

## English Oral Communication Needs of Kayaking and Rafting Service Providers in Phang Nga Province, Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of service and professionalism demonstrated by local tourism personnel plays a vital role in encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, both of which are essential for sustained growth of tourism development of a destination. One effective strategy for strengthening human resources in local tourism businesses is conducting a training needs survey. The purpose of this study was to investigate the English oral communication needs of kayaking and rafting service providers in Phang Nga Province, Thailand. A mixed-method approach was employed to collect data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, respectively. The findings revealed that several communication skills were highly and moderately necessary. Everyday conversational functions and greetings, along with giving directions, were identified as the most essential communicative needs, followed by providing information and making suggestions, which were also categorized as highly necessary. Meanwhile, negotiating and explaining Thai culture were considered moderately necessary. The findings emphasize the need for practical and frequently used language functions in kayaking and rafting service encounters, suggesting that English training programs should be tailored to help adventure tourism professionals to communicate more effectively. The study recommends that local tourism authorities develop targeted training programs focusing on key communication skills to enhance service quality and visitor experience.

**Keywords:** Nature-Based tourism, English oral communication, Kayaking and Rafting service providers

## Introduction

The introduction of a visa-free policy has significantly increased the number of foreign tourists visiting Thailand, bringing major changes to the country's tourism industry. In 2023, Thailand welcomed 28.15 million foreign tourists (Tourism Authority of Thailand., 2023). In 2024, after implementing the visa-free policy, the number rose to 35.54 million (Tourism Authority of Thailand., 2024). This continuous growth in tourism has had a noticeable impact on many regions. In 2024, Phang Nga province experienced significant post-pandemic tourism recovery, with European visitors accounting for 78% of international arrivals. This growth was supported by substantial developments in hospitality infrastructure and services. (Barnett, 2025). As Phang-Nga has breathtaking landscapes such as Khaolak and the nearby beaches along the Andaman coast, Phang-Nga Bay, national parks and mangrove forests, the province is a desirable destination for nature-based tourism. There are an abundance of tourist spots and activities which allow the tourists to engage with nature while enjoying fun and interesting outdoor experiences. The influx of tourists has boosted the local economy and a growing demand in the adventure and eco-tourism sectors. As Pongchai et al. (2021) noted, the visa-free policy has not only attracted more tourists but has also heightened some tourists' expectations in terms of service standards from the service providers.

The increasing popularity of ecotourism together with outdoor recreational activities demands personnel who possess training and knowledge and adaptability skills to fulfill traveler expectations while adapting to tourism industry changes (Soh et al., 2022). To meet traveler's expectations and demands, it is imperative for the human resources development part of all the organizations from both government and private sectors to address communication barriers between local tourism stakeholders (Wong and Srisuk, 2020) and to sustain the tourism destinations and maintain market competitiveness. (Tan et al., 2019) and the curriculum in hospitality and tourism needs to match the requirements of the industry (Arafah, 2019). This research aims to identify the English communication needs of tourism staff in an underexplored area of kayaking and rafting businesses.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved from a grammar-oriented approach into a dynamic, learner-centered approach guided by needs analysis and discourse practices. While its definition has shifted over time, ESP has consistently prioritized addressing learners' specific language needs (González Ramírez, 2015). English for Tourism and Hospitality Purposes

(ETHP) is a subset of ESP that caters to the linguistic demands of the tourism and hospitality industry. Professionals in this sector, such as kayaking and rafting service providers in Phang Nga Province, require proficiency in English to effectively communicate with international guests. English for Tourism and Hospitality Purposes (ETHP) plays a crucial role in equipping students with effective communication skills tailored to industry needs (Manusamy and Kaliappen, 2024). Here are several examples of research studies in English for Tourism and Hospitality Purposes (ETHP).

Several studies have focused on the vital role of English language proficiency in the tourism industry, regarding it as a medium of communication across diverse cultures (Baker, 2009; Kongkerd, 2013; Leslie and Russell, 2006; Manusamy and Kaliappen, 2024). Additionally, tourism professionals must possess the ability to understand tourists who are from other cultures to meet their needs (Astawa and Wijaya, 2024; Block, 2010; Blue, 2003; Laborda, 2009). Finally, the skills emerged as the most frequently used and needed in the recent studies in South-east Asia were listening, followed closely by speaking (Chumphong and Chau-in, 2020; Ijabah and Amrullah, 2023; Namtapi, 2022). Common communication challenges included understanding fast speech, dealing with different accents, limited vocabulary and lack of confidence.

### **Research Objective**

To identify and analyze the English communication needs of kayaking and rafting service providers in Phang Nga Province, Thailand.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design and Instruments**

This study employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the English communication needs of kayaking and rafting service providers in Phang Nga Province. The questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions were adapted from Namtapi's (2022) study, Needs Analysis: English for Specific Purposes for Tourism Personnel in Ayutthaya, which includes 16 questionnaire items.

#### **Participants**

Participants were selected by using clear inclusion criteria: each had at least six months of professional experience and regular interaction with English speaking tourists. From

the population of 87 individuals who met the inclusion criteria, surveying the entire group was not feasible due to availability and willingness. Accordingly, a purposive sampling method was adopted, with random selection procedure applied within the accessible pool to reduce potential bias. While the non-probability design limits full generalizability, these steps strengthened internal validity and promoted moderate reliability of the findings (Kumar, 2019).

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted with 30 kayaking and rafting service providers in Khao Sok National Park, Klong Sok, and Klong Saeng to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.682. In this process, seven questionnaire items were removed, as more than ten participants indicated that they did not need to communicate in English for those purposes. After deleting these seven items, the reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.831 and the final version of the questionnaire consisted of nine items.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

A total of 62 kayaking and rafting service providers completed a nine-item questionnaire. Mean scores were used to assess the importance and frequency of English oral communication needs. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 11 participants were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to identify key communication themes, offering deeper insights into the specific language demands faced in their daily professional interactions.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study begin with the characteristics of the participants, followed by their English oral communication needs as shown in Table 1.

The majority of the participants were male service providers (90.30%). In terms of age, the two largest groups were aged 21-30 years (32.26%) and 31-40 years (32.26%), followed by 41-50 years (20.96%) and 51-60 years (14.52%). According to their educational background, most had completed lower secondary school (58.05%), while others had completed upper secondary school (24.18%), diplomas (14.52%) or bachelor's degrees (3.25%) respectively. Their work experiences in kayaking and rafting varied, with 35.48% having 1-5 years, 37.10% having 6-10 years, and 27.42% having more than 10 years.

**Table 1** The English Oral Communication Needs of Kayaking and Rafting Service Providers in Phang Nga Province

English Oral Communication Needs	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Level
1. Everyday conversations and greetings	4.52	.67	Very High
2. Providing information	4.13	.71	High
3. Making suggestions	3.98	.91	High
4. Discussing numerical information	3.92	.77	High
5. Explaining Thai culture	3.21	.77	Moderate
6. Requesting help	3.84	.68	High
7. Offering assistance	3.85	.72	High
8. Negotiating	3.34	.70	Moderate
9. Giving directions	4.31	.71	Very High

As presented in Table 1, this study investigated the English oral communication needs of kayaking and rafting service providers in Phang Nga Province, with a focus on key communicative functions used in interactions with tourists. The results show a clear distinction between communication skills considered highly necessary and those seen as moderately necessary by the participants. Among the identified needs, "everyday conversation and greetings" received the highest mean score ( $\bar{X} = 4.52$ ), placing it in the "very high" category. This highlights its essential role in facilitating effective communication between service providers and tourists. The less but still highly important communicative functions were giving directions ( $\bar{X} = 4.31$ ), providing information ( $\bar{X} = 4.13$ ), making suggestions ( $\bar{X} = 3.98$ ), discussing numerical information ( $\bar{X} = 3.92$ ), offering assistance ( $\bar{X} = 3.85$ ) and requesting help ( $\bar{X} = 3.84$ ). Their need levels were categorized as "high" suggesting their frequent use in real-life service encounters, emphasizing their significance in facilitating smooth and effective communication with tourists. However, there are two communicative functions that were perceived as moderately necessary. These include negotiating ( $\bar{X} = 3.34$ ) and explaining Thai culture ( $\bar{X} = 3.21$ ).

The findings from the semi-structured interviews elaborates on the communicative functions in English and the challenges encountered when communicating in English with foreign tourists, as follows:

## **1. When do the kayaking and rafting service providers communicate using English**

Many responses emphasized the continued use of English from the beginning to the end of the service experience. Several participants reported initiating communication with tourists in English during the booking inquiry stage, either via telephone or online chat. When tourists arrive at the kayaking or rafting spot, English is used to welcome them and provide basic instructions. They also reported their English use during specific tourism activities such as boat trips or rafting tours or explaining wildlife and environment.

## **2. Communication Challenges with Foreign Tourists**

Based on the semi-structured interview results, four themes emerged from the responses: 1) Accents and pronunciation difficulties, 2) Limited English proficiency of service providers. 3) Non-English-speaking tourists and 4) Communication anxiety.

### **2.1. Accents and Pronunciation Difficulties**

Participants frequently mentioned challenges in understanding the diverse accents of international tourists, particularly those whose speech patterns differ markedly from standard English pronunciation.

“Some tourists speak from the throat. I can't catch the words clearly.”

“Chinese accents are hard to understand even if they speak English”

### **2.2 Limited English Proficiency of Service Providers**

A significant number of participants acknowledge their own lack of confidence and limited vocabulary as barriers to effective communication.

“I worry about using the wrong words because I didn't study English much.”

“Sometimes I don't know how to explain things in English properly.”

### **2.3 Non-English-Speaking Tourists**

Some tourists were reported to have no English language ability at all, leading to complete communication breakdowns.

“Some tourists don't speak English at all, so we just use gestures or point to things.”

“When they speak only their language, I don't know what to do.”

### **2.4 Communication anxiety**

Emotional responses such as fear of misunderstanding or making mistakes contributed to hesitation or avoidance in communication.

“I feel nervous when speaking English because I might say the wrong thing.”

“Even when I know the words I hesitate because I'm not confident.”

## Discussions

The key communicative functions identified as highly necessary by the participants in this study include everyday 1) conversations and greetings, 2) giving directions, 3) providing information, 4) making suggestions, 5) discussing numerical information, such as stating prices, 6) offering assistance and 7) requesting help. These findings align with those of Namtapi (2022), reinforcing the importance of fundamental conversational skills among service providers. The ability to engage in effective communication, particularly through friendly and authentic interactions, has been consistently linked to enhanced customer satisfaction and improved overall service experiences (Ouhammou and Manar, 2025; Saragih, 2024). Additionally, the study highlights other important but moderately required communicative functions, namely 1) explaining Thai culture and 2) negotiating. While these functions contribute to effective English communication in service encounters, their comparatively lower perceived necessity suggests that the core interactions in such settings primarily revolve around basic conversational exchanges.

From the semi-structured interviews, five participants have recognized the necessity of enhancing their English language proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening, as crucial for effective communication in the tourism industry as similarly found in previous literatures (Chumphong and Chuai-in, 2020; Ijabah and Amrullah, 2023; Kholidi et al., 2022; Namtapi, 2022; Nguyen and Modehiran, 2023; Nomnian et al., 2020). Writing and reading skills are considered secondary but still important for specific tasks such as online communication and promotional activities. Furthermore, understanding various accents and speech patterns from different nationalities is considered a key challenge (Chumphong and Chuai-in, 2020; Namtapi, 2022). The kayaking and rafting service providers reported that they do not communicate extensively on a daily basis like tourist guides, tour operators, or tourist assistants at airports. As a result, their need for English communication is lower and so is their communication ability.

## Conclusions

This paper highlights the vital role of English in the tourism industry. This implies that individuals working in the tourism sector, including tour guides, hotel employees, and travel agents, must develop strong English language skills to communicate effectively with international visitors (Schneider, 2024). In kayaking and rafting services and other job roles within tourism businesses, clear and effective communication plays a crucial role in improving the tourist experience and ensuring safety. Effective communication strengthens safety procedures and improves the overall tourist experience by ensuring that visitors feel well-informed and engaged (Kovalenko et al., 2024).

## Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

It can be implied from the results of this study that local organizations in charge of training tourism personnel in Phang Nga and other destinations alike, such as Phang Nga Institute for Development and the Phang Nga Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports should introduce specialized English training programs that are customized to meet the specific needs of tourism workers.

Although several findings in this study align with prior research, because the study focused on a single tourist destination and was limited to water- and nature-based activities such as kayaking and rafting, some aspects of English used in other tourism sectors may not have been captured.

Future research could explore the challenges faced by tour guides working in nature-based tourism to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences or examine the communication strategies used by tourism professionals with limited English proficiency to identify effective methods for improving their interactions with tourists. Experiential learning in university tourism programs is essential for equipping students with practical communication skills, particularly in English, which prepare them for both language proficiency and real-world scenarios they encounter in their career.

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