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Intercultural Communication Competence and Service Quality in Saudi Heritage Tourism: The Role of English-Mediated Interpretation

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ABSTRACT: Heritage tourism depends on interpretation. Visitors do not encounter archaeological sites, historic districts, museums, landscapes, crafts, and oral traditions as self-explanatory objects; they understand them through narratives, questions, signs, guides, and conversations with local hosts. In Saudi Arabia, English increasingly mediates these encounters for international visitors. This article examines how English proficiency and intercultural communication competence jointly shape perceptions of service quality in heritage tourism. It argues that linguistic fluency alone is insufficient. High-quality interpretation requires historical and cultural knowledge, intelligibility, audience awareness, pragmatic sensitivity, dialogic skill, and ethical judgement about what may be simplified, translated, contested, or left uncertain. The article proposes a framework in which English-mediated interpretation affects service quality through four mechanisms: interpretive clarity, dialogic engagement, cultural respect, and perceived authenticity. Intercultural competence moderates each pathway by helping guides and site staff recognise visitor assumptions without reducing Saudi heritage to familiar stereotypes. The framework distinguishes object-related authenticity from the authenticity of the visitor's experience and cautions that polished English can still produce shallow, commercialised, or inaccurate narratives. Eight research propositions and a mixed-method design are developed for future testing across museums, archaeological sites, historic districts, and guided cultural experiences. Practical implications are offered for guide education, site interpretation, assessment, multilingual resources, and community participation. The central conclusion is that English contributes to heritage-service quality when it enables visitors to understand more deeply while preserving the complexity, dignity, and local ownership of the heritage being interpreted.

1. INTRODUCTION

A heritage site is never only a physical place. Its meaning is assembled through stories about origin, use, continuity, loss, belief, labour, memory, and identity. Visitors may see walls, objects, inscriptions, landscapes, or performances, but interpretation helps them understand why these things matter and whose history they represent. For international tourists in Saudi Arabia, English often becomes the medium through which this interpretive work occurs. The quality of English communication can therefore influence not only whether visitors obtain practical information but also whether they perceive the heritage experience as coherent, respectful, credible, and worth remembering.

Saudi Arabia's tourism development has brought greater attention to cultural and heritage destinations alongside religious, leisure, nature, business, and event tourism. This diversification supports broader economic and social objectives, while also

increasing the responsibility placed on museums, historic districts, archaeological sites, cultural festivals, and local guides (Ali & Salameh, 2021; Alsalum et al., 2024). As visitor numbers and origins diversify, interpretation must address audiences who arrive with different historical knowledge, religious frames, expectations of hospitality, and assumptions about the Kingdom.

English proficiency is frequently presented as the obvious solution to this challenge. Saudi needs-analysis studies confirm that tour guides and tourism workers require speaking, listening, vocabulary, explanation, and the ability to present information about attractions (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Aldosari et al., 2025; Mohammed & Sanosi, 2024). These findings are important, but proficiency does not by itself guarantee meaningful interpretation. A guide can speak fluently and still overwhelm visitors with dates, repeat promotional slogans, avoid difficult questions, or translate local concepts into misleading equivalents. Another guide may use less elaborate English but create a thoughtful encounter by organising the story clearly, checking understanding, inviting questions, and acknowledging uncertainty.

Heritage interpretation is thus a special form of service communication. It involves information delivery, but also selection and framing. Guides decide where a story begins, which people appear as historical actors, how change is explained, and whether conflict or ambiguity is visible. The service-quality consequences are not limited to accuracy in a narrow sense. Visitors judge whether the interpretation is engaging, trustworthy, inclusive, responsive, and connected to the place. They may also judge whether the guide appears to respect the culture being represented and the people listening.

Intercultural communication competence is central because interpretation occurs between perspectives rather than from a neutral position. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) identify empathy, experience, motivation, listening, and other relational capacities as important components of intercultural competence, while Deardorff (2006) emphasises attitudes, knowledge, skills, and the capacity for appropriate and effective behaviour. In heritage tourism, these capacities help interpreters recognise that familiar words may carry unfamiliar assumptions. Terms associated with tribe, nation, modernity, tradition, pilgrimage, gender, family, or sacred space cannot always be transferred without explanation.

The article develops an integrative framework joining communicative competence, intercultural competence, tour-guide performance, heritage experience, authenticity, and service-quality research. It proposes that English-mediated interpretation influences perceived service quality through four mechanisms: interpretive clarity, dialogic engagement, cultural respect, and perceived authenticity. English proficiency provides linguistic resources; intercultural competence governs how those resources are used. Historical knowledge and community legitimacy remain necessary foundations.

The argument is also critical. English can widen access, but it can privilege an external gaze if local meanings are reshaped solely to meet presumed international expectations. Simplification may be necessary, yet oversimplification can turn living heritage into a set of marketable images. The objective should not be to make every aspect of Saudi culture immediately familiar. Good interpretation can leave space for difference, complexity, and questions that do not have a single answer.

The article contributes in three ways. First, it treats language as part of heritage meaning-making rather than as a generic employability skill. Second, it explains why intercultural competence is not an optional addition to English proficiency but a condition of its responsible use. Third, it offers a research design and practical framework for evaluating interpretation through visitor understanding, dialogue, authenticity, and community accountability rather than fluency alone.

2. HERITAGE INTERPRETATION AS A SERVICE ENCOUNTER

Tour guiding is a professional practice that combines knowledge, communication, group management, emotional labour, safety, logistics, and representation. Research on guiding has long identified questions of professionalism, performance, and visitor satisfaction (Ap & Wong, 2001; Zhang & Chow, 2004; Huang et al., 2010). In heritage settings, the guide is often the most visible interpreter of the site. Even when visitors use an audio guide or application, staff members answer questions, resolve confusion, and help connect the formal narrative to the immediate environment.

The service encounter differs from a conventional retail transaction. The visitor is not merely obtaining a product; the visitor is participating in an interpretive event. Quality depends partly on whether the guide helps the group notice, connect, imagine, question, and reflect. A technically accurate lecture may still be a poor service if it ignores the physical site, the audience's pace, or their questions. Conversely, an entertaining performance may be judged weak if it distorts evidence or trivialises cultural meaning.

Heritage interpretation has at least five functions. It orients visitors practically, explains objects and places, connects particular details to larger histories, mediates cultural difference, and supports an emotional or reflective relationship with the site. These

functions overlap. A route instruction can become interpretive when it explains why access is restricted; a story can become practical when it helps visitors understand a ritual, custom, or spatial rule. English proficiency supports each function differently.

Interpretation is also selective. No tour can include everything, and no translation carries every association. Selection becomes an ethical issue when it consistently removes local voices, labour, contested history, minority experience, or uncertainty. Service quality should therefore not be assessed only through visitor pleasure. A visitor may enjoy a simplified story that the local community considers inaccurate. Sustainable quality requires attention to both audience experience and representational responsibility.

Guides operate within institutional narratives. Museums, heritage authorities, tour companies, and destination marketers may provide scripts, themes, approved terminology, or restricted topics. These resources can support consistency and accuracy, but rigid scripts may prevent dialogue and make the encounter feel impersonal. The guide's task is to work within legitimate boundaries while adapting explanation to the group. English proficiency makes adaptation possible; intercultural judgement determines whether it is appropriate.

Group diversity further complicates the encounter. A single English-language tour may include native and non-native English users, adults and children, specialists and first-time visitors, people with different religious backgrounds, and visitors whose interests range from architecture to family life. The guide must monitor comprehension without embarrassing individuals and manage questions without allowing one participant to dominate. These interactional skills are central to service quality but are poorly captured by tests that measure only grammar or vocabulary.

3. ENGLISH PROFICIENCY BEYOND FLUENCY

Communicative competence includes linguistic knowledge, sociolinguistic appropriateness, strategic skill, and the ability to maintain communication when difficulties arise (Canale & Swain, 1980). For heritage interpreters, this competence can be specified through six dimensions: intelligibility, listening, narrative organisation, explanatory vocabulary, interaction management, and repair. Each contributes to understanding, but none replaces subject knowledge.

Intelligibility concerns whether visitors can follow the guide without excessive effort. It does not require a native-like accent. In international tourism, English frequently operates as a lingua franca among people with different first languages. Successful speakers adjust speed, phrase length, emphasis, and word choice in response to the audience (Jenkins et al., 2011). A guide who monitors comprehension and reformulates is often more effective than one who delivers a polished monologue at a fixed pace.

Listening is equally important because interpretation is dialogic. Visitors ask incomplete, indirect, or culturally framed questions. A question that appears factual may contain a concern about religion, politics, gender, authenticity, or modern change. The guide must identify what is being asked before responding. Active listening also helps distinguish curiosity from confrontation and genuine misunderstanding from a request for confirmation.

Narrative organisation enables the guide to transform specialist knowledge into a sequence that visitors can follow. Heritage sites contain many possible stories, but a tour needs orientation, transitions, emphasis, and closure. Visitors should understand where they are in time and space, how one detail connects to another, and why the story matters. Organisation is not simplification in the sense of removing complexity; it is the provision of a structure within which complexity can be understood.

Explanatory vocabulary includes terminology for architecture, archaeology, religion, material culture, ecology, craft, governance, trade, and social life. Yet specialist vocabulary should be used selectively and explained. Translation sometimes requires retaining a local term, offering a concise gloss, and showing why no single English word is exact. This approach respects linguistic difference and prevents false equivalence. A guide's willingness to explain an untranslatable term may increase rather than reduce visitor engagement.

Interaction management includes opening the tour, establishing expectations, inviting questions, allocating turns, responding to disagreement, and adjusting to fatigue or time. Repair includes repetition, paraphrase, examples, gesture, visual reference, writing, and checking comprehension. These strategies should be treated as professional competence. Communication breakdown is not unusual in multilingual groups; quality depends on how it is managed.

Saudi research on tourism English supports a task-based orientation. Speaking and listening, giving directions, introducing attractions, and responding to visitor needs emerge as priorities (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Aldosari et al., 2025). For heritage work, these tasks should be expanded to include story construction, comparison without stereotyping, explanation of culturally

specific concepts, handling sensitive questions, and acknowledging evidence limits. The relevant question is not whether the guide can speak English generally, but whether English can carry the interpretive responsibilities of the role.

4. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence begins with an attitude toward difference. Curiosity, openness, and respect make it possible to listen before classifying the visitor. Without these attitudes, linguistic skill may simply make stereotypes more fluent. Deardorff's (2006) model emphasises that knowledge and skills should lead to internal shifts in perspective and externally appropriate behaviour. In heritage tourism, this means that guides need knowledge of both local heritage and the varied frames visitors may bring.

Perspective-taking does not require agreement with every visitor assumption. It allows the guide to recognise why a question has arisen and to respond in a way that informs rather than humiliates. A visitor may use an outdated term, make a broad generalisation, or compare Saudi history with a different context. The guide can correct the assumption while preserving the possibility of dialogue. A defensive response may close the encounter; an over-accommodating response may leave misinformation unchallenged.

Cultural self-awareness is equally important. Guides interpret from within institutional and personal positions. They may take familiar practices for granted or assume that a local category has an obvious English equivalent. Training should help guides identify where explanation is needed and where their own perspective is one among several. Self-awareness also reduces the temptation to present culture as internally uniform.

Intercultural competence includes ethical comparison. Comparisons can make unfamiliar material accessible, but they can also distort. Saying that a local institution is "the Saudi version" of a Western form may create a quick bridge while erasing different histories and functions. A more careful comparison identifies a partial similarity and then explains the limits. This practice requires language for qualification: "It is similar in one respect, but it developed in a different context."

Sensitive topics require particular skill. Heritage may involve religion, conflict, political authority, gendered spaces, migration, slavery, colonial contact, tribal history, or contested ownership. Avoidance can make interpretation feel superficial, while careless treatment can cause harm. Guides need authorised, evidence-based ways to acknowledge complexity, indicate when scholarship differs, and refer questions beyond their role. Intercultural competence includes knowing when not to improvise.

Non-verbal and spatial behaviour also matters. Eye contact, interpersonal distance, group movement, photography, dress, and access rules may be interpreted differently by visitors. English explanations can prevent discomfort when rules are presented with a reason rather than as unexplained prohibition. The guide should not assume that visitors understand local expectations, but neither should visitors be addressed as inherently disrespectful. Clear orientation supports both hospitality and heritage protection.

Finally, intercultural competence is reciprocal. Visitors are not passive recipients, and guides are not solely responsible for eliminating every misunderstanding. High-quality interpretation creates conditions for mutual adjustment. It invites questions, establishes respectful norms, and gives the guide authority to correct inaccurate claims. The aim is an encounter in which difference becomes a source of learning rather than a problem to be hidden.

5. INTERPRETATION, SERVICE QUALITY, AND AUTHENTICITY

Service-quality models distinguish what is delivered from how it is delivered (Gronroos, 1984) and emphasise the interactional, environmental, and outcome components of evaluation (Brady & Cronin, 2001). In heritage tourism, the "outcome" is partly cognitive and experiential. Visitors may leave with greater understanding, a changed perception, an emotional connection, or a memorable question. These outcomes are difficult to measure, but they should not be reduced to entertainment or satisfaction alone.

The proposed framework identifies four mediators. Interpretive clarity concerns whether the visitor can follow the narrative, understand key concepts, and connect explanation to the site. Dialogic engagement concerns whether visitors can ask questions, contribute observations, and feel that the guide responds rather than recites. Cultural respect concerns whether the interpretation avoids stereotyping, acknowledges local dignity, and handles difference responsibly. Perceived authenticity concerns whether the experience feels connected to the place, evidence, community, and the guide's credible engagement.

Authenticity is contested in tourism scholarship. Wang (1999) distinguishes object-related approaches from existential authenticity, which concerns the visitor's experience of self and relationship. Kolar and Zabkar (2010) similarly show that authenticity can be modelled through both object-based and existential dimensions. For heritage interpretation, these distinctions are useful. A visitor may judge artefacts and narratives as historically credible while also experiencing an authentic sense of connection or discovery. English communication can support both, but it can also undermine them.

Interpretive clarity supports object-related credibility when claims are specific, evidence is identified, and uncertainty is acknowledged. Vague promotional language - "the oldest," "the first," "unchanged for centuries" - may sound impressive but weaken trust when unsupported. Guides should distinguish archaeological evidence, oral tradition, local memory, and contemporary interpretation. The ability to make these distinctions in accessible English is a mark of quality.

Dialogic engagement can support existential authenticity by allowing visitors to connect heritage with their own questions and experiences. The guide does not manufacture authenticity, but can create space for attention, reflection, and interpersonal exchange. A brief conversation with a craft practitioner or resident may be meaningful, provided it is not staged in a way that exploits community members. Dialogue should deepen the encounter rather than turn local life into performance for consumption.

Cultural respect affects both service quality and ethical legitimacy. Visitors may evaluate a tour positively because it is entertaining, yet the narrative may reproduce stereotypes or silence the people whose heritage is displayed. A responsible quality model must include community perspectives. Local experts, residents, craftspeople, and heritage custodians should participate in developing English narratives, terminology, and examples. Their involvement helps prevent translation from becoming appropriation.

Perceived authenticity is also shaped by the guide's performance. Visitors often respond to enthusiasm, confidence, and personal connection, but these cues can be misleading. A charismatic guide may present inaccurate stories convincingly. Assessment should therefore combine visitor perception with content review. Service quality in heritage tourism has a dual accountability: to the audience and to the heritage.

The physical environment remains important. Signs, lighting, access, conservation, crowding, and route design influence the experience and can support or obstruct interpretation. English should not be expected to compensate for missing labels, inaccessible routes, or poorly organised exhibitions. Instead, spoken and written interpretation should form a coherent system. Contradictions between guide narratives, labels, websites, and audio content reduce trust.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

The model begins with two related but distinct capabilities: English proficiency and intercultural communication competence. Historical knowledge and institutional or community legitimacy are treated as foundational conditions. English proficiency provides resources for intelligible explanation and interaction. Intercultural competence shapes adaptation, ethical comparison, and the handling of difference. Together they influence interpretive clarity, dialogic engagement, cultural respect, and perceived authenticity, which then shape service quality, satisfaction, memorability, recommendation, and revisit intention.

Proposition 1: Role-relevant English proficiency is positively associated with visitors' perceptions of interpretive clarity in Saudi heritage tourism.

The relationship should depend on functional performance rather than accent or grammatical perfection. Visitors need to follow the story, understand transitions, and identify the significance of what they are seeing. Minor errors are unlikely to matter when meaning remains clear; unstructured or unexplained information may matter even when grammar is accurate.

Proposition 2: Intercultural communication competence strengthens the positive relationship between English proficiency and interpretive clarity.

A guide may possess the language to explain a concept but fail to recognise the visitor's starting assumptions. Intercultural competence helps the guide choose examples, anticipate confusion, and qualify comparisons. It therefore improves the fit between explanation and audience.

Proposition 3: English proficiency influences perceived service quality indirectly through interpretive clarity and dialogic engagement.

This proposition moves beyond a simple direct effect. Visitors may not consciously rate the guide's proficiency, but they experience whether the tour is understandable and responsive. These immediate interactional outcomes inform broader judgements of competence, empathy, and value.

Proposition 4: Intercultural communication competence has a direct positive effect on perceived cultural respect and an indirect effect on service quality.

Respect becomes visible through naming, comparison, response to questions, acknowledgement of diversity, and the avoidance of ridicule or defensiveness. Visitors may not know every local detail, but they can recognise when a guide treats both heritage and audience with care.

Proposition 5: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between high-quality interpretation and visitor satisfaction, memorability, and recommendation.

Research on heritage experience links quality, value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010). The proposed model adds that visitors are more likely to value an interpretation that feels grounded in the place and credible rather than generic. Authenticity is not equated with a frozen past; contemporary change can be interpreted authentically when it is presented honestly.

Proposition 6: Historical knowledge accuracy and source transparency moderate the effect of English fluency on perceived authenticity.

Fluent speech can initially increase confidence, but unsupported claims may damage authenticity when visitors detect inconsistency. Guides who identify the basis of a claim - archaeological evidence, documented history, oral tradition, or local memory - allow visitors to understand the nature of the knowledge being presented.

Proposition 7: The positive effects of dialogic engagement are weaker when group size, time pressure, or rigid scripting prevents meaningful response to visitors.

A guide cannot sustain dialogue under all operational conditions. Large groups and compressed itineraries encourage one-way delivery. Site managers should therefore treat group size and schedule design as service-quality variables rather than expecting language skill alone to solve the problem.

Proposition 8: Community participation in English-language interpretation strengthens perceived cultural respect and reduces the risk of stereotyped or externally imposed narratives.

Community participation can include review of terminology, story selection, recorded voices, training contributions, and mechanisms for correcting interpretation. It should be substantive rather than symbolic. The proposition can be tested by comparing sites with different levels of local involvement.

Table 1. Dimensions of English-mediated heritage interpretation

Dimension	Core question	Indicative evidence
Interpretive clarity	Can visitors follow the story and connect it to the site?	Structured narrative, explained terms, signposting, comprehension checks
Dialogic engagement	Can visitors ask, contribute, and receive a responsive answer?	Open questions, adaptive pacing, turn management, relevant follow-up
Cultural respect	Does interpretation preserve dignity and complexity?	Careful naming, qualified comparison, avoidance of stereotypes, sensitive correction

Dimension	Core question	Indicative evidence
Source transparency	Is the basis and certainty of claims visible?	Distinction among evidence, oral tradition, local memory, and interpretation
Perceived authenticity	Does the experience feel grounded in place and community?	Connection to material setting, credible detail, local voice, honest treatment of change
Service quality	Is the interpretation competent, responsive, trustworthy, and valuable?	Visitor understanding, confidence, satisfaction, and willingness to recommend

7. PROPOSED RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed-method design is appropriate because the relevant outcomes include both measurable perceptions and context-dependent interpretation. The study could sample museums, archaeological sites, historic districts, cultural villages, and guided walking tours in several Saudi destinations. Sampling should include public and private providers, different price levels, and both fixed-site and mobile guiding.

The first phase would document the interpretive system. Researchers could collect English signs, brochures, website pages, audio scripts, guide manuals, and training materials. Interviews with guides, curators, historians, community representatives, and managers would identify the intended narratives, contested terms, visitor questions, and operational constraints. This phase would prevent the evaluation from treating the guide as the sole author of the interpretation.

The second phase would assess guide capability through realistic tasks. Guides might explain a culturally specific concept to a general audience, respond to a sensitive question, adapt a specialist explanation for children, and repair a misunderstanding. Separate raters would score English intelligibility, narrative organisation, explanatory vocabulary, listening, pragmatic appropriateness, interaction management, and repair. Heritage experts would evaluate content accuracy and source transparency. This dual review is necessary because linguistic quality and historical quality can diverge.

The third phase would collect visitor data immediately after the experience. Measures should cover interpretive clarity, engagement, cultural respect, authenticity, service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, memorability, and behavioural intentions. Visitors' English proficiency, prior knowledge, motivation, age group, cultural background, and previous experience of Saudi Arabia should be included as controls or moderators. Measurement invariance should be tested before comparing visitor groups.

Observation or recording would provide interactional evidence. Analysts could examine how guides introduce local terms, respond to questions, manage disagreement, and use objects or space in explanation. Particular attention should be given to moments of repair and to questions that are redirected or left unanswered. These moments may reveal more about intercultural competence than the prepared narrative.

A delayed follow-up could examine what visitors remember and how their destination image develops after the visit. Immediate satisfaction may reflect entertainment, while later recall may reveal whether key ideas were understood. Visitors could be asked to describe the site's significance in their own words. Researchers should not expect exact repetition; the concern is whether the interpretation supported a coherent and non-stereotyped understanding.

Community evaluation should be included as a parallel outcome. Local reviewers can assess whether the English interpretation represents important meanings responsibly and whether commercial adaptation has removed or distorted significant elements. Differences between visitor satisfaction and community evaluation should be reported rather than averaged away. Such disagreement is analytically valuable because it exposes competing definitions of quality.

Research ethics require consent for recording, protection of guide employment, and respectful handling of sensitive cultural material. Community knowledge should not be extracted without recognition or control. Sites may have legitimate restrictions on photography, publication, or the circulation of particular narratives. The research design must treat these restrictions as part of heritage governance rather than as obstacles to be bypassed.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR SAUDI HERITAGE TOURISM

Guide education should integrate English, content knowledge, and intercultural practice. Separate courses can create a false division in which language teachers lack access to current site knowledge and heritage specialists assume that explanation will take care of itself. Co-designed modules can use real objects, maps, routes, and visitor questions. Guides should practise several versions of the same explanation for different audiences while preserving factual integrity.

Assessment should include live interpretation rather than written language tests alone. Candidates can be asked to guide a short segment, answer an unexpected question, and explain an uncertain claim. Evaluators should use distinct criteria for content, language, interaction, ethics, and group management. Accent should not be scored except where intelligibility is genuinely affected. Feedback should identify specific developmental needs rather than assigning a broad label such as "weak English."

Sites should build multilingual interpretation as a layered system. A concise sign can orient visitors; a guide can add narrative and dialogue; a digital resource can provide depth; and a specialist reference can support those who want more detail. English should be edited for clarity and consistency, but local terms should be retained where they carry meaning that translation would flatten. Glossaries can help guides use these terms consistently without making every explanation sound scripted.

Community participation should be embedded in interpretation governance. Residents, craftspeople, historians, cultural practitioners, and other custodians can review English narratives and identify omissions or misleading comparisons. Participation also creates opportunities for recorded first-person accounts or co-guided experiences. Care is needed to ensure that local contributors are compensated and that their voices are not reduced to decorative authenticity.

Managers should protect time for dialogue. If every tour is scheduled so tightly that questions are treated as interruptions, the site cannot claim to offer interactive interpretation. Group size, route length, rest points, and noise levels influence communication. Operational design should reflect the interpretive objective. Smaller groups or designated question points may provide better quality than simply asking guides to speak louder or faster.

Sensitive-question protocols can help guides respond responsibly without silencing discussion. A protocol may identify verified information, preferred terminology, legitimate areas of scholarly disagreement, and routes for referral. It should not become a tool for mechanical avoidance. Guides need language for acknowledging complexity: "There are different interpretations of that issue; the evidence available here supports..." Such formulations protect credibility and encourage intellectual honesty.

Visitor feedback should move beyond generic satisfaction items. Useful questions ask what became clearer, which explanation remained confusing, whether visitors felt able to ask questions, and whether the interpretation changed their understanding. Open-ended responses can identify recurring stereotypes or terminology problems. Feedback should be reviewed with guides and heritage specialists together so that improvement does not become a narrow popularity contest.

English-mediated interpretation also influences destination image. A single guide may become the visitor's most sustained conversation with a representative of the country. The guide should not be burdened with speaking for all Saudi society, yet the encounter will often be generalised. Training should help guides state the scope of their claims and recognise internal diversity. Phrases such as "in this region," "during this period," or "among some communities" can prevent local information from becoming an inaccurate national generalisation.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The framework is conceptual and does not establish that one model fits every heritage setting. Museums, archaeological landscapes, religiously significant places, living heritage, craft demonstrations, and urban districts create different interpretive demands. Visitor expectations also vary. Some seek detailed history, others social interaction, photography, family learning, or leisure. Future research should compare these contexts rather than aggregate them too quickly.

Perceived authenticity is especially difficult to interpret. Visitors may judge a performance authentic because it matches prior images, even when those images are stereotyped. Community members may disagree about what constitutes responsible

representation. Studies should therefore avoid treating visitor authenticity ratings as final truth. Combining visitor, expert, and community perspectives provides a more ethically adequate picture.

Research should also examine power. English may expand international accessibility while privileging visitors who use it confidently. Guides may adapt narratives to tourists with greater social or economic power, while local-language visitors receive different attention. Comparative work can investigate whether English tours omit, add, or reframe content relative to Arabic tours and whether these differences are justified by audience needs or reflect unequal assumptions.

Digital interpretation creates another research direction. Audio guides, augmented content, automated translation, and mobile applications can increase access but reduce dialogue or introduce unreviewed errors. Studies should examine how visitors move between human and digital interpretation and whether the two sources reinforce or contradict one another. Technology should support, not displace, the relational and community dimensions of heritage.

10. CONCLUSION

English proficiency matters in Saudi heritage tourism because interpretation is part of the service itself. Visitors rely on language to understand what they see, connect details to history, ask questions, and evaluate whether the narrative is credible. Yet English becomes valuable only when combined with intercultural competence, historical knowledge, and ethical accountability.

High-quality interpretation is clear without being reductive, engaging without becoming theatrical distortion, and respectful without avoiding complexity. It makes room for local terms, uncertain evidence, multiple perspectives, and visitor questions. Saudi heritage providers should therefore evaluate English not as verbal polish but as a medium of responsible meaning-making. When guides can communicate across difference while preserving the integrity and local ownership of heritage, language strengthens both service quality and the visitor's relationship with the place.

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