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Exploring the Impact of English Language Proficiency on Service Quality Perceptions in Saudi Arabian Tourism

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ABSTRACT: Saudi Arabia's expanding tourism economy places frontline communication at the centre of the visitor experience. In many encounters between international tourists and Saudi service employees, English functions as a practical lingua franca, yet the relationship between employees' English proficiency and tourists' judgements of service quality remains conceptually underdeveloped. This article develops an integrative framework explaining how English proficiency may shape perceived reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and overall service quality across hotels, attractions, transport services, restaurants, tour operations, and digital support channels. It argues that proficiency should not be treated as a single test score or as native-like accuracy. In tourism work, its value lies in intelligibility, listening, interaction management, pragmatic appropriateness, occupational vocabulary, and the capacity to repair misunderstandings. Drawing on service-quality theory, English for tourism research, intercultural communication, and studies of trust and behavioural intentions, the article proposes that communication clarity, interactional confidence, personalised understanding, and service-recovery effectiveness mediate the relationship between employee proficiency and tourists' quality perceptions. The strength of these pathways is expected to vary according to encounter complexity, tourist linguistic distance, time pressure, service failure severity, and the availability of multilingual digital support. The article also proposes a future mixed-method research design suitable for the Saudi context and identifies implications for recruitment, training, assessment, service design, and destination management. The central claim is that English proficiency contributes to service quality only when it is converted into accurate, considerate, and context-sensitive action. Language development should therefore be integrated with operational competence and intercultural judgement rather than treated as an isolated educational objective.

1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia's tourism transformation has widened the range of situations in which visitors and service employees must communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Religious travel remains important, but the tourism landscape also encompasses heritage destinations, urban entertainment, festivals, nature-based travel, business events, hotels, restaurants, transport, retail, and digitally mediated visitor services. The economic significance of this development has been discussed in relation to national diversification and the broad objectives associated with Vision 2030 (Ali & Salameh, 2021). As the sector becomes more internationally oriented, the quality of a visitor's experience depends not only on infrastructure and attractions

but also on thousands of small encounters: asking for directions, checking into a hotel, clarifying a dietary request, reporting a problem, understanding a safety instruction, or seeking an explanation at a heritage site.

These moments are easy to underestimate because language is often treated as a background capability. Service-quality research tends to emphasise reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible conditions, while language education research focuses on proficiency, needs analysis, and curriculum design. In practice, the two domains meet in the same interaction. A receptionist may know the booking system perfectly but fail to explain a deposit clearly. A guide may possess extensive historical knowledge but present it in a way that visitors cannot follow. A transport employee may be willing to help but unable to understand the traveller's problem. In each case, operational competence exists, yet its value is partly hidden because communication does not allow the tourist to recognise it.

Saudi-focused studies have begun to establish the linguistic demands of tourism work. Research with tourism students and employees indicates the importance of speaking, listening, vocabulary, instructions, explanations, and the ability to provide information about attractions (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Al-Malki, 2023; Aldosari et al., 2025). Work on syllabus design for Saudi tour guides likewise shows that generic English courses are unlikely to address the communicative tasks that occur in guiding practice (Mohammed & Sanosi, 2024). These studies provide an essential needs-based foundation. They do not, however, fully explain how proficiency becomes a customer evaluation. Knowing that English is needed is different from specifying why a particular level or type of competence changes a tourist's judgement of service quality.

The distinction matters because tourists do not normally observe employees' proficiency directly. They infer it from the encounter. An employee may have strong grammatical knowledge but hesitate during a complaint. Another may make minor grammatical errors while listening carefully, paraphrasing the problem, checking understanding, and resolving it efficiently. The second employee may be judged more competent because the communicative outcome is clearer and more reassuring. English proficiency is therefore not simply an individual possession. In service settings, it is a performed and relational resource whose value emerges through interaction.

This article develops a conceptual explanation of that process. It brings together four bodies of scholarship that are often discussed separately: service-quality theory, tourism and hospitality communication, communicative and intercultural competence, and relationship-based accounts of trust and loyalty. The resulting framework treats employee English proficiency as an antecedent whose effects are transmitted through four mechanisms: communication clarity, interactional confidence, personalised understanding, and service-recovery effectiveness. These mechanisms shape tourists' perceptions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, which in turn influence overall quality, satisfaction, trust, and behavioural intentions.

The argument is deliberately conditional rather than celebratory. English proficiency cannot compensate for inaccurate information, weak procedures, poor facilities, discrimination, delayed service, or a lack of professional knowledge. Nor should English be treated as the only language relevant to Saudi tourism. Arabic remains central, while the linguistic diversity of visitors may require multilingual staffing, translation, interpretation, signage, and digital tools. English is important because it frequently functions as a shared language, not because all tourists use it equally well or because native-speaker norms provide the appropriate standard. English as a lingua franca research suggests that successful communication often depends on accommodation, negotiation, and repair rather than formal perfection (Jenkins et al., 2011).

The article makes three contributions. First, it refines the meaning of English proficiency for tourism service work by separating linguistic knowledge from interactional performance. Second, it shows how language can enter established service-quality dimensions without being reduced to a single communication item. Third, it offers propositions and an empirical research design that can be tested across Saudi tourism settings. The broader aim is to move discussion from the general claim that "English is important" to a more useful question: under what conditions, through which mechanisms, and for which dimensions of service quality does English proficiency matter?

2. ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AS A SERVICE RESOURCE

Communicative competence has long been understood as more than grammatical accuracy. Canale and Swain (1980) distinguished grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions, making clear that speakers must know not only how language is formed but also how it is used appropriately and how communication can be sustained when difficulties arise. This broader view is especially relevant to tourism because service encounters are purposeful, time-bound, and consequential. The customer is not asking for a display of linguistic knowledge. The customer is trying to complete a journey, obtain assistance, understand a rule, make a choice, or solve a problem.

For tourism work, English proficiency can be organised into six connected capacities. The first is intelligibility: speech must be sufficiently clear for an interlocutor to follow without excessive effort. The second is receptive accuracy, including the ability to understand different accents, speeds, vocabulary choices, and indirect requests. The third is occupational language, such as terminology related to bookings, rooms, transport, food, safety, attractions, schedules, payments, and complaints. The fourth is interaction management: opening an encounter, taking turns, asking focused questions, summarising, signalling next steps, and closing appropriately. The fifth is pragmatic competence, which allows employees to soften refusals, express empathy, make suggestions, and explain restrictions without sounding dismissive. The sixth is repair competence: noticing misunderstanding, rephrasing, checking comprehension, and using alternative resources.

Hospitality communication has distinctive linguistic routines because the employee must combine efficiency with welcome, authority with tact, and standardisation with personal attention. Blue and Harun (2003) describe hospitality language as a professional skill rather than ordinary conversation. This point prevents a common error in training: assuming that general conversational fluency will automatically transfer to service work. A person may speak English comfortably in social settings but struggle to explain cancellation terms or manage an upset guest. Conversely, an employee with modest general fluency may perform effectively within a well-practised occupational repertoire.

English proficiency should also be separated from accent conformity. In international tourism, many encounters occur between people for whom English is not a first language. A native-like accent is neither necessary nor sufficient for high-quality communication. Intelligibility, accommodation, and the willingness to reformulate are more relevant. Treating accent as a proxy for competence can also introduce unfairness into recruitment and evaluation. A more defensible standard asks whether the employee can complete representative service tasks accurately, respectfully, and efficiently with interlocutors from varied linguistic backgrounds.

Finally, proficiency is partly enabled by the service system. Scripts, glossaries, clear policies, translated menus, visual aids, digital booking records, and escalation procedures can strengthen an employee's communicative performance. Poorly designed systems can undermine even a proficient speaker by withholding information or forcing improvised explanations of ambiguous rules. English proficiency is therefore best treated as a human capability embedded in organisational processes. Its impact depends on whether employees have the authority, information, time, and tools needed to turn language into action.

3. SERVICE QUALITY AS A PERCEPTUAL JUDGEMENT

Service quality is not identical to technical correctness. Gronroos (1984) distinguished what customers receive from how the service is delivered, while later models emphasised performance, interaction, environment, and outcome quality (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Brady & Cronin, 2001). This distinction is important in tourism because visitors often lack the information needed to evaluate technical processes directly. They may not know whether a booking system is optimally designed or whether a maintenance procedure follows industry standards. They judge quality through observable cues: whether the employee appears knowledgeable, responds promptly, explains clearly, listens, keeps promises, and handles uncertainty professionally.

The familiar dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy remain useful if they are interpreted carefully. Reliability concerns accurate and consistent fulfilment of promises. Responsiveness concerns willingness and speed in providing assistance. Assurance concerns competence, credibility, safety, and confidence. Empathy concerns individual attention and understanding. Tangibles concern facilities, equipment, appearance, and other physical evidence. Reviews of SERVQUAL and related models show both their influence and their limitations across contexts (Carrillat et al., 2007; Ladhari, 2009). The dimensions should not be assumed to operate identically in every tourism setting, yet they provide a productive language for explaining how communication affects perception.

English proficiency can influence reliability because many service failures begin as information failures. Dates, names, room types, meeting points, payment conditions, dietary needs, and transport instructions must be understood and recorded accurately. Mishearing a request or using ambiguous language may produce an operational error that the tourist experiences as unreliability. Conversely, confirming details, summarising agreements, and explaining contingencies can make service appear dependable even when the underlying process is complex.

Responsiveness is also partly communicative. A quick answer is not responsive if it does not address the actual need. Employees must diagnose the request before offering a solution, and diagnosis depends heavily on listening and focused questioning. In time-sensitive environments, language difficulty can lengthen queues, increase transfers between employees, and create the

impression of avoidance. However, a brief delay may be accepted when the employee explains what is happening, gives a realistic time estimate, and maintains contact. Communication shapes not only actual speed but perceived attentiveness.

Assurance is perhaps the dimension most visibly connected to language. Clear explanations, confident but not exaggerated claims, appropriate terminology, and transparent acknowledgement of uncertainty can signal competence. Yet fluency can also create false assurance if the information is wrong. The most trustworthy performance combines linguistic control with epistemic discipline: employees should know what they know, state what they need to verify, and avoid improvising facts. In this sense, proficiency supports assurance when it helps employees present knowledge responsibly.

Empathy requires more than polite phrases. It involves recognising the customer's perspective and adapting the response. Language allows an employee to identify whether a traveller is confused, anxious, hurried, embarrassed, or angry; to acknowledge that state; and to propose a response that fits the person's circumstances. Standardised courtesy can support consistency, but empathy becomes credible when the employee demonstrates that the specific concern has been understood. Pragmatic competence and active listening are therefore central to the perception of personalised service.

4. THE SAUDI TOURISM CONTEXT

The Saudi context makes the language-quality relationship especially important because the visitor economy combines rapid institutional growth, diverse tourism forms, and a multilingual workforce and customer base. Service encounters may involve Saudi employees, expatriate employees, domestic visitors, Arabic-speaking international visitors, and tourists using English as a shared second language. Linguistic competence is therefore distributed unevenly on both sides of the interaction. A service-quality model that assumes a fluent English-speaking tourist and an employee being judged against native norms would misrepresent many actual encounters.

Saudi research also suggests that tourism education and workplace demands are not always perfectly aligned. Needs analyses emphasise listening and speaking, the interpretation of instructions, and the provision of destination information (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Aldosari et al., 2025). These findings imply that assessment should use realistic tasks rather than rely mainly on decontextualised grammar. They also point to the need for role-specific profiles. The English required by a museum interpreter differs from that required by a hotel housekeeper, airport information officer, restaurant server, adventure guide, event volunteer, or digital customer-support agent.

Service quality in Saudi hotels has been identified as an area requiring context-sensitive study rather than the uncritical transfer of models from other markets (Alsharari, 2020). The same caution applies across the wider tourism system. Expectations may vary according to destination type, price level, travel purpose, religious or cultural needs, prior experience, and the degree of visitor dependence on staff. A traveller at a familiar international hotel may have different linguistic expectations from a visitor in a remote heritage location. The consequences of misunderstanding are also unequal: confusion about a museum schedule is inconvenient, while confusion about safety, medication, transport departure, or emergency procedures may be serious.

The country's tourism development should therefore be understood as a service ecosystem rather than a collection of independent businesses. A visitor's judgement of the destination may be shaped by linked encounters with websites, visa or booking interfaces, airports, taxis, hotels, restaurants, attractions, guides, retail staff, and complaint channels. Language inconsistency across these touchpoints can weaken confidence even when individual providers perform adequately. English capability has organisational and destination-level implications because visitors often attribute local failures to the place as a whole.

5. AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

The proposed framework begins with employee English proficiency as a multidimensional capability and ends with perceived service quality, satisfaction, trust, and behavioural intentions. It does not assume a simple direct effect. Instead, four mediating mechanisms explain how proficiency becomes visible to tourists: communication clarity, interactional confidence, personalised understanding, and service-recovery effectiveness. Each mechanism connects language performance to one or more service-quality dimensions.

Communication clarity refers to the extent to which information is accurate, intelligible, complete, and easy to act upon. It includes understanding the request, selecting relevant information, organising explanations, confirming critical details, and avoiding unnecessary ambiguity. Clear communication reduces the cognitive effort required from tourists and lowers the

likelihood of operational mistakes. It is therefore expected to connect proficiency most strongly with reliability and responsiveness.

Proposition 1: Employee English proficiency is positively associated with tourists' perceptions of communication clarity.

Proposition 2: Communication clarity mediates the relationship between English proficiency and perceived reliability and responsiveness.

Interactional confidence is the tourist's sense that the employee can manage the encounter competently. It is not mere speed or verbal dominance. It is produced through attentive listening, orderly turn management, appropriate terminology, transparent explanations, and calm handling of questions. Research on service quality shows that confidence and assurance influence subsequent value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Cronin et al., 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Language contributes to assurance by making expertise and control perceptible.

Proposition 3: English proficiency enhances perceived assurance through interactional confidence, provided that the information supplied is accurate and operationally grounded.

Personalised understanding concerns whether tourists believe that employees have grasped their specific needs rather than placing them into a generic category. This mechanism relies on receptive proficiency, pragmatic sensitivity, and the ability to ask clarifying questions without making the customer feel blamed. It is especially important for dietary requirements, accessibility needs, family arrangements, religious sensitivities, medical concerns, or unfamiliar travel practices. Intercultural competence supports this process by encouraging openness, perspective-taking, and adaptive behaviour (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Deardorff, 2006).

Proposition 4: The relationship between English proficiency and perceived empathy is mediated by personalised understanding.

Service recovery is a decisive test because a dissatisfied customer presents a more linguistically demanding interaction than a routine transaction. The employee must elicit an account, distinguish facts from emotion, acknowledge the inconvenience, explain available options, negotiate a remedy, and avoid promises that cannot be kept. A language barrier can magnify the original failure by making the tourist repeat the story, move between employees, or feel disbelieved. Effective recovery can have the opposite effect by demonstrating competence and fairness. Trust research indicates that clear and benevolent service behaviour supports both cognitive and affective trust (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002).

Proposition 5: English proficiency has a stronger positive effect on perceived service quality during non-routine and recovery encounters than during highly standardised transactions.

Proposition 6: Service-recovery effectiveness mediates the relationship between proficiency and post-failure trust and satisfaction.

The framework includes several moderators. Encounter complexity should strengthen the effect because complex requests require explanation, negotiation, and conditional information. Time pressure may intensify the cost of low proficiency, although well-designed scripts and visual aids can reduce that cost. Tourist linguistic distance matters because a shared second language may require more accommodation from both parties. Service failure severity is likely to raise the importance of empathy and precision. Finally, multilingual digital support may either compensate for limited spoken proficiency or create new problems when automated translations are inconsistent with employee explanations.

Proposition 7: The positive relationship between English proficiency and perceived service quality is stronger when encounters are complex, consequential, or time-sensitive.

Proposition 8: Organisational communication support - including visual aids, multilingual information, accessible policies, and escalation procedures - strengthens the conversion of employee proficiency into perceived service quality.

The final pathway connects perceived quality to broader outcomes. Service quality is consistently associated with value, satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioural intentions, although the strength and sequence of these relationships vary across contexts (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Caruana, 2002; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In tourism, trust is particularly relevant because visitors often make decisions under uncertainty and depend on employees for local knowledge. Language competence can reduce uncertainty,

but only when tourists perceive the communication as credible and benevolent. Smooth English that masks unclear policy may damage trust more deeply than openly acknowledged limitations.

Table 1. Proposed constructs and observable indicators

Construct	Indicative dimensions	Example observable indicators
English proficiency	Intelligibility, listening, occupational vocabulary, interaction management, pragmatic competence, repair	Understands varied requests; explains procedures; checks critical details; rephrases when needed
Communication clarity	Accuracy, completeness, structure, actionability	Tourist knows what will happen, when, where, and what is required
Interactional confidence	Calmness, orderly turn management, credible explanation	Employee answers within role, verifies uncertain facts, and explains next steps
Personalised understanding	Perspective-taking, clarification, accommodation	Response reflects the tourist's stated needs and constraints
Service-recovery effectiveness	Elicitation, acknowledgement, remedy explanation, follow-through	Complaint is understood, options are clear, and promises are realistic
Perceived service quality	Reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, relevant tangibles	Tourist judges the service as dependable, helpful, competent, and considerate
Relational outcomes	Satisfaction, trust, recommendation, revisit intention	Tourist feels confident in the provider and is willing to return or recommend

6. A RESEARCH DESIGN FOR EMPIRICAL TESTING

A robust empirical test should avoid measuring English proficiency only through employees' self-reports. Self-confidence may influence behaviour, but it is not equivalent to demonstrated ability. A stronger design would combine task-based employee assessment, observed or simulated service encounters, tourist evaluations, and organisational data. The study could sample hotels, attractions, transport services, restaurants, and tour operators in several Saudi destinations to capture variation in service type and visitor profile.

The proficiency assessment should be role specific. Employees might complete listening tasks using several international accents, respond to realistic requests, explain a policy, manage a complaint, and repair a misunderstanding. Trained raters could evaluate intelligibility, comprehension, task completion, pragmatic appropriateness, occupational language, and repair. The aim would not be to reward native-like speech. It would be to estimate whether employees can perform the communicative work their roles require. This approach would be consistent with Saudi needs-analysis research that prioritises speaking, listening, instructions, and destination information (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Mohammed & Sanosi, 2024).

Tourist data could be collected immediately after naturally occurring encounters or after carefully designed service simulations. Surveys should distinguish the quality of communication from the employee's accent and from the outcome of the request. Items could assess clarity, effort, confidence, empathy, reliability, recovery, overall quality, satisfaction, and trust. Tourist English proficiency, first language, prior visits to Saudi Arabia, travel purpose, and encounter importance should be measured

because they may shape evaluation. Multilevel modelling would be appropriate because tourists are nested within employees and organisations.

Qualitative data would add explanatory depth. Conversation-based observation, short tourist interviews, and employee recall interviews could identify where misunderstandings begin and how they are repaired. Researchers should pay attention to pauses, repetitions, confirmation checks, code-switching, digital translation, gestures, written information, and transfers to colleagues. The purpose would not be to catalogue errors mechanically but to understand the interactional consequences of particular choices. A minor grammatical error may have no effect, whereas a failure to clarify a date may produce a major service problem.

An experimental component could strengthen causal inference. Participants might view or experience matched service scenarios in which employee language performance varies in clarity, empathy, or repair while the operational outcome remains constant. Another condition could hold language constant while changing the outcome, allowing researchers to separate communicative from technical quality. Ethical design would require avoiding caricatured accents or deficit representations of employees. The most informative manipulation would vary functional performance rather than nationality-coded speech.

Measurement development should proceed in stages rather than combining every construct in one large questionnaire. Cognitive interviews with tourists can test whether terms such as clarity, confidence, empathy, and fluency are understood as intended. A pilot study can then examine factor structure, convergent validity, and the degree to which respondents distinguish language performance from general friendliness. Multi-group analysis should test measurement invariance across Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking tourists, first-time and repeat visitors, and tourists with different levels of English. Without such checks, apparent group differences may reflect different interpretations of the scale rather than genuine differences in perceived quality.

The model also requires temporal discipline. Immediate post-encounter ratings capture vivid interactional impressions, but they may not predict the evaluation formed after the tourist discovers whether a promise was fulfilled. A two-wave design could collect encounter-level perceptions first and follow-up judgements after the relevant outcome, such as room readiness, transport arrival, complaint resolution, or refund completion. This would help distinguish confidence created by fluent speech from confidence justified by reliable performance. The distinction is central to the argument that language should reveal and support competence rather than substitute for it.

Sampling should include less visible roles as well as customer-facing positions with obvious language demands. Housekeeping, security, maintenance, drivers, event stewards, and attraction assistants may become critical communicators when routines break down. Researchers should also record when employees transfer a tourist to a colleague, use a translation application, draw a map, point to written information, or call a supervisor. These are not signs of failure in themselves. They may be intelligent repair strategies. An ecologically valid study should evaluate whether the strategy resolves the problem with dignity and accuracy, not whether the employee completes every encounter unaided.

Ethical safeguards are especially important when employees are assessed in workplaces. Participation should not be presented as a covert performance appraisal, and individual scores should not be given to managers unless employees have explicitly consented to that use. Audio or video recording requires clear permission from staff and tourists, careful anonymisation, and secure handling. Results should be reported in ways that identify system-level training needs without stigmatising particular nationalities, accents, or occupational groups.

7. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The framework extends service-quality theory by showing that language is not merely an additional dimension placed beside reliability or empathy. It is one of the means through which several dimensions become observable. Reliability is communicated through confirmation and accurate explanation; responsiveness through diagnosis and updates; assurance through credible knowledge; and empathy through listening and adaptation. This view helps explain why two encounters with the same technical outcome may receive different evaluations.

It also refines language-proficiency research. Standardised proficiency levels are useful for broad comparison, but tourism organisations need performance evidence tied to actual roles. Training should begin with communication mapping: identify the encounters that matter, the language functions they require, the risks created by misunderstanding, and the resources employees can use. A front-office programme might prioritise bookings, payments, complaints, and local recommendations; a guiding

programme might emphasise narration, audience engagement, question handling, safety briefings, and culturally sensitive explanation.

Recruitment and appraisal should use realistic demonstrations rather than informal impressions based on accent or conversational ease. Assessment panels can ask candidates to handle representative scenarios and score them against transparent criteria. Existing employees can receive developmental profiles that distinguish listening, explanation, interaction management, and repair. Such profiles are more actionable than a single label such as "intermediate English." They also reduce the risk of mistaking confidence for accuracy or accent familiarity for competence.

Managers should not place the entire burden on individual employees. Service systems can be redesigned to make multilingual communication easier. Policies should be written in plain language; critical information should be available visually and in major visitor languages; digital records should allow employees to confirm what the customer selected; escalation routes should be clear; and staff should know when to seek interpretation or supervisory support. The goal is not to eliminate human interaction but to give it reliable informational support.

Service-recovery training deserves particular attention. Employees need language for acknowledging inconvenience without prematurely accepting disputed liability, asking for a concise account, explaining constraints, offering alternatives, and confirming follow-up. Role plays should include emotional and ambiguous cases rather than only polite routine requests. Supervisors should evaluate whether employees can remain respectful when communication becomes difficult, because tourists may interpret visible frustration as hostility or indifference.

At destination level, English quality should be monitored across the visitor journey. A tourism authority or destination management organisation could develop communication audits covering websites, signs, booking messages, transport information, attraction interpretation, complaint channels, and emergency guidance. Recurrent points of confusion should be treated as design failures rather than evidence that individual tourists "did not understand." Feedback data can then inform both language training and process improvement.

The framework also supports a multilingual rather than English-only policy. English may offer broad reach, but different destinations and visitor segments require different language combinations. Arabic-English bilingual resources can be supplemented by targeted languages, pictograms, accessible formats, and human interpretation. The strategic question is not whether every employee should master many languages. It is how the service system can guarantee intelligible and respectful assistance when no fully shared language is available.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article offers a conceptual model rather than evidence that a particular level of English produces a fixed increase in service-quality ratings. Relationships may differ across tourism subsectors, visitor groups, price categories, and encounter types. Proficiency may also correlate with education, experience, confidence, or job role, making causal interpretation difficult. Future research should therefore use multiple measures, longitudinal designs, and experimental or quasi-experimental comparisons where feasible.

The framework concentrates on tourists' perceptions, but employee experience also matters. Constant interaction in a second language can create cognitive load, anxiety, and emotional labour. Organisations that demand fluent performance without adequate training or staffing may reduce employee well-being and ultimately weaken service. Research should examine reciprocal accommodation: tourists as well as employees contribute to mutual understanding. It should also investigate when digital translation supports inclusion and when it introduces privacy, accuracy, or trust concerns.

Further studies should compare individual and system-level interventions. One organisation might invest mainly in intensive employee language courses, while another combines shorter role-based training with redesigned forms, clearer policies, visual instructions, and access to multilingual support. Comparing these approaches would show whether service quality improves most through higher proficiency, better communicative infrastructure, or their interaction. Longitudinal research is also needed because training gains may fade when employees have few opportunities to use English, while repeated workplace use may strengthen strategic competence even without formal instruction. Finally, studies should include tourists who have limited English themselves. Their experiences can reveal whether employees communicate inclusively or unconsciously reward visitors whose speech is closer to familiar prestige varieties.

9. CONCLUSION

English proficiency can influence service quality in Saudi Arabian tourism, but the relationship is neither automatic nor adequately represented by a single language score. Proficiency matters when it enables employees to understand requests, explain procedures, manage interaction, adapt to individual needs, and repair misunderstanding. Through these mechanisms, language helps tourists recognise reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

The practical implication is clear: language development should be linked to service design and occupational performance. Saudi tourism organisations will gain more from task-based training, realistic assessment, multilingual support, and careful recovery procedures than from an abstract pursuit of native-like fluency. The relevant standard is successful, accurate, and respectful communication. When language is treated as part of the service system rather than a decorative skill, it can strengthen trust in individual providers and in the destination as a whole. The most persuasive evidence of progress will not be a higher average test score on its own, but fewer avoidable misunderstandings, clearer explanations, more effective recovery, and visitors who feel that their needs were understood without employees being pushed toward unrealistic or exclusionary standards of linguistic perfection.

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