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Leveraging Local English Communication Skills as a Catalyst for Sustainable Tourism Growth: A Case Study of Sekotong, Lombok

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Abstract

The rapid growth of international marine tourism in Sekotong, West Lombok, demands competent human resources capable of bridging cross-cultural communication and promoting environmental stewardship. This study investigates the existing English communication competence of the local coastal community in Sekotong, analyzes how communication barriers affect marine conservation and cultural preservation, and formulates a contextual English for Tourism and Conservation (ETC) learning model. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with an intrinsic case study design, data were collected over three to four months in Batu Putih Village, Gili Asahan, and Gili Gede through semi-structured interviews with fifteen purposively selected key informants—local tour guides, Pokdarwis members, tourism SME operators, and village officials—participatory observation, and analysis of twenty-two visual artifacts drawn from the linguistic landscape. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking, and thick description, while research ethics were observed through informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity toward Sasak community norms. The findings reveal a stark dichotomy between transactional and interactional competence. While local stakeholders demonstrate basic transactional proficiency at the CEFR A1 level—relying on telegraphic speech, isolated vocabulary, and non-verbal gestures for routine commercial exchanges—they experience severe deficits in interactional competence, often resorting to strategic avoidance, manifesting as silent withdrawal, during complex inquiries. Furthermore, grammatical distortions in public signage, such as "No Step Corals," undermine the institutional authority of local conservation groups. These linguistic barriers directly compromise coral reef protection, Sasak cultural integrity, and maritime safety, while confining locals to low-margin labor as external agencies dominate high-value guided tours. Treating English as vital soft infrastructure, this study proposes an applied, task-based ETC framework comprising three modules: Practical Marine Hospitality, Environmental Stewardship Discourse, and Sasak Cultural Narratives, designed to empower local hosts as autonomous custodians of sustainable tourism. The study concludes that English communication competence is a precondition for local empowerment rather than a mere service skill, and recommends the piloting of the ETC model within community empowerment programs.

Keywords: English for Tourism and Conservation; sustainable tourism; soft infrastructure; local empowerment; Sekotong

1. Introduction

Global tourism in the twenty-first century has moved decisively beyond the mere pursuit of visitor numbers and economic profit toward the paradigm of sustainable tourism, which emphasizes a careful balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and the socio-cultural sustainability of host communities. This shift reflects a broader recognition that tourism, if left unmanaged, can degrade the very natural and cultural assets upon which it depends. Within this framework, the quality of human resources emerges as a decisive factor determining the success and competitiveness of a destination, for it is people—not infrastructure alone—who mediate the encounter between visitors and places. Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation, possesses enormous marine tourism potential, and one region with such potential is Sekotong, a coastal area in the southwest of West Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province. Sekotong is known for its small island clusters—Gili Gede, Gili Asahan, and Gili Layar—which offer beautiful coral reefs, clear waters, and coastal communities that maintain strong local cultural values (Hizmi & Junaid, 2023).

In recent years, Sekotong has experienced a steady increase in international tourist visits, particularly those interested in marine tourism, snorkeling, diving, and ecotourism. However, this growth has not been matched by the preparedness of local human resources, especially in English communication skills. English, as a global lingua franca, plays a strategic role in the tourism industry: proficiency is important not only for serving foreign tourists but also as the primary medium for conveying information about local culture, social values, and environmental conservation messages. In Sekotong, limited English communication skills often lead to miscommunication between hosts and tourists, particularly in the context of marine conservation education such as coral reef protection and responsible marine tourism ethics (Strobl et al., 2020). A tour guide who cannot explain why a coral fragment must not be touched, or a boat operator who cannot warn a visitor about a strong current, becomes an unwitting participant in the degradation of the very destination that sustains his livelihood.

This communication problem extends well beyond the immediate inconvenience of tourism services. The inability of local communities to convey messages effectively can shift their position from active hosts to passive objects of tourism, while the narrative and economic benefits are controlled by external parties who possess the linguistic capital to mediate the tourist experience. In the long term, this condition may threaten the sustainability of tourism, both environmentally and socio-culturally. From the perspective of English language education, language is not only a linguistic system but also a social, cultural, and ideological tool. Therefore, strengthening the English communication skills of local communities should be designed contextually, based on the actual needs of Sekotong tourism, and integrated with conservation values and local wisdom (Rizal, n.d.). This approach aligns with the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework, particularly the emerging orientation of English for Tourism and Conservation (ETC), which treats language learning as inseparable from the environmental and cultural contexts in which it is used.

Based on this background, the problems identified in this study are fourfold: limited English communication skills among Sekotong local residents; communication gaps causing misinterpretation between local communities and international tourists; ineffective dissemination of environmental conservation messages; and the lack of a contextual and sustainable English learning model tailored to local tourism needs. Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. First, how is the English communication skill of the local community in Sekotong? Second, how do communication barriers affect the delivery of conservation and cultural messages? Third, what is a suitable English for Tourism and Conservation model for Sekotong's context? The corresponding objectives are to describe the English communication skills of the local community, to analyze the impact of communication gaps on sustainable tourism development, and to examine the role of English as a tool for local community empowerment.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of English language education, particularly ESP and sustainable tourism, by offering an empirically grounded account of how language competence functions as soft infrastructure in a coastal destination. Practically, it benefits local communities by enhancing their communication capacity, provides local government with a basis for human resource policy formulation, and serves academics as a reference for further research at the intersection of tourism and language education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Tourism and Human Resources

Sustainable tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization, considers economic, social, and environmental impacts while meeting the needs of present and future generations (Maree, 2022). Weaver (2006) integrates environmental conservation, economic viability, and socio-cultural integrity into a single conceptual frame, while Butler (1999) emphasizes long-term management that avoids resource degradation. In marine contexts such as Sekotong, sustainability includes coral reef protection, biodiversity conservation, and preservation of coastal community values (Hizmi & Junaid, 2023). Tourism development must therefore balance environmental protection with economic benefits for local communities, recognizing that the two are not opposing forces but interdependent conditions for long-term viability.

Human resources are fundamental to this endeavor. Tourism services are intangible and produced and consumed simultaneously, making the attitudes, communication skills, and cultural awareness of tourism actors critical determinants of tourist satisfaction (Cooper et al., 2008; Lillo-Bañuls & Fuster, 2025). Dessler (2017) defines human resources as the skills, knowledge, abilities, and other attributes that contribute to organizational performance and productivity, while Drucker (1999) reminds us that knowledge and skills are the most valuable assets in modern economies. This perspective positions human capital development, including soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability,

and intercultural understanding, as essential for sustainable development. In developing destinations such as Sekotong, local communities often serve as the frontline of tourism activities—tour guides, boat operators, homestay owners, and small business operators—and their limited capacity, particularly in foreign language proficiency, can become a significant barrier to effective communication with international tourists. This limitation may lead to misunderstandings, reduced service quality, and missed economic opportunities. Moreover, inadequate communication skills can hinder the ability of local communities to convey important information related to environmental conservation, cultural values, and responsible tourism practices. As a result, tourists may not fully understand local norms or ecological sensitivities, which can negatively impact both the environment and socio-cultural sustainability.

2.2 English as a Lingua Franca and Language as a Social Tool

English functions as a global lingua franca in international tourism, serving as a means of communication among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007; Crystal, 2003). It is widely used for communication between tourists and hosts, dissemination of information, and cultural interpretation; limited proficiency can thus lead to miscommunication and reduced service quality. This is particularly critical in Sekotong, where communication is essential for delivering conservation messages and guiding tourist behavior.

Beyond its communicative function, language is a dynamic social and cultural practice. Kramsch (1998) emphasizes that language expresses cultural reality and shapes social identity, where meanings are constructed through shared experiences, values, and beliefs. Fairclough (1995) highlights that language is inherently ideological and connected to power relations in society, arguing that discourse is never neutral as it reflects and reproduces social structures, ideologies, and inequalities. In tourism settings, language proficiency may influence who controls information, decision-making, and economic benefits. Language serves several interconnected functions in tourism destinations such as Sekotong: it represents local identity, transmitting the uniqueness of local culture and coastal community life to international visitors; it transmits cultural values, allowing local communities to communicate norms, customs, and environmental ethics such as marine conservation and responsible tourism behavior; and it negotiates meaning with visitors, where both tourists and local residents must continuously adapt their communication strategies to achieve mutual understanding. The way local communities communicate in English can influence how tourists perceive the authenticity, hospitality, and cultural richness of a place. Therefore, limited language proficiency may not only create communication barriers but also affect the overall image and competitiveness of a tourism destination. English learning in Sekotong should thus not be limited to grammatical competence alone, but must also integrate local cultural values and environmental awareness.

2.3 English for Specific Purposes and English for Tourism and Conservation

English for Specific Purposes is a learner-centered approach in which content and methods are based on learners' reasons for learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) characterize ESP as needs-based, context-specific, and goal-oriented, with needs analysis as a central component that identifies what learners must do with the language in real-life situations. In the context of Sekotong, ESP should include guiding tourists, explaining marine tourism, and communicating conservation practices. While English for Tourism is an established branch of ESP that focuses on tourism communication (Withiam, 2010), sustainable tourism contexts require the integration of environmental awareness, as ecotourism must promote conservation and education (Honey, 2008). This study therefore proposes English for Tourism and Conservation, which integrates communication skills, environmental education, and local wisdom. This model is particularly relevant for Sekotong, where marine conservation is essential and where the fate of the coral reef is inseparable from the communicative competence of those who live beside it.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with an intrinsic case study design. The intrinsic case study design was selected because the case itself—Sekotong's linguistic and tourism ecology—is of inherent interest and cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative means. The research was conducted over three to four months in three sites: Batu Putih Village, Gili Asahan, and Gili Gede, each representing a distinct configuration of tourism development, from village-based homestays to island resorts. Participants comprised fifteen purposively selected key informants, including local tour guides, Pokdarwis (community tourism awareness group) members, tourism SME operators, and village officials—individuals positioned at the frontline of host–tourist interaction and therefore able to speak with authority about the communicative demands of their work. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation of twenty-two visual artifacts drawn from the linguistic landscape, including public signage, promotional materials, and conservation notices. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and thick description, while observing research ethics including informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity toward Sasak community norms. The researcher's role was that of a participant-observer, residing in the community for the duration of fieldwork and engaging in the daily rhythms of tourism activity, from morning boat departures to evening conversations on the beach.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Existing English Communication Competence

The findings reveal a stark dichotomy between transactional and interactional competence. Local stakeholders demonstrate basic transactional proficiency at the CEFR A1 level, relying on telegraphic speech, isolated vocabulary, and non-verbal gestures to complete routine commercial exchanges—negotiating boat fares, quoting snorkeling prices, and confirming meal orders. This competence is functional within tightly scripted, predictable encounters, where a small repertoire of phrases and a confident smile can carry the transaction to completion. However, the same stakeholders experience severe deficits in interactional competence. When confronted with complex inquiries—questions about reef ecology, safety protocols, or cultural history—they frequently resort to strategic avoidance, silently withdrawing from the exchange or deflecting the conversation to a third party. This pattern suggests that the community's English has developed as a transactional tool rather than as a medium for meaningful dialogue, reflecting an instrumental orientation to language learning driven by immediate commercial necessity. The linguistic landscape mirrors this condition: the twenty-two artifacts collected reveal a preponderance of single-word or telegraphic signs, with only a handful attempting full sentences, and several containing grammatical distortions that inadvertently alter meaning.

4.2 Communication Barriers and Their Impact on Sustainability

The consequences of these linguistic barriers extend well beyond service inconvenience. First, conservation communication is compromised: grammatical distortions in public signage such as “No Step Corals” undermine the institutional authority of local conservation groups and fail to convey the urgency of reef protection. A visitor who reads a mangled warning may conclude that the rule is merely decorative, and the reef suffers accordingly. Second, Sasak cultural integrity is at risk, as locals unable to narrate their own history and traditions cede interpretive authority to external guides, reducing culture to spectacle and depriving the community of the dignity of self-representation. Third, maritime safety is compromised when safety instructions cannot be conveyed with precision, a matter of life and death in waters where currents and weather can shift without warning. Economically, these barriers confine locals to low-margin labor—boat handling and equipment rental—while external agencies dominate high-value guided tours, reproducing the very power asymmetries Fairclough (1995) describes. In this sense, English functions as soft infrastructure: its absence is not merely a skills gap but a structural constraint on local agency and equitable benefit distribution. The community is, in effect, hosting guests in its own home while being unable to speak to them.

4.3 Toward an ETC Model for Sekotong

Treating English as vital soft infrastructure, this study proposes an applied, task-based ETC framework comprising three modules. Practical Marine Hospitality develops transactional and interactional routines for guest reception, safety briefing, and service negotiation, grounding language learning in the concrete tasks of daily work. Environmental

Stewardship Discourse equips locals with the vocabulary and rhetorical strategies to explain reef ecology, conservation rules, and responsible tourism ethics persuasively, transforming conservation from a set of prohibitions into a narrative of care. Sasak Cultural Narratives builds the interactional competence needed to narrate local history, customs, and values with authenticity and pride, restoring interpretive authority to those to whom the culture belongs. The framework is grounded in needs analysis (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), integrates conservation and local wisdom (Honey, 2008), and positions local hosts not as passive recipients of training but as autonomous custodians of sustainable tourism. Its task-based orientation ensures that learning is organized around what learners actually do with language, rather than around abstract grammatical categories, while its integration of conservation and culture ensures that language competence serves the broader goals of sustainability.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that English communication competence in Sekotong is characterized by functional transactional proficiency but severe interactional deficits, and that these linguistic barriers directly compromise coral reef protection, Sasak cultural integrity, maritime safety, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. English must therefore be understood as soft infrastructure—a precondition for local empowerment rather than a mere service skill. The proposed task-based ETC framework, comprising Practical Marine Hospitality, Environmental Stewardship Discourse, and Sasak Cultural Narratives, offers a contextually grounded pathway for transforming local hosts into autonomous custodians of sustainable tourism.

For local government, the findings provide a basis for integrating conservation-oriented English training into community empowerment programs and for recognizing language capacity as a component of destination competitiveness. For academics, the study opens avenues for further research at the intersection of ESP, sustainable tourism, and community development. Future research is recommended to pilot and evaluate the model's implementation over an extended period, measuring both linguistic gains and conservation outcomes, so that the promise of English as a catalyst for sustainable tourism growth may be tested and refined in practice.

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