

English Communication Strategies in Staff-Guest Interaction: A Case Study at Highland Resort and Nature Tours Tomohon

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 07 August 2026	This study investigates the English communication strategies employed by frontline staff at Highland Resort and Nature Tours (HRNT) Tomohon when interacting with international guests. Set in a hybrid tourism environment that integrates hospitality services with high-risk outdoor activities, the study highlights the communicative demands faced by staff in ensuring both effective service and guest safety. A qualitative case study design was adopted, involving seven frontline staff members selected through purposive sampling. Data were

1. Introduction

The global tourism industry has undergone significant transformation driven by globalization, shifting from infrastructure-based services toward experience economies that prioritize authentic human connections (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Within this transformation, English has emerged as the primary lingua franca for international service interactions (Jenkins, 2020). For frontline staff in non-English-speaking countries, English proficiency is therefore not merely an additional service advantage but a functional necessity that directly influences service quality, guest satisfaction, and, particularly in high-risk tourism contexts, physical safety. In specialized adventure and eco-tourism settings, communication failures may have consequences that extend beyond service inconvenience. Bird and Gísladóttir (2020) documented that communication breakdowns during nature tours can create direct safety risks, while Matti et al. (2022) demonstrated that effective risk communication in volcanic and extreme tourism environments requires systematic, multi-channel messaging and structured staff training. These findings indicate that English communication in hybrid tourism settings should be understood not only as a hospitality instrument but also as an essential mechanism for risk mitigation.

Communication Strategies (CS) refer to deliberate techniques employed by speakers when their available linguistic resources are insufficient to convey intended meanings. Dörnyei and Scott (1997, p. 174) define CS as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an

repositions CS not as markers of linguistic deficiency but as legitimate professional competencies that reflect communicative resourcefulness. Studies of front office staff reveal frequent deployment of clarification requests, paraphrasing, and multimodal supports including gestures and written aids (Yunita & Wahyudi, 2020), while research on guided tours documents systematic use of approximation, circumlocution, and confirmation strategies to maintain interaction flow (Jumadil & Siswana, 2023). Speaking anxiety constitutes a critical constraint on CS deployment, as staff experiencing high communicative anxiety frequently default to avoidance behaviors rather than engaging guests as collaborative communication partners (Lamasigi et al., 2023). For HRNT staff, managing communicative anxiety is therefore a prerequisite for effective CS application, particularly in outdoor settings where confidence and authority directly affect guest safety compliance.

2.2 *The Taxonomy of Dörnyei and Scott (1997)*

The CS taxonomy developed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997) provides the analytical framework for this study. The taxonomy identifies three main categories: Direct Strategies address communication problems at the point of breakdown through techniques including circumlocution, approximation, mime, message reduction, and message replacement; Interactional Strategies involve the interlocutor in collaborative problem-solving through comprehension checks, confirmation requests, clarification requests, and response repair; and Indirect Strategies prevent or manage communication problems preemptively through

understanding across diverse linguistic and cultural environments. Chen and Lin (2025) further established that while machine translation handles factual and transactional content adequately, human judgment remains necessary for rhetorical or culturally complex communication. These findings position digital translation tools not as substitutes for communicative competence but as legitimate supplementary resources within the ecology of professional tourism communication.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), selected because HRNT's dual-context operational structure—combining indoor hospitality with high-risk outdoor nature tourism within a single staff team—constitutes a distinctive, information-rich case not found in previously studied tourism sites. The qualitative approach enabled contextually grounded, in-depth documentation of CS use as it naturally occurred in real service encounters (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data collection took place at HRNT in Kinilow Village, Tomohon, North Sulawesi, over a two-month period from April to May 2026, aligned with the peak international tourist season. The research setting encompassed two primary locations: the Front Office lobby and indoor hospitality areas, and outdoor tour destinations including Mount Mahawu trekking, Mount Lokon trekking, Pinaras and Kali waterfalls, Tang

direct observation, simulation-based observation was employed, in which participants re-enacted representative service scenarios validated against field notes and interview data. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted following Kvale's (2007) seven-stage inquiry framework, with questions adapted from the taxonomy's three category structure into open-ended probing prompts to explore participants' awareness of and reasoning behind strategy selection. Third, photographic documentation captured non-verbal strategy use with full participant consent.

3.4 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analyzed using Creswell and Creswell's (2017) six-step qualitative procedure: organizing data, reading for holistic understanding, coding against the Dörnyei and Scott (1997) taxonomy, generating themes and role-based patterns, presenting findings with participant quotations, and interpreting results in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Trustworthiness was established through four criteria following Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility via data triangulation across three instruments and member checking of interview transcripts; transferability through thick description of the HRNT context and staff roles; dependability through a consistent coding framework tied to the established taxonomy; and confirmability through transparent documentation of analytical decisions and proper attribution of all sources.

4. Results

a. Direct Strategies

Five direct sub-strategies achieved universal usage (7/7): message reduction, message replacement, circumlocation, approximation, and mime. These five strategies constitute the core problem-solving toolkit applied by all participants regardless of role or service setting, representing HRNT's baseline CS repertoire.

Circumlocation was the primary vocabulary-gap resolution technique. When specific English terms were unavailable, all participants shifted to physical or functional descriptions. SN demonstrated this during a Gunung Mahawu trekking tour: "I forgot the word crater, so I told the guest: Look at that, the big hole with white smoke on top of the mountain. The guest immediately understood, Oh, you mean crater." MM applied the same technique at a clove plantation, describing cloves as "small flower for cigarette and cooking" while pointing to the tree, successfully prompting the guest to supply the target word. In both cases, circumlocation resolved the vocabulary gap without interrupting the communicative flow.

Approximation operated alongside circumlocation as a speed-prioritizing substitute strategy. In Front Office settings, LM substituted "pool" for "fish pond" and RS used "tool to open your drink" for bottle opener. Tour guides regularly employed sem

strategy's universality across roles and settings reflects its dual function: it serves both accuracy assurance in administrative contexts and safety verification in outdoor contexts.

Response: repair was applied reactively whenever guests indicated confusion. Staff consistently slowed their speaking rate, replaced complex vocabulary with simpler synonyms, and re-confirmed the corrected message. NS employed a more assertive repair approach in outdoor settings, raising his voice and slowing his tempo: "When a guest took the wrong turn at a trail junction, I immediately raised my voice and said: Hey mister, wrong way! Follow me here!" This variation reveals that response repair adapts in urgency and intensity to the stakes of the communicative context.

A significant role-based divergence emerged in direct appeal for help (4/7). Front Office staff (LM, RS) and dual staff (SN) treated peer assistance as a professional service procedure, with LM stating: "When I find it very difficult to explain resort services, I often ask Mr. Michael for help. I directly say to the guest: Excuse me, my senior will help you." Tour guides NS, MM, and RP explicitly rejected this strategy on grounds of professional authority. NS stated: "Asking guests for help with words? I would never do that. It would be embarrassing for a senior like me to ask guests as if I were ignorant. We are their guide; we are the ones being paid." This divergence demonstrates that CS

communicative stakes of each moment and selected the strategy that best balanced accuracy with operational requirements.

The third pattern, the Mediated Communication Escalation Sequence, describes the staged approach employed when direct verbal strategies were insufficient. Staff first applied simplified English reinforced by mime; when this proved insufficient, they transitioned to Google Translate; when that was also inadequate, they escalated to a direct appeal to a more proficient colleague. Crucially, no interaction was left unresolved across all observed encounters, confirming that this three-stage sequence functions as HRNT's *de facto* communication breakdown protocol.

4.3. Google Translate as an Emergent CS Extension

The systematic use of Google Translate as a real-time communication support tool constitutes an additional finding that extends beyond the Dörnyei and Scott (1997) taxonomy, which was developed prior to widespread smartphone adoption. Five of seven participants integrated it into live service interactions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Google Translate Usage Patterns Among HRNT Frontline Staff

competence but as an active resource within a broader strategic ecosystem, integrated at a specific stage of the Mediated Communication Escalation Sequence based on contextual judgment.

The role-based switching of dual staff participants SN and MM constitutes a further finding that extends the English for Tourism literature. Both participants employed materially different strategic repertoires depending on their assigned role at any given time: accuracy-oriented, interactionally rich strategies in Front Office settings, and speed-oriented, authority-maintaining strategies in outdoor tour settings. This context-modulated competence demonstrates that communicative proficiency in hybrid tourism workplaces is not a fixed skill set but an adaptive repertoire continuously adjusted to the communicative demands of the specific service role and environmental context. This finding has direct implications for ESP curriculum design, which should address both indoor hospitality communication and outdoor guiding communication as distinct competency domains with partially overlapping but functionally differentiated strategic demands.

5. Conclusion

This study confirmed that HRNT frontline staff actively and systematically deploy CS from all three categories of the Dörnyei and Scott (1997) taxonomy, with 18 of 24 sub-strategies confirmed and nine achieving universal usage across all participants. The complete absence of message abandonment across all seven participants provides empirical evidence that structured simulation-based training has produced a problem-solving rather than avoidance-based communic

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Welly Forensa Manurung: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, and Writing – original draft.

Ignatius J. C. Tuerah: Supervision, Validation, and Writing – review & editing.

Herminus E. Pabur: Supervision, Validation, and Writing – review & editing.

All authors approved the final manuscript.

Statement of the Use of AI

AI tools were used only for language editing. AI was not used for data analysis, interpretation, or formulation of research findings

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