the study could examine both shared patterns and contrasting experiences within the bounded case. The participants ranged from 20 to 40 years of age. Their educational backgrounds extended from elementary school to a bachelor's degree, while their guiding experience ranged from one to four years. This variation was relevant because differences in educational access and

occupational experience could shape how participants encountered communicative difficulties, sought learning resources, and developed strategies for interacting with international tourists.

The adequacy of the participant group was not justified through the assumption that a particular number of interviews automatically constituted saturation. Instead, it was considered in relation to the clearly bounded case, the specificity of the participant criteria, the relevance of the accounts to the research objectives, and the variation represented within the dataset. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively, and the later interviews primarily elaborated or qualified patterns already under development rather than materially altering the overall interpretation. This approach is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which a universal saturation threshold is not considered an appropriate basis for determining sample adequacy (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

Table 1

Participant characteristics and guiding experience

Participant	Age	Educational background	Guiding experience
P1	39	Senior high school	3 years
P2	27	Senior high school	4 years
P3	25	Senior high school	4 years
P4	30	Senior high school	1 year
P5	22	Vocational high school	2 years 6 months
P6	26	Bachelor's degree	3 years 6 months
P7	21	Senior high school	3 years
P8	20	Junior high school	2 years
P9	30	Senior high school	4 years
P10	40	Elementary school	1 year
P11	37	Senior high school	2 years
P12	39	Elementary school	2 years
P13	36	Elementary school	1 year
P14	29	Junior high school	3 years
P15	21	Vocational high school	3 years
P16	27	Junior high school	2 years
P17	38	Elementary school	3 years
P18	23	Senior high school	3 years
P19	26	Senior high school	3 years
P20	29	Senior high school	1 year 6 months

2.3 Researcher Role and Supporting Instruments

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data generation and interpretation. This role involved conducting the interviews, observing guiding activities, documenting field information, coding the data, and developing the thematic interpretation. Because qualitative data are generated and interpreted through the researcher's engagement with participants and the research setting, the findings were treated as contextually situated interpretations rather than neutral reproductions of participants' experiences (Berger, 2015).

The supporting instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide and a non-participant observation sheet. The interview guide was aligned with the research objectives and covered participants' previous English-learning experiences, uses of English during guiding activities, communication difficulties

encountered with international tourists, strategies used to maintain mutual understanding, sources of linguistic assistance, and perceived changes in their communicative abilities. Open-ended questions and follow-up prompts allowed participants to elaborate on specific workplace encounters while ensuring that comparable topics were addressed across interviews. Alignment between the research questions and interview protocol, together with the flexible use of follow-up questions, supports the generation of focused but sufficiently detailed qualitative evidence (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Knott et al., 2022).

The observation sheet focused on communicative activities occurring during actual guiding sessions. It directed attention to the purposes of the interactions, the verbal and nonverbal resources used by the guides, communication difficulties, clarification and repair strategies, and contextual conditions affecting communication. The observations therefore generated evidence of current workplace practices that complemented participants' retrospective interview accounts.

2.4 Data Collection and Translation

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations in early 2026. Interviews constituted the primary data source because they enabled participants to describe their English-learning histories, interpret challenging communicative experiences, and explain how workplace encounters influenced their subsequent learning practices. Observations provided complementary evidence about how English, interactional strategies, gestures, and local knowledge were employed during current guiding activities. The two methods were therefore used to illuminate different dimensions of the case rather than to produce interchangeable evidence.

All 20 participants were interviewed individually using Bahasa Indonesia as the principal language. This allowed them to describe their experiences, perceptions, and workplace practices in the language in which they could communicate most comfortably and comprehensively. The semi-structured format ensured that common topics were explored while allowing the researcher to pursue individual experiences and unexpected issues through follow-up questions (Knott et al., 2022). Participants were encouraged to discuss specific communicative events, including situations in which they had difficulty understanding tourists, could not immediately express an intended meaning, received assistance or correction, or later searched for and reused unfamiliar English expressions.

The interviews were transcribed in Bahasa Indonesia. Analysis was conducted using the Indonesian transcripts so that participants' meanings remained connected to their original linguistic and cultural contexts. Interview excerpts selected for presentation in the findings were subsequently translated into English. Translation prioritized conceptual and contextual equivalence rather than rigid word-for-word correspondence, particularly when participants used colloquial expressions or culturally specific descriptions (Qun & Carey, 2024).

Non-participant observations were conducted during actual guiding sessions without the researcher becoming involved in the guiding process. Field notes documented communicative practices and relevant contextual features, including the guiding activity being performed, the apparent purpose of the interaction, the linguistic and nonlinguistic resources used, and circumstances influencing communication. Field notes were reviewed alongside the interview transcripts because they can preserve contextual information that may not be accessible through retrospective interview accounts alone (Pacheco-Vega, 2019). Observational evidence was not treated as proof that participants' accounts were either correct or incorrect. Instead, it was used to identify consistencies, differences, and contextual complexities between what participants reported and what occurred during observed interactions.

2.5 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was suitable because it enables researchers to develop interpretive patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset while recognizing the active role of the researcher in coding and theme construction

(Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Byrne, 2022). The analysis focused on patterns related to workplace communicative demands, communication difficulties, interactional strategies, learning resources, and participants' perceptions of communicative development. Although these areas provided an analytical focus, coding remained open to experiences and patterns not anticipated by the research objectives.

The analysis followed six recursive phases. First, the researcher became familiar with the data by reading the Indonesian interview transcripts and observation notes repeatedly and recording preliminary analytical observations. Second, meaningful segments of the dataset were coded according to their relevance to the research questions. Codes captured both frequently reported experiences and accounts that complicated or contradicted the developing interpretation. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes representing broader patterns of meaning across the participants' accounts and observed practices. Fourth, the candidate themes were reviewed against their coded extracts and the complete dataset to evaluate their coherence, distinctiveness, and explanatory relevance. Fifth, each theme was refined, defined, and named by identifying its central organizing concept and its relationship to the overall explanation of workplace-mediated English learning. Finally, the findings were produced by integrating thematic interpretations with participants' interview excerpts and relevant observational evidence. These phases were recursive rather than strictly linear, allowing movement between coding, theme development, data review, and writing as the interpretation was refined (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Byrne, 2022).

The interview transcripts constituted the principal analytical corpus, while the observation notes were incorporated throughout coding and theme development to contextualize, extend, or challenge the interview-based interpretations. Themes were not selected solely according to the frequency of particular statements. They were retained when they captured a meaningful pattern that contributed to explaining how communicative demands, workplace interaction, and learning practices were connected within the case. Because the study employed reflexive thematic analysis, themes were understood as analytical constructions developed through engagement with the dataset rather than categories that passively emerged from the data.

2.6 Trustworthiness

Several complementary procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing accounts across participants with different educational backgrounds and levels of guiding experience. This comparison enabled the researcher to distinguish widely shared patterns from experiences associated with particular participant circumstances. Second, methodological triangulation was undertaken by comparing participants' interview accounts with field observations of actual guiding activities. Triangulation was used to deepen and interrogate the interpretation rather than to assume that agreement between sources automatically established a single objective truth (Natow, 2020). Member checking was also employed by seeking participants' feedback on whether the researcher's interpretations adequately reflected their experiences and by allowing them to clarify inaccurate or incomplete interpretations. Participant feedback was treated as an additional interpretive resource rather than as automatic confirmation that the researcher's analysis was correct. This approach recognizes that member checking is most valuable when it enables clarification and dialogue while preserving the researcher's responsibility for the final analytical interpretation (Lloyd et al., 2024). Trustworthiness was further supported by repeatedly reviewing the themes against the Indonesian transcripts and observation notes and by attending to accounts that differed from dominant patterns. Detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, data-collection procedures, and analytical process were provided so that readers could assess the relevance and potential transferability of the findings to other tourism workplaces. Participants were identified using the codes P1–P20 throughout the reporting of the findings to protect their identities.

3. Findings

The analysis generated three interconnected themes: (1) constructing a workplace-relevant English repertoire through multiple learning pathways, (2) managing variability and communication breakdown during tourist interaction, and (3) developing greater confidence, responsiveness, and strategic adaptability through repeated workplace participation. Although presented separately for analytical clarity, the themes formed a recurring workplace-learning process. Participants entered guiding work with unequal levels of prior English exposure, encountered communicative demands during interactions with international tourists, mobilized verbal, nonverbal, social, and digital resources to sustain communication, and sometimes retained and reused language from one encounter in subsequent guiding situations. The interview data captured participants' retrospective accounts of this process, while the observation notes contextualized how English and other communicative resources were used during current guiding activities. Because the study was cross-sectional, changes reported by participants are presented as perceived communicative development rather than directly measured gains in English proficiency.

3.1 Constructing a Workplace-Relevant English Repertoire Through Multiple Learning Pathways

Participants did not attribute their English learning to a single source. Instead, their accounts revealed a combination of formal education, independent learning, peer practice, and repeated interaction with international tourists. These pathways made different contributions to their communicative repertoires. Schooling generally provided basic vocabulary and initial knowledge of English, whereas self-directed learning and workplace participation helped participants expand, activate, and adapt that knowledge for immediate occupational purposes. This distinction was evident in P2's account: *"At first, I learned English at school. That was where I started knowing basic vocabulary and learned English little by little. But after working as a tour guide, I used English more often because I had to use it almost every time I met tourists"* (P2). Formal education therefore functioned as a foundation rather than complete preparation for guiding. Workplace interaction created a practical need to use existing knowledge to welcome visitors, describe the destination, provide directions and safety information, answer questions, and respond to communicative situations that could not always be predicted in advance.

Several participants supplemented this foundation through self-directed learning. P5 described a long-standing interest in English that led to purposeful engagement with songs and films: *"I have liked English for a long time. I usually learned by myself through songs and movies. When I found unfamiliar words, I looked up their meanings, and gradually I became more familiar with them"* (P5). This experience indicates that exposure became a learning resource when it was accompanied by noticing and active meaning seeking. P5 also extended English practice into peer interaction, explaining, *"Sometimes when I gather with friends who like English, we also try to use English together for practice"* (P5). Such peer practice created a lower-pressure space in which English could be rehearsed outside encounters with tourists. P6 adopted a more systematic strategy by connecting workplace input with later review: *"I have my own notebook for studying. It usually contains vocabulary and things that I heard while working. At night before sleeping, if I'm not too tired, I open it again and study from it"* (P6). The notebook enabled language encountered during guiding to be recorded, revisited, and potentially retained beyond the immediate interaction. At the same time, the qualification *"if I'm not too tired"* shows that opportunities arising at work did not automatically become sustained learning; their value also depended on participants' available time, energy, and willingness to engage in follow-up study.

Despite these multiple pathways, interaction with international tourists was the setting in which English became recurrent, consequential, and directly connected to the accomplishment of guiding tasks. P1 stated, *"I think I learned more from work experience because I always use English whenever I meet tourists. From that, I gradually became used to speaking and understood more little by little"* (P1). Similarly, P7 emphasized that practice was embedded in an occupational obligation rather than undertaken only as a voluntary learning activity: *"Sometimes I meet foreign tourists almost every day. So automatically I keep practicing. Whether I want it or not, I have to use English because it is needed for work"* (P7). These accounts suggest that the

workplace transformed English from an academic subject into a functional communicative resource. The need to complete actual guiding tasks required participants to retrieve available language, interpret tourists' contributions, and produce responses under real-time conditions.

The observations supported these accounts by showing guides using English in recurring communicative events, including greeting visitors, explaining features of the waterfall, indicating routes, issuing safety instructions, and answering questions. Such interactions exposed participants not only to tourism-related vocabulary but also to different pronunciations, question forms, and ways in which tourists responded to explanations. International tourists consequently functioned not only as recipients of guiding services but also as sources of linguistic and interactional input. The learning potential of this input was illustrated by P9, who explained, *"Usually I get new vocabulary from tourists, especially words related to tourism. Sometimes I have never heard them before, and later I use them again in the next guiding session"* (P9). This account reveals a sequence in which an unfamiliar expression was encountered, recognized as relevant, retained, and subsequently reused. Considered alongside P6's vocabulary notebook and P5's meaning-search practices, this finding indicates that workplace input became particularly productive when participants actively noticed, recorded, checked, reviewed, or reapplied it. The tourism workplace therefore generated repeated opportunities for English learning, but the conversion of a brief communicative encounter into a more durable resource depended on what participants did with the language they encountered.

3.2 Managing Variability and Communication Breakdown During Tourist Interaction

The second theme concerned the unpredictability of spoken interaction with international tourists. Participants frequently experienced difficulty when tourists used unfamiliar accents, spoke rapidly, or employed expressions that the guides had not previously encountered. These sources of difficulty often operated together. A familiar word could become difficult to recognize when pronounced differently or delivered at speed, while the real-time demands of service interaction gave guides limited opportunity to interpret an utterance and prepare a response. Communication problems therefore involved more than gaps in vocabulary; they also required participants to process variable spoken input under time pressure and adapt to speakers whose English differed from the varieties with which they were familiar.

Accent variation was the most prominent listening difficulty in participants' accounts. Some perceived British-accented speech as more difficult than American-accented speech, but their explanations attributed this difference primarily to unequal familiarity. P2 explained, *"The most difficult situation is usually when I meet tourists with British accents. Sometimes it is difficult to catch because the pronunciation sounds different. American accents are easier because I hear them more often"* (P2). P5 similarly stated, *"When the accent is different, sometimes I need to listen several times first because the pronunciation is not the same as what I usually hear"* (P5). These accounts indicate that comprehension depended on the relationship between tourists' speech and participants' previous listening exposure. Even when individual words were potentially known, differences in pronunciation, intonation, and speech rate could delay or prevent recognition. The challenge was therefore not an inherent property of a particular national accent but a problem of familiarity and real-time processing.

Participants initially attempted to manage difficult input by listening carefully and using available context. P3 explained, *"Sometimes I listen first and think about what they mean before answering"* (P3). This pause was not necessarily a sign that communication had failed; rather, it allowed the guide to coordinate listening, interpretation, and response preparation. When internal processing did not produce adequate understanding, participants moved toward explicit negotiation. P13 described this progression clearly: *"Sometimes I listen first and try to understand what they mean. If I still do not understand, I usually ask them to repeat it so it becomes clearer"* (P13). The movement from contextual interpretation to a request for repetition shows that guides evaluated their own understanding and adjusted their response when uncertainty remained.

Requests for repetition were the most direct means of repairing comprehension problems. P4 reported, *"If I do not understand, I usually ask them to repeat it. Sometimes they speak more slowly afterward, and it becomes easier to understand"* (P4). Rather than placing sole responsibility on the guide, this strategy made repair collaborative by encouraging the tourist to modify the original utterance. Mutual understanding was consequently negotiated through interaction. Participants also used gestures, pointing, repetition, and visible features of the physical setting when spoken explanation alone was insufficient. P6 noted, *"If it's difficult to explain, I usually use gestures as well. Usually I point to places or repeat things so that tourists still understand"* (P6). Observation notes documented similar practices: guides repeated or shortened explanations, reduced their speaking pace, pointed toward routes or locations, and physically demonstrated intended actions when tourists appeared uncertain. These observed practices show that communication at the site was multimodal, with meaning constructed through the coordination of speech, gesture, spatial context, and attention to the interlocutor's responses.

Digital translation applications provided an additional resource, although participants generally positioned them as a last resort rather than a default means of communication. P17 explained, *"If I really cannot understand, I usually use Google Translate. But I only use it when I have no other option"* (P17). This account suggests a layered strategic response: guides first attempted to interpret the utterance, request clarification, draw on context, or use nonverbal resources before turning to digital assistance. Translation technology was valuable because it allowed an interaction to continue when other strategies were insufficient, but its selective use also reflected participants' preference for sustaining direct communication whenever possible.

Thus, the findings show that successful guiding did not depend on uninterrupted, grammatically perfect, or problem-free English. It depended on participants' capacity to recognize incomplete understanding, tolerate temporary uncertainty, signal a problem, and mobilize alternative resources without abandoning the communicative task. Requests for repetition and slower speech redistributed responsibility for understanding across both interlocutors, while gestures, pointing, reformulation, and translation applications enabled participants to compensate for gaps in comprehension or expression. Communication breakdowns therefore became occasions for strategic action, revealing a practical form of communicative competence grounded in maintaining mutual understanding under variable workplace conditions.

3.3 Perceived Communicative Development Through Repeated Workplace Participation

The third theme captured how participants compared their current communication with their experiences when they first began guiding. They associated repeated interaction with international tourists with greater confidence, faster preparation of responses, and an increased capacity to adjust explanations and manage misunderstanding. These findings reflect perceived development reconstructed through retrospective accounts. The observations demonstrated participants' use of adaptive practices at the time of the study, but they could not independently establish the extent to which an individual's English proficiency had changed over time.

Participants commonly recalled that their early encounters were characterized by anxiety about making errors, hesitation, and occasional dependence on a mixture of Indonesian and English. P10 contrasted those experiences with his current confidence: *"There is a big difference compared to before. At first, I was afraid of making mistakes when speaking and I often mixed Indonesian and English. But after meeting tourists more often, I became more used to it and now I feel more confident"* (P10). P1 similarly described a reduction in the time required to prepare a response: *"Because I use English almost every day, now it is easier to talk with tourists. Before, I needed more time to think before answering, but now I am more used to it"* (P1). These accounts indicate that repeated participation increased familiarity with recurrent communicative routines. Participants did not suggest that every linguistic problem had disappeared; rather, accumulated experience made familiar tasks more manageable and enabled them to enter interactions with less hesitation. Confidence was thus linked to a history of completing real communicative tasks rather than simply to possessing more declarative knowledge of English.

Participants also perceived development in their ability to adjust communication to different tourists. P20 explained, *"Now it is easier to adjust when talking with tourists because I have met many people and already know how to explain things"* (P20). Adjustment involved more than producing additional English. It included selecting an alternative explanation, changing the amount or pace of information, and responding to verbal and nonverbal indications of understanding. Observation notes showed guides monitoring tourists' reactions and then repeating, simplifying, or supplementing explanations when confusion became apparent. Such responsiveness demonstrates an interlocutor-oriented dimension of communicative development that cannot be reduced to vocabulary size or grammatical accuracy.

Participants further described changes in how they addressed communication problems. P5 reported less immediate reliance on translation technology and greater use of interactional and contextual inference: *"Now I rarely use Google Translate. Usually I ask them to repeat it or try to understand from the previous sentence first"* (P5). P20 likewise described maintaining communication through verbal and nonverbal adjustment: *"If it is difficult to explain, I usually use gestures as well. Usually I point to places or repeat things so that tourists still understand"* (P20). These accounts suggest that development involved an expansion of strategic options. Rather than withdrawing when they encountered a linguistic gap, participants learned that they could request repetition, infer meaning from preceding talk, reformulate an explanation, or use the physical environment to support meaning.

Nevertheless, the data did not support a simple relationship in which a longer period of guiding automatically produced greater communicative ability. Differences in strategic behavior appeared to reflect the quality of participants' engagement with English as well as the amount of occupational exposure. For example, P5 described sustained learning through media, meaning searches, peer practice, and reduced reliance on translation technology, while P6 recorded and reviewed language encountered during work. By contrast, P17 continued to use digital translation when other resources were insufficient. These variations do not establish a hierarchy of competence among the participants, but they show that years of employment alone could not explain how individuals managed communication or expanded their repertoires. Workplace exposure created learning opportunities, while noticing, review, resource seeking, rehearsal, and reuse influenced how fully those opportunities were taken up.

Workplace conditions both enabled and constrained this development. Frequent interaction provided recurrent practice with guiding routines and introduced participants to new expressions and ways of speaking. At the same time, unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, unpredictable questions, fatigue, and the pressure to complete an immediate service task could limit opportunities for reflection. Participants' practices, such as asking for clarification, recording vocabulary, consulting meanings, practicing with peers, and reusing expressions in later encounters—helped transform some of these difficulties into learning resources. Development was therefore uneven and conditional rather than an automatic consequence of contact with international tourists.

Across the three themes, workplace-mediated English learning emerged as a recursive process. Participants brought knowledge from school, media, and independent study into tourist encounters; workplace demands revealed linguistic gaps and unfamiliar forms; guides combined interactional, nonverbal, social, and digital resources to maintain mutual understanding; and some of the language encountered during one interaction was subsequently checked, recorded, practiced, adapted, or reused. Repeated participation was associated in participants' accounts with greater confidence, response readiness, and strategic flexibility, but exposure alone was insufficient. The learning potential of tourism work was realized most clearly when authentic interaction was accompanied by active noticing, resource seeking, reflection, and subsequent application.

4. Discussion

This study shows that workplace interaction did not support English development through exposure alone. Rather, the findings indicate a recursive process in which guides drew on resources acquired through schooling, media, self-study, peers, and earlier tours; encountered gaps during communication with international tourists; used verbal, nonverbal, social, or digital strategies to sustain the interaction; and, in some cases, subsequently checked, recorded, practiced, and reused the language they had encountered. The contribution of the study therefore lies in explaining *when* workplace interaction became developmentally meaningful. Frequent contact created opportunities, but those opportunities were converted into communicative resources only through active uptake, reflection, and reuse. This interpretation also explains why guides working in the same setting reported different levels of confidence and adaptability.

4.1 Workplace Interaction as a Language-Learning Ecology

The findings first challenge a strict separation between formal instruction and informal workplace learning. School English gave several participants foundational vocabulary and grammar, but guiding required them to mobilize that knowledge for situated purposes such as welcoming visitors, describing attractions, giving safety instructions, and answering unexpected questions. This relationship is consistent with research that positions classroom and beyond-classroom learning as interconnected parts of a learner's trajectory rather than competing alternatives (Reinders & Benson, 2017). In tourism settings, learning pathways are similarly shaped by differences in educational access, occupational demands, personal investment, and opportunities to use English with visitors (Ramadhani & Vaughan, 2025). The workplace at Tumpak Sewu therefore did not replace prior learning; it activated existing knowledge, revealed its limitations, and supplied immediate reasons to extend it.

The participants' learning resources were distributed across people, technologies, and activities. Tourists supplied contextually relevant expressions and interactional feedback; peers offered assistance and rehearsal; films and songs broadened exposure; online searches supported meaning checking; and notebooks enabled language from a tour to be revisited. This pattern reflects a language-learning ecology in which learners exercise agency by connecting formal, social, informal, and technology-mediated opportunities (Lai et al., 2018). Importantly, the resources became valuable through their connections. For example, P6 recorded unfamiliar expressions for later review, while P9 reported reusing vocabulary learned from tourists in subsequent tours. These accounts illustrate how an immediate encounter could be extended into a learning sequence rather than remaining an isolated communicative event.

Nevertheless, the availability of English input did not guarantee learning. Workplace-learning research similarly shows that experience becomes developmental through processes such as feedback seeking, reflection, and later experimentation, rather than through participation alone (Decius et al., 2025; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). At Tumpak Sewu, unfamiliar language could prompt searching or peer consultation, but fatigue, time pressure, and the need to complete the tour sometimes limited follow-up. The site is therefore better understood as an *opportunity structure* than as an automatic immersion environment. Workplace affordances are unequally accessible and may be enabled or constrained by task conditions, social support, and workers' capacity to act on them (Strömmer, 2016). This conditionality explains why frequent interaction produced uneven reported development among participants.

Digital translation illustrates the same principle. Participants generally used Google Translate as a backup when contextual inference, repetition requests, gesture, and reformulation were insufficient. Machine translation can be incorporated productively into a broader multilingual repertoire, particularly when learners critically interpret rather than passively accept its output (Kelly & Hou, 2022; Niño, 2020). In this study, however, its immediate communicative value should not be confused with evidence of durable learning. Its primary contribution was to prevent interaction from collapsing, while its developmental value depended on whether translated language was subsequently understood, retained, or reused.

4.2 Breakdown and Repair as Communicative Work and Learning Opportunity

The second finding demonstrates that communication difficulty was situated and jointly managed rather than simply a deficiency in the guides' English. Participants experienced difficulty when rapid speech, unfamiliar pronunciation, unknown expressions, and limited processing time converged during consequential service encounters. Similar challenges have been reported among tourism personnel who must understand varied speakers and respond immediately despite lexical or listening limitations (Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019; Tanaka, 2023; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). Participants' references to difficult accents should therefore be read as evidence of unequal familiarity and exposure, not as proof that any national variety is inherently unintelligible.

Guides responded by requesting repetition, asking tourists to slow down, drawing on prior talk, simplifying or reformulating explanations, and monitoring tourists' responses. These practices show that understanding was collaboratively achieved. Research on English as a lingua franca likewise identifies repetition, reformulation, explicitness, and confirmation as central resources for resolving or preventing misunderstanding (Kaur, 2017; Pietikäinen, 2018). In tourism service encounters, speakers adapt their language to secure the practical purpose of the exchange rather than attempting to maintain uninterrupted, error-free production (Thongphut & Kaur, 2023; Wilson, 2018). P4's account of a tourist slowing down after a repetition request exemplifies this reciprocal accommodation: the guide initiated repair, but successful understanding depended on the tourist's response.

Gesture and the physical environment were equally important. Pointing to paths, demonstrating actions, and using visible features of the waterfall allowed guides to combine English with local and embodied knowledge. These strategies should not be treated merely as compensation for linguistic deficiency. Research with Indonesian guides indicates that communicative competence also includes diagnosing problems, mobilizing contextual knowledge, and proposing workable solutions (Abdullah et al., 2022). In a nature-based destination, multimodal action was therefore part of professional competence because it enabled guides to make safety information and local knowledge accessible to visitors. An evaluation based only on grammatical accuracy would overlook this interactional and problem-solving capacity.

Breakdown also had a possible developmental function because it made specific gaps noticeable. A repetition request could provide a more accessible version of an utterance; a tourist's reformulation could supply a useful expression; and an unsuccessful explanation could identify language for later searching or practice. Research on second-language interaction outside classrooms shows that everyday encounters can become learning spaces when participants orient to a linguistic problem as something to understand and later use (Eskildsen & Theodórsdóttir, 2017). The connection becomes stronger when experiences are revisited, reconstructed, or reapplied in subsequent interactions (Lilja & Piirainen-Marsh, 2019).

However, the findings do not justify treating every repaired misunderstanding as evidence of acquisition. A breakdown became a learning trigger only when the guide noticed its relevance and followed it with checking, rehearsal, reflection, or reuse. P9's later use of vocabulary learned from tourists provides clear evidence of this transition, whereas other difficulties may have ended once the immediate service problem was resolved. The study thus extends earlier tourism research on communication strategies by adding a temporal dimension: repair can complete the present encounter while simultaneously producing input, feedback, or a perceived need that informs a later one. Its learning value remains conditional rather than automatic.

4.3 Communicative Development, Contribution, and Implications

Participants described development mainly as reduced fear, quicker responses, and greater ability to adjust explanations. Repeated tours familiarized them with recurring sequences such as greetings, route descriptions, safety warnings, and common questions, but the unpredictability of tourists' contributions continued to require flexibility. Their accounts therefore suggest a combination of routinization and context-sensitive adaptation. This interpretation is compatible with interactional competence, understood as an

increasing ability to deploy linguistic and sequential resources in ways fitted to particular interlocutors and situations (Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2018). Because the present study was cross-sectional, however, it identified perceived development and current practices rather than directly measuring individual change over time.

This interpretation broadens development beyond vocabulary and grammar. Participants valued being able to initiate interaction, recognize incomplete understanding, request assistance, infer meaning, reformulate an explanation, use gesture, and continue despite uncertainty. In lingua-franca communication, effectiveness similarly depends on pragmatic adaptability and collaborative meaning making rather than conformity to a single native-speaker norm (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018). Increased confidence was part of this process because successful encounters appeared to reduce fear of error and encourage further participation. Although communicative Tourism English instruction can improve confidence and performance (Ho, 2020), confidence cannot be equated with objectively demonstrated competence (Koc, 2021). The reported changes should therefore be understood as participants' perceptions, supported by observations of strategic practices but not by longitudinal proficiency measures.

The unevenness of these perceptions is theoretically important. Years of service alone did not explain who searched for meanings, recorded expressions, consulted peers, or deliberately reused new language. The findings instead support a recursive workplace-learning model: occupational demands activate existing resources; interaction exposes a gap; guides use repair, gesture, social assistance, or technology; selected experiences are reflected upon or rehearsed; and language or strategies are tested in later encounters. A new interaction may then reveal another gap and restart the process. This model integrates language-learning ecology, interactional repair, and informal workplace learning while explaining why exposure within a shared setting can yield different outcomes. It is offered as a context-grounded explanation rather than a universal sequence requiring every guide to complete every phase.

Practically, the findings support short, site-responsive training organized around recurrent communicative events rather than a generalized grammar syllabus. Needs analyses of Indonesian tour guides likewise prioritize speaking, listening, tourism vocabulary, explanation, and context-specific guiding tasks (Setiawan et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024; Yanti et al., 2024). Training at Tumpak Sewu could therefore rehearse welcoming visitors, explaining routes and natural features, issuing safety instructions, responding to unexpected questions, and repairing misunderstanding. Practice should include varied intelligible English, repetition requests, clarification questions, reformulation, pace adjustment, gesture, and critical use of translation tools. Interaction-centered and cooperative Tourism English instruction provides relevant support for this communicative orientation (Ho, 2020; Hong et al., 2022). Training should also connect each tour with deliberate follow-up. A brief routine could require guides to record one unfamiliar expression or difficult exchange, check its meaning and pronunciation, discuss possible responses with a peer, and identify where the language or strategy could be reused. This would formalize the reflection-and-application processes already evident in participants' notebook use, online searching, and peer practice (Decius et al., 2025; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). Such support is especially important because authentic interaction supplies immediate relevance but does not ensure equal access to time, feedback, or learning resources.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how 20 local tour guides at Tumpak Sewu Waterfall learned and used English through their everyday work with international tourists. Their workplace-relevant English repertoires were developed through interconnected pathways rather than a single source. Formal education provided an initial linguistic foundation, while media exposure, independent meaning searches, vocabulary notes, peer practice, and tourist interaction enabled participants to expand and mobilize that knowledge for occupational purposes. The workplace therefore functioned as a point of convergence between prior learning, self-directed activity, and immediate communicative demands. However, frequent exposure to

English was not inherently developmental. Its learning value depended on whether guides noticed linguistic gaps, sought assistance or information, reflected on difficult encounters, and reused language or strategies in subsequent tours.

Communication difficulty was central to this process rather than incidental to it. Rapid speech, unfamiliar pronunciation, unknown expressions, and limited processing time created recurrent challenges, which participants managed through contextual inference, requests for repetition or slower speech, reformulation, gesture, pointing, peer support, and selective use of translation applications. These practices demonstrate that effective guiding involved collaboratively maintaining understanding through linguistic, interactional, embodied, and digital resources rather than producing uninterrupted or error-free English. Some breakdowns also became learning triggers when participants subsequently checked, recorded, practiced, or reapplied what they had encountered. Repeated workplace participation was associated in participants' accounts with greater confidence, faster response preparation, and stronger strategic adaptability, although these outcomes represent perceived communicative development rather than objectively measured proficiency gains.

The study's principal contribution is its context-grounded explanation of workplace-mediated language learning as a recursive and conditional process: occupational demands activate existing resources, interaction reveals a communicative gap, guides mobilize strategies to sustain the encounter, and selected experiences are transformed through reflection and reuse into resources for subsequent communication. This explanation clarifies why guides working in the same environment may report different developmental outcomes despite similarly frequent contact with tourists. Practically, the findings support short, site-responsive training centered on authentic guiding tasks, including welcoming visitors, explaining natural features and routes, issuing safety instructions, answering unexpected questions, and repairing misunderstanding. Such training should combine exposure to diverse English speech patterns with strategy rehearsal, peer discussion, post-tour reflection, and critical use of translation tools.

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