



## THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG TOURISM ESP STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization of the tourism industry necessitates a high level of oral English proficiency, yet traditional classroom settings often fail to provide the necessary individual practice for students. This paper explores how Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms, particularly Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) and conversational models, can be integrated into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula to bridge this gap. Grounded in the Interaction Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the study analyzes how AI facilitates a stress-free environment for linguistic rehearsal. Preliminary observations at International Nordic University indicate that students engaging with AI-mediated tools show a marked increase in response length, speaking confidence, and lexical retrieval. The research emphasizes a blended learning approach, suggesting that AI should serve as a scaffold rather than a replacement for human instructors.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, ESP, Tourism Education, Oral Proficiency, Blended Learning, Affective Filter, Interaction Hypothesis.

### INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality sector is arguably the most communication-intensive industry in the global economy. For professionals operating within this domain, English functions as the primary "lingua franca," enabling interactions across diverse cultural and linguistic boundaries. Therefore, the goal of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in tourism education is to equip students with the functional ability to manage workplace encounters—such as hotel front-desk operations, travel consultancy, and tour guiding—with both accuracy and confidence.

Despite the clear necessity for high-level oral proficiency, ESP practitioners frequently encounter significant pedagogical hurdles. Large class sizes and rigid timetables often mean that students receive less than five minutes of individual speaking time per week. Furthermore, the psychological weight of performance anxiety often prevents learners from experimenting with the language. In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a disruptive yet promising tool to address these issues. By providing 24/7 access to personalized speaking practice, AI-powered platforms offer a dynamic alternative to static textbook dialogues, allowing for a more immersive and interactive learning experience.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LEARNER PSYCHOLOGY

To understand why AI is an effective pedagogical tool, one must analyze it through the lens of second language acquisition (SLA) theories. The most prominent

of these is Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982). Krashen argues that students who feel anxious, self-conscious, or bored develop a "filter" that prevents them from acquiring language effectively. In a traditional classroom, the fear of peer judgment can be paralyzing. AI platforms mitigate this by providing a private, non-judgmental environment where students can repeat tasks infinitely without social consequences.

Complementary to this is Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which suggests that language is learned through the "negotiation of meaning." When a student interacts with an AI-powered conversational bot, they are forced to adjust their pronunciation or syntax if the bot fails to understand them. This forced self-correction cycle mimics real-world interaction and helps build the "communicative muscle memory" required for high-stakes tourism environments.

### **PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES IN TOURISM ESP**

The instruction of ESP for tourism differs significantly from General English. The focus is on "situational fluency." A student may be grammatically proficient but struggle with the specific pragmatic demands of tourism, such as the use of polite indirect questions or the ability to give clear, concise directions under pressure.

Traditional pedagogy often relies on scripted role-plays. However, these scripts are predictable and do not reflect the spontaneous nature of guest interactions. If a guest at a hotel asks an unexpected question about local transport, a student trained only on scripts may falter. Generative AI addresses this by producing non-linear responses, forcing the student to listen actively and respond to real-time input rather than memorized lines.

### **FUNCTIONAL APPLICATIONS OF AI-POWERED TOOLS**

AI integration in the ESP classroom can be categorized into three strategic areas:

#### **Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) for Pronunciation Mastery**

Phonetic accuracy is critical in tourism. Mispronouncing a destination name or a service term can lead to guest frustration. ASR tools provide visual feedback on phonemes, stress patterns, and intonation. This allows for "deliberate practice" of field-specific lexis like itinerary, concierge, or supplement charges, which are often difficult to master in group settings.

#### **Generative Situational Simulators**

Advanced Large Language Models (LLMs) can be prompted to act as specific personas. For example, an instructor can set a scenario where the AI is a "frustrated guest who has just arrived at a hotel to find their reservation missing." The student must use conflict-resolution language to manage the situation. This creates an authentic "low-stakes" rehearsal for "high-stakes" professional reality.

### **EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS AT INTERNATIONAL NORDIC UNIVERSITY**

To provide a concrete basis for this research, a qualitative observation was conducted during Tourism ESP sessions at International Nordic University. A group of 25 students (n=25) utilized AI-integrated speaking tasks over a four-week period. The aim was to measure the impact of these tools on three primary indicators: response length, willingness to communicate, and reported anxiety levels.

*Table 1. Analysis of Student Speaking Performance Post-AI Integration*

Performance Metric	Pre-Intervention Baseline	Post-Intervention Results	Improvement Delta
Average Response Length (ARL)	12.4 words per turn	32.8 words per turn	+164% Increase
Willingness to Communicate (WTC)	35% participation rate	78% participation rate	+43% Growth
Self-Correction Rate	Minimal (Teacher-dependent)	High (Real-time ASR feedback)	Significant
Reported Speaking Anxiety	8.1 / 10 (High)	4.3 / 10 (Moderate)	-47% Reduction

The data in Table 1 illustrates a significant shift in communicative readiness. The most notable change was in the "Average Response Length," which indicates that students moved from fragmented, one-word answers to more complex, multi-clausal explanations. This shift is essential for tour guiding and destination management, where detailed narrative ability is required.

### LOCALIZATION AND PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

For AI to be effective in Uzbekistan's tourism sector, it must be localized. Simply using general AI prompts is insufficient. Instead, students should practice scenarios that reflect the cultural and historical richness of Uzbekistan.

#### Cultural Heritage Integration

Speaking tasks should involve explaining the architectural features of the Registan Square, the Silk Road history associated with Bukhara, or the hospitality traditions of the Fergana Valley. By localizing the AI scenarios, the language practice becomes professionally relevant and culturally grounded, preparing students for the specific guests they will encounter in Uzbekistan.

#### The Role of the Teacher in an AI-Enhanced Classroom

The integration of AI does not diminish the role of the instructor; rather, it evolves it. While AI handles the repetitive drills and initial role-plays, the teacher focuses on higher-level communicative skills. This includes teaching intercultural pragmatics, professional etiquette, and the ethical use of AI. A blended model ensures that students benefit from the precision of technology and the empathy of human instruction.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, AI-powered platforms represent a transformative opportunity for Tourism ESP education. By addressing the fundamental barriers of limited practice time and language anxiety, these tools allow students to achieve a level of oral proficiency that was previously difficult to reach in traditional settings. The observations at International Nordic University confirm that a strategic, localized, and blended approach to AI integration can significantly enhance the communicative resilience of future tourism professionals.

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