

*The Needs Analysis of Using English in Travel Agencies in Urban Cities in Uzbekistan:  
Focusing on the Language Use Difficulties*

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**Abstract**

This study aims to examine the specific English language needs and challenges faced by tourism professionals in Uzbekistan's travel agencies. Uzbekistan's tourism sector's rapid development earned it a place among the top five nations globally, with the most dynamically evolving tourism industry, as acknowledged by the UNWTO. The Guardian (2019) regarded Uzbekistan as the world's premier tourist destination. In Uzbekistan a travel sector has witnessed rapid growth and increased interaction with inbound tourists and multinational companies. Foreign tourist arrivals increased from 2 million in 2016 to 6.7 million in 2019. In this study four employees of travel agencies in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara were interviewed to identify English language needs and challenges in 2023. Interview data was analyzed based on the Grounded Theory Approach. Through GTA approach, five core-categories were identified: (1) past and current experience, (2) actual needs for English, (3) realization of problems of English use, (4) problem-solving situations in English use, and (5) future hopes for English use. According to the interview data, all the participants learned the professional English in higher education. Their actual needs of English such as emailing and communicating with tourists were identified. As a problem of English use, diverse accents and slangs were described. To solve the problem, participants engaged with English media and sought coworker's assistance. The present study underscores the critical role of English proficiency in the tourism sector, advocating the importance of understanding World English and curriculum development to enhance the competencies of travel agents in developing countries.

Keywords: Travel Agencies, Uzbekistan, English Language Learning, Needs Analysis, World English

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## Introduction

The English language occupies an essential role as the primary means of global communication. Within the context of the tourism industry, English has become an important tool, enabling effective communication, negotiation, and transaction execution between tourism professionals and tourists. One of the major economic sectors in the world due to the high levels of people movement connected with tourism (Thurlow & Adam, 2010; Urry, 2002). Consequently, it directly or indirectly contributes to host countries by means of foreign currency inflows, job creation across service and manufacturing sectors, and bolstered government revenues derived from various levies such as hotel taxes, tourist taxes, departure taxes, income taxes, and customs duties on imports (Badri, Dizaji, & Zeynali, 2014). As a global lingua franca, English is extensively utilized in the hospitality and tourism industry, facilitating international trade and tourism by providing English-speaking tourists access to diverse destinations. In light of these considerations, the ability to communicate proficiently in English has become imperative, given that the majority of tourists are inclined to use English as their medium of interaction. Consequently, all personnel within the tourism industry, spanning roles in hotels, airlines, tour companies, and related sectors, must possess a high level of English fluency to facilitate seamless communication with guests. Proficiency in English empowers staffs to comprehend the nuanced needs of guests, thereby enabling them to provide service that aligns with guest expectations and enhances overall satisfaction, ultimately fostering guest loyalty.

"The guest is as great as your father," according to a fitting saying from Uzbekistan, emphasises the value of hospitality in Uzbek society. Though it is not without difficulties, Uzbekistan's tourist sector appears to be one with great potential. Recognizing the potential of tourism as a driver of economic development, the President of Uzbekistan issued a Presidential Decree (2017) titled "The Measures to Ensure the Rapid Development of Tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan". This decree emphasizes the importance of aligning economic strategies with potential factors that enhance the quality of life for Uzbekistan's population and advance the tourism sector. Uzbekistan boasts a unique cultural and historical heritage, with ancient cities that offer profound historical significance. The country encompasses three main types of tourism: inbound, outbound, and domestic. With a diverse array of tourist destinations, Uzbekistan is home to a substantial number of tour operators and travel agencies, currently totaling 1483 (Uzbektourism, 2022). Commencing in 2016, Uzbekistan initiated a comprehensive reform of its tourism industry, recognizing tourism development as a strategic priority for economic growth in various regions. This reform evidenced by a significant surge in foreign tourist arrivals between 2016 and 2019. To illustrate, foreign tourist arrivals increased from 2 million in 2016 to an impressive 6.7 million in 2019. Uzbekistan's tourism sector's rapid development earned it a place among the top five nations globally, with the most dynamically evolving tourism industry, as acknowledged by The Guardian (2019) as one of the world's premier tourist destinations. Furthermore, 2018 witnessed a remarkable 98% increase in foreign tourist arrivals compared to 2017, accompanied by a 131% growth in the number of companies and organizations engaged in tourism activities. This growth was characterized by varied patterns in tourist arrivals from diverse regions. For instance, tourists from Central Asian countries registered an average annual growth rate of 22-25%, while tourists from non-CIS countries experienced a substantial 50% annual growth rate.

Tourism professionals employed by travel companies across Uzbekistan are presented with increased opportunities to engage with the English language due to the influx of foreign

visitors. However, while these professionals receive training in English communication based on curricula developed by experts in the field, a formal needs analysis has not been conducted to discern the specific English language requirements tailored to the context of tourism employees. These professionals often encounter communication challenges when interacting with foreign travelers, which can hinder the delivery of efficient services. Addressing this issue necessitates an examination of the specific linguistic needs within the tourism context. Notably, various scholars in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have underscored the importance of adapting language teaching methods and content to the distinct needs of learners in specific professional domains (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Consequently, while some training courses are available for tourism staff and students to develop English proficiency within the tourism context, the lack of a systematic needs analysis represents a critical gap.

Moreover, existing curricula may not adequately align with the actual needs of tourism employees. Therefore, conducting a formal needs analysis specific to English language requirements in the tourism sector across Uzbekistan is imperative. Notably, previous research in this domain primarily focuses on examining language issues faced by employees and students in tourism businesses and universities in countries such as Iran (Masoumpanah, 2013), Malaysia (Kholidi, 2022), Indonesia (Suprina & Rahayu 2016), Vietnam (Trang, 2015) and Thailand (Aunruen, 2005 ; Prachanant, 2012). However, few qualitative studies have been conducted on this topic in Uzbekistan. Moreover, studies addressing English language needs in Uzbekistan's tourism sector remain scarce, particularly for tourism employees. Recognizing this research gap, compounded by the fact that English has become the predominant language in the daily operations of travel companies, this study is driven by the purpose of conducting a comprehensive review of the English language needs within Uzbek travel agencies. This research aims to establish a baseline for garnering diverse insights, including content development, design, and program implementation for English language programs tailored to the tourism sector.

This study focuses on discerning the specific English language needs and challenges encountered by tourism professionals working within international travel agencies and companies in Uzbekistan. The research outcomes are expected to serve as valuable guidelines for the development of English language programs aimed at enhancing the capabilities of tourism staffs. The findings may be instrumental for policymakers, planning authorities, and relevant organizations in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the English language requirements for tourism employees embarking on careers in international tour companies in Uzbekistan. Additionally, the study results may offer valuable insights to English language learners and educators within the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), assisting in developing educational materials customized to the specific requirements of travel agents in this particular setting.

This study is conducted to provide an understanding of the needs, responsibilities, and problems of using English in tourism employees working in tour and tourism companies in Uzbekistan. Therefore, in this study the research questions are these follows:

1. What are the English language needs for employees working in tourism companies?
2. What difficulties do tourism employees face in using English in their job?

## **Literature Review**

### **Need Analysis of English Language Use**

The role of needs analysis in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been a cornerstone for practitioners such as researchers, course designers, material developers, testers, evaluators, and classroom teachers. Mackay and Mountford (1978) categorized needs into academic and job needs. Academic needs involve English proficiency required for further academic study, while job needs pertain to the English skills needed for specific job roles, such as technicians requiring English for project work. Graves (1996) expanded on this by stating that needs analysis involves identifying what learners can do and understanding what they need to learn or improve upon. In essence, needs analysis aims to collect and interpret information about learners' needs. Therefore, Crystal (1997) underscored the pivotal role of English as an auxiliary language in facilitating transportation and accommodation services, business meetings, academic conferences, international conventions, and other official gatherings in the tourism industry. However, Piyanapa (2004) introduced a different perspective, focusing on learners' needs at the conclusion of a language course, termed Target Situation Analysis (TSA). This framework emphasizes communication purposes, settings, means, language skills, functions, and structures. Piyanapa (2004) also emphasized that needs analysis is crucial for establishing how a course should be structured and what it should cover. The term "needs" itself has been defined in various ways, contributing to a nuanced understanding of learners' requirements.

Analyzing needs is essential when designing and implementing language programs, and it forms an integral part of planning language learning curricula, as Brown (1995) and Richards (2001) emphasized. As per the insights shared by Richards (2001), a demand for the English language exists among individuals employed in the fields of tourism, business, and civil service. English has gained popularity and significance, particularly among the workforce in the tourism sector. The presence of staff members capable of speaking English has become a necessity within Uzbekistan's hospitality industry. The proficiency in English language skills is widely acknowledged as a crucial requirement for those engaged in the domains of tourism and hospitality.

In the present study, language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) based on job needs are investigated, encompassing functions and challenges in using these skills. Language proficiency, particularly in English, is vital in the tourism industry, especially for employees working with foreign companies and clients in Uzbekistan, where English serves as a mode of international communication. A study on the role of language in the Management of Tourism Organization, conducted by Thitthongkam and Walsh (2010), identified several dimensions of language in tourism. These include enhancing customer satisfaction, promoting the language proficiency of tourism professionals, inspiring and persuading international tourists, increasing demand, fostering a better understanding of culture, and facilitating effective internal and external communication. These dimensions emphasize the multi-faced role of language in the tourism industry.

### **English Education in Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan English language is not a public or common spoken language. However, it has been thought for few decades. The inclusion of English language education as part of formal education was initiated by the Soviet administration in 1932. Following the issuance of a

special government decree, the acquisition of a foreign language became an obligatory component of the curriculum for all citizens who have completed elementary schooling.(Ornstein, 1958). The incorporation of foreign language studies into formal education led to the establishment of a specific curriculum within schools, spanning from Grade Five to Grade Ten. The Grammar Translation (GT) Method served as the predominant teaching methodology in the field of Soviet TEFL (Bartley, 1971). The allocation of hours for English language instruction within the EFL curriculum of the Soviet Union exhibited variability from year to year.

In Soviet times English was simply taught as one of many foreign languages. However, the country's independence marked a significant turning point, opening doors for a new approach to English education. While English is yet to reach the same status as Russian, the current outlook on English language education hints at its potential to outshine other foreign languages in the future. The early 2000s witnessed a transformative phase in the teaching of foreign languages in Uzbekistan. This period saw a collective effort from all stakeholders, including educators, students, and educational institutions like schools, colleges, lyceums, and universities, to adopt new methodologies for teaching and acquiring proficiency in foreign languages. (Jalolov, 2015). In a bid to enhance higher education, Uzbekistan has implemented significant reforms, incorporating the utilising of CEFR and National Qualifications Framework (NRK) in the country. Both projects took part in the implementation of Presidential Decree No 1875 of December, in 2012, significant advancements were made in the realm of enhancing the pedagogy and acquisition of foreign languages. These developments were aimed at fortifying the communication proficiencies and global influence of prospective experts from Uzbekistan across various disciplines.

Since English has become a major international language, the government of Uzbekistan has been actively promoting the teaching of English as a crucial part of the curriculum in public schools. Beginning in 2013, English education has been made a mandatory subject for first-graders in primary school. However, not all primary schools across the country have strictly followed such mandates. The implementation of English language exposure in primary schools and the broader transformation of English education across the nation has been executed through a top-down approach. The language planning policy in the Uzbekistan education system has traditionally adhered to a hierarchical approach, frequently entailing decisions made by the government and the governmental education agency. The lack of transparency has frequently been subject to criticism by both external observers and internal stakeholders. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in different primary and secondary schools across the country have often lacked awareness of the intricacies of language-planning policy. Despite the high demand for English for Tourism, there remains a shortage of textbooks tailored to the specific needs of tourism industry personnel in Uzbekistan, with most existing resources designed for general English usage.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the needs and challenges that Uzbekistan travel agents have when utilizing English in the workplace. Additionally, predicted data that highlight certain linguistic abilities and capabilities are helpful to travel agents. This study uses a qualitative approach and tools to analyze the needs of travel agents in Uzbekistan's urban centers. The study's primary methodology involved conducting a semi-structured interview survey to investigate English usage in order to assess and characterize the current requirements for English usage among Uzbek travel agents. To find primary data for this

study, interview survey questions were used. They are employed to evaluate travel agents' English language proficiency in Uzbekistan.

### **Instrument**

There are multiple phases involved in creating interview survey questions. First, including the interview survey and the questions used in the earlier studies. A number of research articles belong to the requirements analysis in ESP and English language were studied. Next, the frameworks of sample questions are examined. Furthermore, the course syllabus and texts regarding English for tourism are examined in order to provide proper data for the interview questions. Subsequently, the questions are produced considering the study's objectives, the information obtained, and other criteria for creating interview survey questions. The supervisor professor then reviews the questions to ensure they are valid in substance. Before the questions are given to the interviewers, the other researcher's inputs and criticisms are considered for revision. At first, the survey content was made in English with the interview questions. The interview questions are then given to the participants in Uzbek language to aid in understanding. The survey's results are then manually examined using the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) techniques.

The research instrument was a set of semi structured interview survey which was used to gather data concerning the needs, functions and problems of English use in tourism industry. The obtained data was analyzed using the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA). The content of the survey is about the difficulty of language use. The interview survey items were the followings:

- Time and period of work as a tour agent
- First language
- Situation of English learning (how much you are studying)
- When to start studying professional English
- English proficiency certificate
- Current work content and use of English
- English usage problems
- Problem-solving situations
- English education advices for new staff
- Hope for the future

### **Participants**

The study involved four individuals employed in the tourism sector, specifically working for international tour companies situated in prominent tourist destinations within urban centers of Uzbekistan. These tourist attractions are situated in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. The participant group consisted of three males and one female, spanning ages from their 20s to their 60s. These individuals possess extensive experience in the hospitality industry as tour agents, having worked in the field for several years.

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Sex	Male	Male	Male	Female
Age	30's	20's	60's	30's
Educational background	Univesity degree	Univesity degree	Univesity degree	Univesity degree
Province	Samarkand	Bukhara	Samarkand	Tashkent
Data	Sept, 2022	Oct, 2022	Dec, 2022	Dec, 2022
Type	Online	Online	Online	Online

Table 1. Demographics of Participants of the Interview

## Results

Based on interview survey results, 89 subcategories, and 22 categories were identified. Five core-categories were extracted: past and current experience, actual needs for English, realization of problems of English use, problem-solving situations in English use, future hopes for English use.

Core-categories	Categories	Sub-categories
Past and current experience	[Continuation of work at a travel agency for years]	«Continuation of employment at a travel agency for years with Uzbek as the first language» «Work experience at a travel agency online.»
	[Started to learn professional English at University]	«Begin professional English study at university» «Learning English in high school and private language schools» «Started studying specialized English in a specialized field at university» «Willingness to learn English and continuation»
Actual needs for English	[Motivation and continuation of learning English]	«High motivation to learn English even while using Japanese or Russian in working environment» «Efforts to remember English» «Planning IELTS test next summer» «Willingness of learning English due to high English usage rate for tourists» «High rate of English usage during work»
	[Awareness of the importance of English proficiency certificates]	«Lack of recognition of the importance of English proficiency certificates» «Certificate of English proficiency required in recent years» «The importance of English proficiency certificates» «The language certificate requirement in conferences abroad» «Language certificate to improve skills and credibility as a tour agent»
	[Increasing the English usage due to business expansion]	«Increase the number of opportunities for services in English due to business relations» «Increase the number of requests from Russia and European countries» «Experience of using English in neighbour countries» «Use English when communicating with foreign companies»
	[Frequency of the English usage in communication and work processes]	«High rate of speaking English daily with tourists» «High rate of English usage among tourists» «Use English when communicating with foreign companies through formal emails» «Using English almost everyday» «Using English during writing emails sometimes» «Using english during tours or spins with tourists» «Experience of using English in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan»

	[Understanding customer desire]	«Importance of all skills to understand customer's desire» «Problem solving by improving English ability»
	[Importance of improving writing skills]	«High importance of writing and speaking skills for tour agents» «Trying to write a small book in English» «Currently trying to develop writing skill more» «High motivation and importance of improve writing skill»
	[Importance of listening and speaking ability is high in travel companies]	«Another important skill is listening» «High importance of writing and speaking skills for tour agents»
Realization of problems of English use	[Problems in understanding slang (listening problem)]	«Difficulty in understanding English speaker's slangs and accent» «Excessive use of slang by native speakers» «Lack of opportunities to understand slang at university education» «Difficulty in understanding English in work with tourists who use slang»
	[Accent and Pronunciation Problems (Speaking problems)]	«Challenges of understanding various accents and dialects of English-speaking tourists» «Difficulty in understanding English words in fast speaking» «Realizing lack of speaking practices» «Recognition of burden for native speakers without using jargon and slang» «Understanding various type of English accents» «Indian or Russian peoples English is sometimes hard to understand» «Explaining complex itineraries can be challenging» «Facing difficulties while negotiating prices »
	[Disadvantages of not being good at speaking and listening skills]	«Explaining complex itineraries can be challenging» «Facing difficulties while negotiating prices »
	Grammatical and vocabulary problems	«Struggling to find right words to express complex ideas and concepts» «Difficulty in understanding some English words» «Grammatical problems when writing emails» «Sometimes do not understand the English words» «Not understanding words because of not using them» «Lack of understanding business words in meetings. » «Lack of vocabulary to express complex ideas»
	Realizing importance of English in emails	«Grammatical problems when writing emails in English» «Using English during writing emails sometimes» «Lack of communication problems in English while writing e-mail» «Use English when communicating with foreign companies through formal emails» «Understanding importance of English in emails»
Problem-solving situations in English use	[Watching movies in informal English]	«Improve listening skills by using YouTube videos» «Improve listening ability by watching movies and listening to podcasts» «Using European or non-native countries' movies» «Listening British Council podcasts to understand different accents»
	[Reading English books and textbooks]	«Past experience of using paper dictionaries » «Improve English by reading more English books » «Reading news in English to improve english language ability»
	[Asking help from others]	«Asking help from experienced staffs» «Asking tourists to explain the words» «Tourists explain the meaning of the word more simply» «Asking help from guide interpreters during group tours» «Satisfaction from working the company due to helpful staffs»



	[Problem solving by another explanation]	«High willingness to develop all English skills» «Attending English courses to improve English ability» «Improve speaking by talking with native speakers»
	[Using technologies to improve English ability]	«Using electronic dictionaries» «Using internet to correct writing and grammar mistakes easily» «Using dictionary and apps to translate the contexts» «Using online resources for solutions»
Future hopes for English use	[Hope to start an own business ]	«Importance of English and negotiating skills to do business with foreign companies» «writingg a book about tourism potential of Uzbekistan »
	[Hope to acquire a master's degree in tourism]	«Hoping to obtain a master's degree in tourism» «Using English to continue education in future» «Hoping to retake another IELTS exam»
	[Career opportunity with strong English ability]	«actively engage to learn English regularly» «enrolling English languages courses» «Practicing speaking and listening by communicating with native speakers» «Big advantages to improve English skills in workplace» «English skill is important for new employees»

Table 2. Core-Category Breakdown

In the case of the core category of (1) “past and current experience”, participants reported a range of experiences with English, beginning with formal education in university at [started to learn professional English at university] and extending into their professional careers at [continuation of work at a travel agency for years]. The participants have been working in travel agencies for several years, with English usage becoming increasingly significant due to online work environments and international client interactions.

To the core category (2) “actual needs for English”, English was identified as crucial for professional growth and effective communication in the workplace, according to the category [frequency of English usage in communication and work processes]. The participants showed a strong desire to enhance their English language skills (writing and listening): [motivation and continuation of learning English], [importance of improving writing skills], [importance of listening and speaking ability is high in travel companies], recognizing the importance of proficiency certificates at [awareness of the importance of English proficiency certificates], such as IELTS test. [Increasing the English usage due to business expansion] and [understanding customer desire] were highlighted as key drivers for increased English usage.

The analysis also revealed nuanced challenges in another core category, (3) “the realization of problems of English use”, which participants faced in using English, notably in understanding slang, accents, and achieving clear pronunciation in categories [problems in understanding slang (listening problem)] and [accent and pronunciation problems (speaking problems)]. Participants frequently encountered difficulties in both understanding varied English accents spoken by Indian and Russian and slang of native speakers of English such as «understanding various types of English accents» , «(Indian or Russian peoples English is sometimes hard to understand)» .

However, to overcome challenges and language barriers revealed by analyzing the data, participants employed various strategies in the core category of (4) “problem-solving situations in English use”. These strategies included engaging with English media in the category of [watching movies in informal English] (YouTube videos and podcasts), [asking

for help from others] such as experienced coworkers, and [using technologies to improve English ability] like language learning apps and online dictionaries. These approaches facilitated informal learning and improvement in language proficiency.

As a (5) “future hope for English use”, survey participants expressed aspirations to [Career opportunity with strong English ability] for career advancement. Their future goals also included [hope to start their own business] and [hope to acquire a master's degree in tourism], which led to starting their businesses, pursuing a master’s degree in tourism, and enhancing professional opportunities through improved English proficiency.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study's findings illuminate the intricate relationship between English language proficiency and professional development in the travel industry. The participants' strategies for overcoming language barriers, such as engaging with English media and using technology, align with the notion of autonomous learning and the use of authentic materials in language acquisition. The findings highlight the pivotal role of English in professional settings, particularly in tourism where cross-cultural communication is frequent. The need for continuous language development, as evidenced by the participants' ongoing efforts to improve their English skills, underscores the dynamic nature of linguistic competence in professional contexts.

The exploration of experiences, needs, challenges, strategies, and aspirations related to English language use among travel industry professionals has provided valuable insights into the integral role of language proficiency in professional development and success. As said above, many previous researches in this domain primarily have focused on examining language issues faced by employees and students in tourism businesses and universities in countries across the globe. However, few qualitative studies have been conducted on this topic. Even though various data collection and analysis methods were utilized, the results closely matched those of another study.

For example, Aunruen (2005) conducted a needs analysis of English for travel agents in Chiang Mai. The results indicated that the agents primarily needed English language skills for client communication. Speaking was identified as the most essential skill for their daily tasks, followed by listening, writing, and reading. Grammar and pronunciation were considered to be of lesser importance. The agents encountered the most challenges with speaking, followed by grammar and listening, respectively. As a problem of English use, diverse accents and slangs were described. The new finding of this study is the specific language challenges identified included difficulties in writing emails in English. Understanding grammar is crucial to emailing international customers and clients in a foreign country.

Both studies, Aunruen’s (2005) and the present study, underscore the importance of English proficiency for travel agents, particularly in speaking and listening. They also highlight the challenges faced in these areas. However, the present study provides more detailed strategies for improvement, such as watching movies and Youtube videos in English, reading English books, listening to podcasts, using technology to improve English abilities and seeking help from other colleagues with high proficiency of English. This indicates a more holistic approach in the present study’s analysis, addressing language skills and practical methods for enhancement and improvement. In an increasingly interconnected world, the proficiency to communicate proficiently in English is not just a professional attribute, but a vital instrument

for cultivating comprehension and cooperation across diverse cultural contexts. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on language use in travel agents of Uzbekistan and highlights the need for targeted language enhancement and improvements for professionals in the travel industry.

In closing, this research not only sheds light on the current state of English language use in the travel industry but also paves the way for future inquiries into the evolving linguistic demands of Uzbekistan's educational institutions. The present study underscores the critical role of English proficiency in the tourism sector, advocating the importance of understanding World English and curriculum development to enhance the competencies of travel agents in developing countries.

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