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DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM COMPETENCIES THROUGH ESP INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Although sustainable tourism research increasingly highlights competence development and educational transformation, the role of language education in fostering sustainability competences remains underexplored. To address the aforementioned gap, this paper looks into the possible contributions of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in developing sustainable tourism competences within tertiary-level students. Drawing on competence-based education and United Nations Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the study suggests a conceptual framework linking ESP pedagogy with sustainability-oriented learning outcomes. It argues that ESP courses for tourism and hospitality students can extend beyond language acquisition by promoting intercultural awareness, critical thinking, ethical communication, and responsible professional practices. The integration of sustainability-focused communicative tasks and curriculum design strategies enables ESP instruction to prepare graduates to actively support sustainable tourism transformation and improve employability.

Key Words: *English for Specific Purposes, Sustainability competencies, Employability, Communicative tasks, Learning outcomes, Task-based activities*

JEL classification: *I23, J24, Z13*

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Introduction

Environmental challenges, shifting expectations among travellers, and the growing influence of international sustainability agendas make the tourism sector an intensely dynamic area (Kim & Baker, 2024; Eurofound, 2025). Within this changing context, sustainability has become an integral element of tourism development. As a result, focused attention is given to the different types of competences required from the contemporary tourism workforce. Apart from delivering high-quality service, tourism professionals are expected to demonstrate responsible behaviour, actively support sustainable practices, and communicate effectively with a wide range of stakeholders (Buerkle et al., 2023).

As regards the aforementioned, European Commission (2020a) suggests green skills to be taken as an integral component of professional competence, defining them as the capacity to translate sustainability principles into practical action. At the same time, higher education continues to stress the importance of employability skills-such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and adaptability-which are seen as essential for navigating ever-more changing professional environments (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Despite being relevant, these two skill sets are not always meaningfully connected within tourism education. Namely, sustainability is often addressed at a conceptual level, while employability tends to be approached in broad and decontextualised terms (Abo-Khalil, 2024).

In this regard, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents a relevant pedagogical context for bringing these dimensions together (Ünlü & Qureshi, 2021). Its emphasis on context-sensitive language use and professionally oriented tasks creates opportunities to integrate communication practice with competence development. Recent research highlights the importance of linking sustainability-oriented education with employability outcomes (Alimehmeti et al., 2024). However, the role of ESP in facilitating this integration within tourism and hospitality education remains insufficiently explored (Kesić & Lipovšek, 2024).

Using the review of relevant literature, the paper aims to explore how ESP instruction can contribute to the development of sustainability competences and employability skills in tourism and hospitality education.

Theoretical background

The growing emphasis on sustainability in tourism and hospitality has increased the demand for graduates who possess both green and employability skills. In this context, the UN Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework offers a useful foundation for integrating sustainability into higher education, particularly by encouraging environmental awareness, ethical responsibility, and critical thinking (Abo-Khalil, 2024; UNESCO, 2017). In the context of tourism, green skills involve sustainable service practices, environmental awareness, and the ability to communicate sustainability-related values to guests in a clear and appropriate way. Research also suggests that students engage more actively when sustainability is taught through applied and context-relevant activities rather than abstract concepts (Araneo, 2024).

Within this framework, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides a practical tool for linking sustainability with professional communication. Its focus on authentic, field-specific language use (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) allows sustainability topics to be naturally incorporated into teaching (Kesić & Lipovšek, 2024). At the same time, ESP contributes to the development of employability skills, which include communication, teamwork, adaptability, and intercultural awareness (Succi & Canovi, 2020). In tourism and hospitality, proficiency in English remains particularly important, as it directly supports interaction with international guests and enhances employment opportunities (Pešić, 2022). Recent approaches highlight the importance of integrating sustainability awareness with traditional professional competences, reflecting the expectations of employers who increasingly value graduates capable of incorporating sustainability into their professional roles (Fernando & Tajan, 2024). To achieve this, ESP instruction needs to adopt a competence-based and student-centered approach aligned with ESD principles (Buerkle et al., 2023). Participatory and experiential learning models are particularly effective, as they encourage active involvement and support the development of critical thinking and ethical decision-making (Fernando & Tajan, 2024). In practical terms, this integration can be structured around three mutually interwoven dimensions: communication-based activities that reflect workplace situations, intercultural tasks that explore sustainability across different contexts and ethical discussions that promote responsible professional behaviour (Buerkle et al., 2023).

ESP as a tool for developing sustainability competencies and employability skills

Having the aforementioned in mind, the proposed framework for integrating sustainability competences into ESP instruction is structured around three interrelated dimensions: communication-based, intercultural, and ethical.

Communication-based dimension

The communication dimension is grounded in theories of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and task-based learning (Willis et al., 2026). Furthermore, the Communicative Language Teaching fosters the use of real-life tasks in language acquisition (Richards, 2006). The current ESP textbooks in hospitality and tourism identify key communicative functions, such as greetings, information exchange, negotiation, and complaint handling (Walker & Harding, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Harding 1998). To support the acquisition of these functions, relevant sub-competencies include functional language (e.g. making introductions, describing services), professional register and vocabulary (including tourism-specific terminology, appropriate levels of formality), digital communication skills (e.g. emails, booking systems), and non-verbal skills.

Such content is in line with the following outcomes: Students can conduct a check-in process in English (introduce themselves, request information, explain hotel services); Students are able to write a professional booking confirmation email, using the appropriate form and polite tone; or Students are able to explain a hotel's sustainability initiatives to international guests using appropriate eco-terminology.

Achieving these outcomes requires the use of authentic, task-based activities. For example, role-play activities may simulate reception scenarios using real-life materials, integrating greetings, information exchange, and explanations of the hotel's environmental practices. Case studies can involve analysing transcripts of eco-tourism advertisements or service reviews, with a focus on persuasive strategies and specialised vocabulary. Writing tasks may include composing emails to tour operators that confirm itineraries while addressing sustainability-related issues, whereas listening activities can be based on authentic booking calls followed by comprehension tasks.

Importantly, communication tasks can systematically integrate sustainability themes (e.g. role-plays involving eco-friendly hotels or sustainable tour options), thereby reinforcing environmental values alongside language use. Moreover, strong communication skills are widely recognised as essential for employability in the global hospitality sector, where staff are expected to interact effectively with diverse clients and markets (European Commission, 2020b). Teaching English through realistic tourism tasks thus contributes simultaneously to the development of professional communication skills and sustainability awareness.

Intercultural dimension

Intercultural competence (ICC) involves the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures (Trang & Phuong, 2023). The adopted foundational model proposed by Byram and Zarate (1997) emphasises multiple dimensions of intercultural competence, including knowledge of other cultures (*savoirs*), attitudes such as openness and curiosity (*savoir être*), skills in interpreting and relating (*savoir-faire*) and critical cultural awareness. This concept is further supported by UNESCO cross-cultural competencies, such as systems thinking, collaboration, and self-awareness (UNESCO, 2017). The implementation of the cultural dimension could be supported through the development of the following sub-competencies: cultural empathy, flexibility in communication style, awareness of nonverbal norms, and the ability to manage misunderstandings.

The suggested outcomes may be defined as follows: Students can adapt a hospitality interaction to a guest's cultural expectations (e.g. offering different foods or addressing guests in a formal or informal way); Students are able to recognise and respond sensitively to cultural taboos (e.g. topics of conversation in some cultures); Students are able to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and discuss how they affect service style.

The most beneficial activities for supporting the implementation of cultural dimension would be cultural role-plays, case analysis and interviews or exchanges. For example, students can simulate providing service to the guests from different cultural backgrounds, analyse scenarios in which misunderstandings occur, or research cultural norms and present guidelines for tourism professionals.

The cultural dimension contributes to sustainable tourism by promoting the inclusion of local communities and preserving cultural heritage. Moreover, it prepares students for global workplaces. For example, training in cultural competence may increase employability in multinational hotel chains or travel companies, as it enables staff to deliver culturally appropriate and quality service to international clients (Trang & Phuong, 2023).

Ethical dimension

The ethical dimension is grounded in *tourism ethics* and *sustainable development principles*. The framework is outlined in the UNWTO (2001), which highlights the need to decrease negative impacts on the environment, cultures, and societies. Its theoretical foundations can be traced to both business ethics, particularly in terms of fairness and transparency, and environmental ethics. Within this dimension, key concepts include corporate social responsibility (CSR) in tourism, human rights, and “leave-no-trace” principles. Accordingly, relevant sub-competences involve understanding tourism’s socio-environmental impact, developing moral reasoning, and demonstrating commitment to fair and responsible practices.

The examples of appropriate learning outcomes are as follows: Students can identify ethical issues in a tourism case (e.g., overtourism in a historic city) and propose sustainable alternatives; Students are able to explain a hotel’s environmental policy to a guest, demonstrating knowledge of recycling or energy-saving procedures; Students are able to articulate the rights of tourism workers and guests as outlined by global standards.

These outcomes are most effectively achieved by using role-play debates, case studies and project-based tasks. For example, students can adopt the roles of different stakeholders in an ethically difficult situation, whereas case studies can be used as prompts to develop analytical writing skills. Project-based tasks, such as drafting sustainable tourism charter for a hotel, further develop field-specific lexis and ethical awareness.

The ethical dimension is closely linked to sustainability, particularly in relation to social and environmental responsibility (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). By mastering this dimension, students become prepared for professional contexts in which ethical awareness and CSR-related

competences are increasingly valued, thus supporting both sustainability-oriented learning and employability (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Conclusion

The intersection of sustainability and employability presents both a key challenge and an opportunity for tourism education. In this context, ESP provides a pedagogical framework capable of addressing both dimensions simultaneously. Simultaneously, it enhances employability by developing transferable skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving through interactive and task-based learning.

However, integrating these dimensions implies facing several challenges. Many language teachers lack a background in tourism or sustainability, necessitating professional development (Boeve-de Pauw et al., 2022). ESP instructors therefore require training in environmental topics, cultural competence, and ethical issues. At the same time, ESP instructor collaboration with tourism experts will ensure authenticity and becomes of crucial importance if successful implementation is to be achieved. Another challenge is resource availability. Namely, authentic materials and technology may be limited in some institutions. Additionally, class size can impede interactive tasks, where large classes may require team-teaching or smaller breakout groups. Finally, curricular constraints may pose difficulties, as existing language curricula might not accommodate new content, and examinations often prioritise grammar and lexis over practical skills. Consequently, it is recommended that institutions recognise the value of sustainability-oriented ESP and provide greater flexibility.

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