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Navigating the Global Service Encounter: Pedagogical Implications of English as a Lingua Franca in Hospitality and Tourism Education: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Tourism presents a unique intercultural scenario, where English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) plays a critical role in temporary yet significant service interactions between guests and hosts from multiple language and cultural communities. English is widely estimated to serve as the medium for a majority of the world's English communication among non-native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2004), yet many hospitality and tourism (HT) training programs continue to focus on native-speaker frameworks that are not aligned with workplace realities. Adopting a narrative literature review approach, this paper synthesizes approximately 30 peer-reviewed sources, selected using the explicit inclusion criteria described in the Methodology, on conversation analytic and ethnographic studies from varying regions of the world to examine the pedagogical implications of integrating ELF into HT curricula. The study highlights “Doing Explicit” as a key feature of communication within ELF service encounters, where tourism employees and service users rely on pragmatic techniques such as repetition, verbal and non-verbal hints, and collaborative dialogue to achieve the goal of a successful service outcome. Linguistic landscape research further suggests that, within a tourism context, English is a sign of modernity and high-quality service, and that in many everyday transactional exchanges intelligibility is generally prioritized over strict grammatical accuracy, although accuracy remains essential in higher-stakes exchanges such as pricing, bookings, safety instructions, and complaint handling. The review identifies a persistent gap between HT workplace communication and curricula that still emphasize native-speaker norms over the pragmatic competence and tolerance of uncertainty that ELF interactions actually demand. This paper, therefore, urges the integration of ELF to accommodate intelligibility, active engagement, genuine multicultural materials, and meaningful learning. This change in focus in HT teaching will better equip future workers of the global hospitality industry.

Keywords: *English as a Lingua Franca; hospitality and tourism education; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); intercultural communication; service encounters*

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1. Introduction

Globalization and more international travel have changed how humans interact to provide public services. According to UN Tourism (2026), an estimated 1.52 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded worldwide in 2025, placing people from thousands of different cultures into sustained, close contact with one another. This promotes intense communication (Thurlow

& Jaworski, 2011). English, therefore, has become the lingua franca (Franceschi & Hartle, 2021).

The sociolinguistic situation of English today is what Gnutzmann (2000) calls “unstable equilibrium.” Traditionally, prescriptive norms were the domain of native speakers alone; nowadays, on average, there are no native speakers in approximately three fourths of all verbal English (Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004). It has become vital to reshape English from a tradition-bound, rigid, and homogenous system to a system that is more flexible, far-reaching, and highly influenced and defined by its non-native speakers (Crystal, 2003). In line with this, Cogo (2016) invents the notion of “Multilingua Franca” to explain the phenomenon of English among linguistically rich speakers as one of the resources used. The native/non-native distinction is used here as shorthand, following the terminology of the cited studies; ELF scholarship increasingly treats this binary as a simplification, since proficiency, repertoire, and communicative competence vary widely within both groups (Cogo, 2016).

The key to identifying the “moments of truth” described by Sparks and Weber (2008) occurs in the HT sector. It happens during the interaction between the guest and the service personnel to create and form a perception of service quality. Though these interactions are brief and transactional in nature, they are instrumental in creating service satisfaction and in forming a service image for the organization. The diverse nature of ELF communication creates a lot of uncertainty for the communicator. Participants communicate with different grades of proficiency and with different local accents, and therefore the primary focus must be on effective communication, rather than on proficient communication (Baker, 2015).

ELF dominates in business and even more so in the HT sector. Still, most HT training designs have not acknowledged this. Most HT training designs presume a native-speaker model, and therefore position non-native speakers as poor communicators, and not as competent participants of a global community (Seidlhofer, 2005). Such training designs are a blatant contradiction between theory and professional practice (Ghaffour, 2022) and, as a result, do not prepare students for the reality of communicating with international guests (Matsumoto, 2018). This concern is echoed by a recent systematic review of English for specific purposes in hospitality and tourism education, which similarly finds limited integration of authentic communicative variation into current curricula (Liu et al., 2022). The distinct contribution of the present review and other ESP-focused syntheses is to connect ELF interactional research and linguistic-landscape scholarship directly to concrete, assessable classroom design principles for HT English teaching, an integration that prior reviews have not attempted.

This paper attempts to bring together the existing scholarship on communicative practices for authentic ELF service encounters and translates findings for hospitality and tourism (HT) education. It advocates for a shift in thinking that moves away from unattainable goals of language proficiency and native speaker-like communicative competence and towards an ELF paradigm that encourages the capacity to communicate, to understand and create meaningful communication and discourse in the context of a multilingual community (Kurniawan et al., 2026). By bringing teaching and learning practices in line with the realities of the global service encounter, HT education can assist in the sustainable development of a thriving industry, and the practice of its new professionals.

Drawn on this aim, this review addresses the following questions:

What communicative strategies and features comprise ELF service encounters within the hospitality and tourism sectors?

Where are the mismatches between HT workplace communication and available English language curricula?

From ELF, what teaching and design principles are suggested for HT English language and assessment frameworks?

2. Methodology

This study uses a narrative literature review technique instead of a systematic review. This is due to the nature of the body of literature that contains ELF, conversation analysis, linguistic landscapes, and language pedagogy. The authors have used a range of techniques to review the literature, including a documented search string e.g. scoping the literature using the English as a Lingua Franca, hospitality, tourism, service encounters, linguistic landscapes, and ESP pedagogy keywords to search in Scopus, WEB of Science and Google Scholar – for example, (“English as a Lingua Franca” OR ELF) AND (hospitality OR tourism OR “service encounter*”) AND (pedagog* OR curricul* OR teaching) as well as targeted citation searches on key texts e.g. Seidlhofer (2004) and, Jenkins (2015). The major body of literature the authors attempt to review for the period of 2000-2026 is, as they have stated, published peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and monographs, and works published prior to 2000 that are seminal reference works that outline available core theoretical frameworks that have not become obsolete. The authors included literature that discusses ELF communication and service or tourism discourse and ESP/EFL teaching for hospitality and tourism and excluded literature that presented general ELF communication literature that had no service or tourism discourse and no teaching relevance.

Around 30 sources were found and organized into four groups: (a) interpretations of ELF, (b) characteristics of HT service encounters, (c) linguistic landscape research, and (d) teaching strategies that involve different forms of communication. This paper offers a more broad, general view of the literature on the subject. It does not argue that the literature on these topics is complete, nor does it claim to make suggestions about how effective a particular teaching approach is. It is a more effective way of communicating ideas that may drive future studies focused on teaching and research techniques.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Conceptualizing ELF in tourism contexts

According to David Crystal (2003), ELF is a language used to communicate when no mutual mother tongue exists. In the case of international tourism, Franceschi and Hartle (2021) state that ELF is the primary language facilitating communication where host and guest exchanges consist of multiple languages. Seidlhofer (2004) suggests that the current case requires a complete rethinking of English for professional training. This means that we need to

stop thinking of English as a structured, closed system used only by native speakers, and start thinking of it as an open system where English is negotiated and used by its speakers in each context. The HT sector has a lot of relevance to this line of thinking. Front line staff will likely encounter a variety—an English language continuum, as it were—marked by varying levels of proficiency, different communicative styles, and a great many different accents.

3.2. The nature of HT service encounters

Service encounters in the hospitality and tourism industry are where institutional service delivery meets the experience of the customer. According to Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), these encounters are transactional processes with preset rules governing the nature of the interaction. Blue and Harun (2003) note how these interactions are often short and tend to be rather focused. What has been researched in places like Thailand, Vietnam, and in the UK shows that hospitality staff use a type of language that is formal, scripted, and impersonal. Nevertheless, Thongphut and Kaur (2023) show that diverse ELF encounters disrupt formulaic interaction because of the degree of uncertainty in the communication which requires participants to be more detailed and explicit than they would typically be in linguistically unified situations.

3.3. Linguistic landscapes and the commodification of English

English's role in tourism goes beyond facilitating verbal interactions and encompasses the linguistic landscape (LL), the visible text in public domains, such as signage, billboards, and shopfronts. Studies of sites like Petra in Jordan (Alomoush, 2015) and S'Arenal in Mallorca (Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2009) depict a scenario where English occupies a privileged space in the multilingual tourism communication framework. Mutohhari et al, (2021) note that this phenomenon is primarily an economic concern, where English is utilized as a marker of modernity, status, and assurance of service quality to foreign tourists. According to Shohamy and Waksman (2009), even though there are numerous spelling and structural mistakes in the tourist landscape, the intended message can still be grasped. This shows that there is a high level of operational value in the tourist context. This has direct implications on the understanding and evaluation of accuracy in the framework of HT education.

3.4. Communicative strategies in ELF service encounters

Research into ELF interactions in HT contexts has revealed that ELF speakers utilize a range of strategies that help them to achieve mutual understanding. Kaur (2012) describes one of these strategies as “Doing Explicit,” in which speakers repeat important information several times to ensure that it is understood correctly. Thongphut and Kaur (2023) elaborate on this idea and show that many speakers prefer to clarify things and provide extremely explicit information, often using definitions, examples, or descriptions to unpack and explain a word or phrase that is potentially confusing or problematic. Kaur (2011b) describes the strategies of reformulation and self-repair, in which speakers replace portions of their utterances or simplify their utterances, essentially, to reduce the cognitive burden of the task on the listener. This complements corpus-based evidence that textbook models of checking understanding differ markedly from the checking practices found in authentic non-native discourse (Cheng & Warren, 2007). Beyond strategies that are principally used by monolingual speakers, Jenkins

(2015) focuses on multilingual strategies that encompass the use of code-switching and translanguaging to bridge cultural gaps and express solidarity. Parise (2021) describes conversational duetting, in which partners in the conversation use dialogue that is cooperative and supportive to create meaning and ensure that communication is effective, even when this means using non-standard grammatical constructions. Overall, these investigations show that ELF speakers in HT contexts are primarily focused on pragmatic strategies and the ability to be flexible in their interactions, as opposed to the need to be linguistically accurate.

3.5. Synthesis: Linking ELF, service communication, and linguistic landscape

Taken together, these four strands of research are mutually reinforcing rather than independent. ELF theory (3.1) establishes English as a negotiated, context-dependent resource rather than a fixed native-speaker system; conversation-analytic studies of HT service encounters (3.2) show how this negotiation plays out moment-to-moment in transactional talk; and the pragmatic strategies identified in ELF interaction research (3.4) – repetition, self-repair, code-switching, conversational duetting – are the concrete linguistic means by which that negotiation is accomplished. Linguistic landscape research (3.3) extends this picture beyond spoken interaction to the visual and symbolic environment in which service encounters are embedded: signage and shopfront English signal to both hosts and guests that English is the expected medium of exchange, priming expectations of intelligibility over correctness before any conversation begins. This connection matters for curriculum design because it implies that HT English training cannot be limited to spoken transactional scripts; it must also build learners' awareness of, and ability to produce and interpret, the English used in tourism's visual and textual environment (menus, signage, promotional material), since this shapes the communicative expectations learners will need to manage. Read together, these strands support a view of intercultural communicative competence in HT contexts as encompassing not only spoken accommodation strategies but also literacy in the broader linguistic landscape of the industry (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009).

4. Results: Evidence synthesis

The literature synthesized yields three main findings, presented here separately from the pedagogical recommendations developed in the following section.

First, in response to RQ¹ (the communicative features of ELF service encounters), the most consistently supported finding across independent contexts is the centrality of explicitness and repair as coping strategies. These strategies include “Doing Explicit” (Kaur, 2012), self-repair and reformulation (Kaur, 2011), and elaboration through definitions and examples (Thongphut & Kaur, 2023). Each of these has been documented across separate studies, and this pattern is further corroborated by corpus-based evidence that authentic checking-understanding practices diverge from textbook models (Cheng & Warren, 2007). This convergence across independent sources gives the explicitness/repair finding comparatively strong evidential support. This convergence across independent sources gives the explicitness/repair finding comparatively strong evidential support.

Second, in response to RQ¹ and RQ³, evidence that English functions as a marker of modernity and service quality in the tourism linguistic landscape recurs across at least three independent single-site studies (Alomoush, 2015, on Jordan; Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2009, on Mallorca; Lu & Xu, 2021, on China). This cross-site recurrence strengthens confidence in the general pattern, although each individual study remains geographically bounded and the underlying mechanism, symbolic commodification of English, is inferred rather than directly measured through visitor or business-owner data in every case.

Third, in response to RQ² (the gap between HT curricula and workplace communication), the evidence is comparatively thinner. More specifically, the claim that HT training designs presume a native-speaker model rests mainly on conceptual and position papers (e.g. Ghaffour, 2022; Matsumoto, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2005) rather than on systematic curriculum audits, and the one systematic review located supports the general direction of this claim without quantifying its extent. This finding should therefore be read as a well-argued but not yet empirically quantified gap and is treated with corresponding caution in the recommendations that follow.

5. Discussion: Pedagogical implications

5.1. Reorienting toward intelligibility and explicit communication

The major consequence of ELF research for HT education is that the objective of language learning must shift from native dialect accuracy to the ability to communicate in a language. Deterding (2013) states that frontline employees experience many communication challenges due to the variations in guests' accents and levels of English proficiency. This suggests that rigidly scripted communication is often insufficient on its own, particularly given the unpredictable, improvisational demands of many service encounters. Students must therefore be trained to recognize that there may be communication challenges and be proactive when there may be a communication breakdown. This requires them to learn ways to communicate the same transactional content (e.g., room numbers, price, and/or location) in different ways. Students must also learn to explain words that may not be clear and/or possibly give them in a roundabout way. Examples of this practice include calling a private transfer one in which the guest does not join with another guest and giving the term “gym” as a “fitness room.” When these strategies are used in the curriculum, they demonstrate that achieving the goal of communication in ELF contexts relies heavily on the ability to flexibly use communication strategies to prevent communication breakdowns rather than eliminating the use of communication strategies that are not commonplace. At the same time, intelligibility should not be treated as categorically more important than accuracy in every context. In exchanges involving prices, timings, bookings, safety instructions, legal information, or complaint handling, precise and accurate language remains essential, and classroom emphasis on intelligibility needs to be balanced against these higher-stakes communicative demands.

5.2. Developing accommodation and collaborative skills

The ability to alter one's communication when utilizing ELF is crucial, says Pietikäinen (2016). In native-non-native English speaker communication, the principle of least collaborative effort is dominant. In contrast, communication via ELF requires the principle of

increased collaborative effort. This difference is significant for HT education. For instance, students must learn supportive listening and backchanneling (to signify understanding), when to employ a face-saving strategy to signal a lack of understanding, and when to simplify word choice and sentence length to accommodate the listener. While Parise (2021) focuses on the importance of actively negotiating meaning as conversational dueting, he is suggesting that the communication burden not rest on just one of the participants. Teaching commitment strategies demonstrate the flexibility that authentic service encounters will require from the learner.

5.3. Incorporating authentic and multilingual materials

Current HT curricula are still suffering the most from the use of “cleaned” (often sanitized) and native-speaker-oriented materials, which fail to demonstrate the real variability in English. Syllabus designers should be including real ELF service encounters in the forms of authentic audio and video materials to showcase the variety of accents, communicative styles, and levels of English that students will be confronted with in their future employment. Jenkins (2015) is in support of the use of multilingual materials. She shows that the use of code-switching and translanguaging can create local authenticity and improve interconnectivity in the services provided for the guests and the hosts. Lastly, exposure to non-standard forms – such as the omission of the third-person singular verb morpheme (e.g., “she work” instead of “she works”) – helps students recognize these as documented, systematic features of ELF usage rather than as errors, provided such exposure is grounded in the empirical literature on ELF grammar (e.g., Cogo, 2016).

5.4. Experiential learning and assessment reform

Constructivism relies upon learning that builds knowledge from experiences or activities as opposed to learning that consists of pre-formed knowledge that is simply told to students (Kolb, 1984). Service encounters that simulate information gap tasks focus on practicing the “Doing Explicit” technique using simplified language to convey transactional information that can be clarified or reformulated. They are then required to undertake these tasks within realistic scenarios. Digital tele-collaboration tools provide authentic, web-based interactive opportunities to communicate with people from different cultures and different languages. Along with fieldwork in local tourist areas including visitor centers and museums, tele-collaboration provides firsthand experience of multilingual communication. Assessment practices also require reform. According to Morbiducci (2017), the clearest measure of the acceptability of a form of language is through its clarity of meaning and contextual relevance rather than its adherence to a native-speaker form. Students’ language capability, or their capacity to obtain meaning and achieve goals in real transactional contexts, should be prioritized. Finally, Hadj (2019) advocates a holistic approach to teaching.

5.5. An integrated pedagogical framework

The following framework translates the pedagogical implications above into a more concrete and systematic set of teaching priorities, linking each learning outcome to a corresponding content focus, material type, classroom activity, and assessment criterion.

Learning outcome	Content focus	Materials	Sample classroom activity	Assessment criterion
Communicate intelligibly despite variable proficiency and accents.	Paraphrasing and repetition Self-repair	Authentic ELF audio and video recordings	Role-play resolving a booking mix-up at check-in with a guest whose accent the student must accommodate	The student is able to achieve the communicative goal, and their message is understood by the listener.
Adapt the message and collaborate to achieve mutual understanding.	Backchanneling and face-saving strategies	Real service encounter transcripts	Misunderstanding-repair exercise: students analyze a transcript and identify a misunderstanding. Students will then demonstrate a misunderstanding repair using one or a combination of the following: repetition, reformulation, or self-repair.	The student appropriately uses accommodation strategies and demonstrates a shared responsibility for meaning.
Use and interpret authentic multilingual input, including the linguistic landscape.	Code-switching and translanguaging	Tourism signage photos and multilingual video clips	An information-gathering exercise in which two students simulate having different first languages and exchange booking and pricing information.	The student completes the information gathering and recognizes non-standard forms as systematic rather than erroneous.

Balance intelligibility with accuracy.	Higher-stakes transactional language (prices, safety, complaints)	Complaint-handling records	Simulation of a complaint requiring precise and unambiguous language.	A task-completion rubric that assesses students on intelligibility, accommodation, and contextual accuracy as opposed to grammatical accuracy.
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This framework is intended as a starting point for curriculum design rather than a validated instrument because its practical effectiveness has not yet been tested empirically and would benefit from piloting in an HT English classroom.

5.6. Risks, transferability, and assessing intelligibility and accommodation

Three caveats qualify the recommendations above. First, there is a risk of over-normalizing non-standard forms. While features such as third-person morpheme omission are documented as systematic in ELF usage (Cogo, 2016), some HT roles such as drafting written contracts, safety notices, or legal disclaimers still require a more standard register, and curricula should teach students to recognize which register a given task calls for rather than presenting all non-standard forms as equally appropriate everywhere. Second, transferability across contexts is limited. Third, intelligibility and accommodation need observable, not impressionistic, assessment criteria. That is building on the task-completion rubric introduced in the Section 5.5, intelligibility can be operationalized as successful completion of the communicative task by an independent listener (e.g., correct booking, correct room number relayed), and accommodation can be operationalized as the countable use of specific strategies during a task (e.g., at least one instance each of repetition, reformulation, or comprehension-check), so that raters are scoring observable behaviors rather than a subjective overall impression.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed how English as a Lingua Franca shapes communication in global hospitality and tourism service encounters and has drawn out implications for restructuring HT English language education accordingly. The combination of existing studies shows that during ELF service encounter, communication is achieved through the pragmatic techniques of repetition, paraphrasing, self-repair, and co-construction. These techniques prioritize successful mutual understanding over strict grammatical correctness, without treating grammatical error as a failure to be eliminated at all costs. The analysis of linguistic landscape research shows that English is a resource that is used in the service of tourists, and a gap in the reality of the workplace and a curriculum that is built on the native speaker model is a barrier to the HT

graduates' work readiness. As Section 4 makes clear, this gap claim is currently better supported by argument than by direct curriculum audit. The paper has therefore proposed, as a conditional recommendation rather than a demonstrated intervention, a means of addressing the gap through a language pedagogy that focuses on English as a Lingua Franca, built on the pillars of intelligibility, accommodation, authentic multilingual resources, and active, constructive teaching, learning, and assessment.

HT education may be able to reposition trainees: rather than treating them as perpetual learners measured against an idealized native-speaker standard, an ELF-informed curriculum could help prepare them as competent users of English as a transnational communicative resource (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2017). With that said, it would be interesting to further examine the long-term impacts of implementing an ELF-informed curriculum on the professional success of graduates, as well as consider the role of emerging technologies that support authentic interaction across cultures within the training (Parise, 2025). Hence, balancing teaching practices and the multilingual component of international tourism becomes a priority for the continued success of the global service sector (Seidlhofer, 2004).

This review is subject to the limitations inherent in its narrative design: it does not follow a systematic search protocol, and its conclusions are interpretive rather than derived from original empirical data collected for this study. The pedagogical framework proposed in Section 5.5 has not yet been empirically tested in an HT classroom, and its impact on learners' communicative outcomes remains to be evaluated in future research, ideally through classroom-based intervention studies that compare ELF-informed and traditional native-speaker-oriented instruction.

A concrete empirical research agenda follows from these limitations. Future studies could (a) conduct a systematic curriculum audit of HT English programs to quantify, rather than argue for, the native-speaker orientation identified in Section 4; (b) pilot the Section 5.5 framework in at least two HT programs in different national contexts, using the observable indicators proposed in 5.6 (task-completion rates, countable use of accommodation strategies) as pre/post outcome measures; and (c) track graduates' self-reported and employer-rated communicative performance in service roles over time to assess whether gains observed in the classroom transfer to the workplace. Reporting effect sizes and context (region, program type, sample size) in any such studies would allow future reviews to update the evidence map with intervention, and not only descriptive, data.

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Author Contributions

Vo Thi Anh Dao, Nguyen Thi Kim Ba, Huynh Nguyen Thu, Nguyen Thi Boi Ngoc, Vu Thi Tinh, and Nguyen Ngoc Hoang jointly contributed to conceptualization, literature search, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

This study is a narrative literature review based on previously published, publicly available sources.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable, as this study did not involve human participants.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. All sources synthesized are publicly available, peer-reviewed publications listed in the References section.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

AI was used to support literature organization and language editing during manuscript preparation and revision.

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