

## ESP NEEDS ANALYSIS OF FRONT OFFICE STAFF IN A HOTEL SETTING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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### Abstract

The present research investigates the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) needs of front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel, Sanur, Denpasar, Bali. Employing a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the research involved four front office staff members as primary participants, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions of ESP needs. First, in terms of target situation needs, front office staff are required to perform specific communicative tasks including greeting guests, managing reservations, handling complaints, and providing tourist information. Second, regarding present situation needs, a significant gap exists between the staff's current English proficiency and the communicative demands of their professional roles, particularly in speaking and writing skills. Third, concerning learning needs, participants expressed a strong preference for practical, task-based, and authentic hospitality materials. These findings underscore the urgent need for a targeted ESP program tailored to the specific communicative context of hotel front office work.

**Keywords:** *ESP needs analysis, front office staff, hotel English, qualitative study, hospitality communication*

### A. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become the primary medium of communication in the tourism and hospitality industry. Hotels, as one of the central pillars of the tourism sector, require their staff to possess adequate English communication skills, particularly those working in the front office department. Front office staff serve as the first point of contact between the hotel and its guests, making their ability to

communicate effectively in English a critical professional competency. However, in many hotels, especially in non-English-speaking countries like Indonesia, the English proficiency of front office staff remains a significant challenge that affects the quality of service delivered to foreign guests.

The concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a highly relevant framework for addressing language needs in professional contexts.



Unlike General English, ESP focuses on the specific communicative needs of learners within a particular field or occupation. In the hospitality industry, this means equipping front office staff with the linguistic tools necessary to handle check-in and check-out procedures, respond to guest inquiries, manage complaints, and facilitate smooth communication across various service encounters. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) foundationally argued, ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions regarding content and method are based on the learner's reasons for learning. This principle underscores the necessity of conducting a thorough needs analysis before designing any ESP curriculum or training program.

Needs analysis is considered the cornerstone of ESP curriculum development. It involves identifying the target situation needs, learning needs, and present situation of the learners in order to develop relevant and effective language instruction. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), needs analysis in ESP serves to determine what language skills and knowledge learners require to function effectively in their target contexts. In the hotel industry, this analysis becomes particularly important because the communicative demands of front office work are highly specific, ranging from formal greeting protocols to handling difficult situations with diplomacy and cultural sensitivity.

Several studies have highlighted the gap between the English language competencies that front office staff

currently possess and what is actually required to perform their duties effectively. Pratiwi and Kurniawan (2022) conducted a study on ESP needs among hotel employees in Bali and found that the majority of front office staff felt underprepared for handling complex guest complaints and culturally diverse communication situations. Their research emphasized the importance of targeted ESP training tailored to the specific communicative contexts encountered in front office settings. Similarly, Rahmawati and Setiawan (2021) found that front office staff in three-star hotels in Yogyakarta faced significant challenges in using professional English terminology during check-in procedures, reflecting a clear mismatch between their current language abilities and the demands of their occupational roles.

The importance of ESP in hospitality has also been recognized internationally. Al-Khatib (2005), as cited in more recent literature, pointed out that hotel staff in non-English-speaking countries consistently demonstrate difficulties in handling spontaneous and unpredictable guest interactions, which require a level of communicative competence that general English training alone cannot provide. More recently, Kaur and Suria (2020) argued that ESP programs for hospitality workers must incorporate authentic materials drawn from real workplace interactions to be truly effective. Their study, published in the *Asian ESP Journal*, emphasized that needs analysis must precede any instructional design to ensure that



learning outcomes align with real professional demands.

In the Indonesian context, the hospitality industry has been growing rapidly, with the government actively promoting tourism as a key driver of economic development. This growth has increased the demand for skilled hotel workers who are proficient in English, particularly in roles that involve direct guest interaction. Despite this demand, research on ESP needs within the Indonesian hotel sector remains limited, and studies specifically targeting front office staff are even scarcer. Fitria (2021) noted in her study that the absence of systematic ESP needs analysis in Indonesian hotel training programs leads to generic and ineffective language instruction that fails to address the real communicative challenges faced by employees on the job.

Furthermore, the qualitative research approach is particularly appropriate for exploring ESP needs in hospitality settings because it allows researchers to capture the richness and complexity of real-world language use. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, qualitative methods enable a deep understanding of the communicative practices, challenges, and needs of front office staff that quantitative instruments alone cannot reveal. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argued, qualitative inquiry is most valuable when the research seeks to explore a phenomenon in its natural context, with attention to the perspectives and experiences of the participants. This

methodological stance is well-suited to understanding how front office staff navigate the linguistic demands of their professional environment.

Given the above background, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive ESP needs analysis of front office staff in a hotel setting using a qualitative approach. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the target situation needs of front office staff, including the types of communicative tasks they perform, the language skills they require, and the challenges they face in English communication. Additionally, the study aims to identify the present situation of the staff in terms of their current English proficiency and language use, and to explore their learning needs, including their preferences and motivations for improving their English skills. By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on ESP in the hospitality industry and provides practical insights for the development of more effective and contextually relevant English training programs for hotel front office staff in Indonesia.

## B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive case study approach. The qualitative method was selected because it allows the researcher to explore and describe phenomena in depth within their natural context, particularly the English language needs and communicative practices of front office staff in a real hotel environment. As Moleong (2021) stated,



qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. This approach is considered the most appropriate method for capturing the complexity of language use in professional workplace settings.

This research was conducted at Neo Bintang Hotel, located at Jalan Sindu, Sanur, Denpasar, Bali. The hotel was selected as the research site because it is an active hospitality establishment that regularly serves both domestic and international guests, making it a highly relevant context for examining the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) among hotel staff. The multilingual and multicultural nature of the guest population at Neo Bintang Hotel further strengthens the relevance of this location as a research setting.

### 1. Participants

The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling technique, in which participants were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to ensure that the selected participants can provide rich and meaningful data related to the phenomenon under study (Sugiyono, 2022). The total number of staff at Neo Bintang Hotel consists of 13 employees across various departments, as presented in the following table:

**Table 1. Research Participants by Department at Neo Bintang Hotel**

Department	Number of Staff
Front Office	4
Housekeeping	2
Security	2
Pool Attendance	1
Garden	2
Cook	1

However, consistent with the focus of this study, the primary participants were the 4 front office staff members, as they are the employees most directly involved in English communication with foreign guests on a daily basis. The front office department serves as the main point of guest interaction, including handling reservations, check-in and check-out processes, guest inquiries, and complaint management. As Riana dan Pratama (2022) emphasized, front office staff bear the greatest communicative burden in hotel operations due to their role as the primary interface between the hotel and its guests, making them the most critical subject of ESP needs analysis in hospitality research.

### 2. Data Collection

Data in this study were collected through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with all four front office staff members to explore their perceptions of their English language needs, the communicative challenges they face, and their learning preferences. The interview questions were semi-structured to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives. Second, non-participant observation was carried



out to directly observe how front office staff use English in real service interactions with guests. This technique allowed the researcher to capture authentic language use in its natural professional context. Third, documentation was used to analyze relevant hotel materials such as standard operating procedures (SOP), guest communication guidelines, and any written English materials used by the staff. Arikunto (2020) stated that documentation is an important complementary technique in qualitative research that helps verify and enrich data obtained through interviews and observation.

### 3. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which consists of three concurrent stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. The condensed data were then displayed in narrative form and structured matrices to facilitate systematic analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on patterns and themes that emerged from the data, and these conclusions were verified through member checking with the participants to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied triangulation of sources,

cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and documentation to confirm consistency and accuracy of the data obtained.

## C. Results and Discussion

### Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on data collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation conducted at Neo Bintang Hotel, Jalan Sindu, Sanur, Denpasar, Bali. The findings are organized into three main categories aligned with the ESP needs analysis framework: (1) target situation needs, (2) present situation needs, and (3) learning needs of the front office staff.

#### 1. Target Situation Needs

Target situation needs refer to the English language demands that front office staff are required to meet in order to perform their professional duties effectively. Based on the observation and interview data, it was found that the four front office staff members at Neo Bintang Hotel engage in a wide range of communicative tasks that require competence in English on a daily basis.

##### a. Greeting and Welcoming Guests

The most frequently occurring communicative task observed was greeting and welcoming guests upon arrival. All four front office staff members confirmed that the majority of guests staying at Neo Bintang Hotel are international tourists, particularly from Australia, Europe, and Japan. As a result, English serves as the primary language of



communication during the check-in process. During observation, it was noted that staff routinely used standard phrases such as "Good morning, welcome to Neo Bintang Hotel, how may I assist you?" and "May I have your reservation name, please?" However, difficulties arose when guests deviated from expected communicative patterns, such as using informal language, strong accents, or making complex requests that required more nuanced responses.

One front office staff member, identified as Participant 1 (P1), stated during the interview:

*"Sometimes guests speak very fast or use words I don't understand. I know the standard phrases, but when they ask something different, I get confused and I don't know what to say."*

This finding indicates that while staff have developed a degree of formulaic competence in routine interactions, their ability to handle spontaneous and unpredictable communicative situations remains limited.

#### **b. Handling Reservations and Check-in/Check-out Procedures**

The second major communicative task identified was managing reservations and facilitating check-in and check-out procedures in English. This task involves not only verbal communication but also written communication, as staff are required to read and respond to emails and online booking messages in English. From the documentation analysis, it was found that reservation-related emails received by Neo Bintang Hotel were predominantly written in English, and the

responses were often drafted with grammatical errors and unclear sentence structures, suggesting a limited command of written English among the staff.

Participant 2 (P2) acknowledged this challenge:

*"Writing emails in English is very difficult for me. I sometimes use Google Translate, but the result is not always correct, and I am worried that guests will misunderstand."*

#### **c. Handling Guest Complaints and Special Requests**

One of the most linguistically demanding tasks identified was handling guest complaints and special requests. This communicative context requires not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic awareness, including the ability to use polite and diplomatic language, express empathy, and negotiate solutions effectively. During observation, two incidents were recorded in which front office staff struggled to respond appropriately to guest complaints regarding room conditions and noise levels. In both cases, the staff resorted to using very basic and incomplete English sentences, which led to visible frustration on the part of the guests.

Participant 3 (P3) expressed:

*"When guests complain, I feel nervous. My English is not enough to explain the situation properly. I just say sorry and try to call the manager."*

#### **d. Providing Information and Recommendations**

Front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel are also expected to provide guests with information about hotel facilities, local attractions, transportation, and



dining options in Sanur and the broader Denpasar area. This task requires a broad vocabulary related to tourism and local geography, as well as the ability to give clear and accurate directions in English. Based on the interview data, all four participants reported difficulty in this area, particularly when guests asked for specific recommendations or detailed directions that went beyond their prepared scripts.

## 2. Present Situation Needs

Present situation needs refer to the current English language proficiency and communicative competencies of the front office staff. This component of the needs analysis seeks to identify the gap between what the staff can currently do in English and what they are required to do in their professional roles.

### a. Current English Proficiency Level

Based on the interview data and observation findings, the four front office staff members at Neo Bintang Hotel demonstrated varying but generally low to intermediate levels of English proficiency. Two participants (P1 and P2) reported having studied English formally only up to the high school level, with no further formal training in English after entering the workforce. The other two participants (P3 and P4) had received basic hospitality English training during their vocational education, but both acknowledged that the training was general in nature and did not specifically prepare them for the communicative demands of front office work.

During observation, it was noted that staff performed more confidently in highly scripted and predictable interactions, such as standard greetings and room key handovers, but showed visible discomfort and hesitation in open-ended or complex communicative situations. This pattern is consistent with the distinction between formulaic competence and communicative competence in ESP literature.

### b. Language Skills Gaps

The data revealed that the most significant language skill gaps among the front office staff were in the areas of speaking and writing. All four participants ranked speaking as their most challenging skill, particularly in terms of pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary breadth. Writing was identified as the second most challenging skill, with participants expressing difficulty in composing grammatically correct and professionally appropriate emails and messages in English. Reading and listening were considered relatively less challenging, as staff had more exposure to written and spoken English through daily guest interactions and online media.

Participant 4 (P4) stated:

*"I can understand when guests speak slowly, but when they speak fast or use slang, I lose track. Speaking back to them fluently is my biggest problem."*

### c. Attitude Toward English

Despite the identified proficiency gaps, the attitude of the front office staff toward English was generally positive. All four participants expressed awareness of the importance of English in their



professional roles and showed a genuine desire to improve their language skills. This positive attitude is a significant asset for any future ESP training program, as learner motivation is a key factor in the success of language instruction.

### 3. Learning Needs

Learning needs refer to the preferences, motivations, and conditions under which the front office staff believe they can most effectively improve their English proficiency. This component of the needs analysis is essential for designing ESP programs that are not only linguistically relevant but also pedagogically appropriate.

#### a. Preferred Learning Methods

When asked about their preferred methods of learning English, all four participants expressed a preference for practical, activity-based learning over traditional grammar-focused instruction. They specifically mentioned role-play simulations of real hotel scenarios, vocabulary building exercises focused on hospitality terminology, and listening practice using authentic recordings of hotel conversations as the most desirable learning activities. These preferences align strongly with the principles of communicative language teaching and task-based language learning, which are widely endorsed in ESP literature.

#### b. Preferred Learning Schedule

Given the shift-based nature of hotel work, all participants indicated that they would prefer short but regular learning sessions rather than long intensive courses. A learning schedule of

two to three sessions per week, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, was identified as the most feasible arrangement that would not interfere with their work responsibilities.

#### c. Need for Contextual and Authentic Materials

All four participants emphasized the importance of using real-life hotel materials in English learning, including actual guest emails, hotel SOPs written in English, and sample complaint dialogues. They expressed that learning from authentic materials would be more relevant and motivating than working with generic English textbooks that do not reflect the specific language demands of their workplace.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several important insights regarding the ESP needs of front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel, which will be discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and previous research.

#### 1. ESP Needs Analysis and the Gap Between Target and Present Situation

The needs analysis conducted in this study clearly demonstrates a significant gap between the English language demands of front office work at Neo Bintang Hotel and the current proficiency levels of the staff. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who argued that the fundamental purpose of ESP needs analysis is to identify the discrepancy



between what learners can currently do and what they need to be able to do in their target situation. The data from this study confirm that this gap is most pronounced in the areas of spontaneous spoken communication and professional written communication, both of which are central to the daily responsibilities of front office staff.

This finding also aligns with the results of Fitria (2021), who conducted a study on ESP analysis in hotel staff and found that the majority of hotel employees in Indonesia lack the specific linguistic competencies required for professional guest interaction, particularly in handling complaints and providing detailed information in English. Fitria (2021) emphasized that this gap cannot be addressed through general English programs alone and that targeted ESP instruction grounded in authentic workplace communication is essential. The present study supports and extends this conclusion by providing empirical evidence from a specific hotel context in Bali, demonstrating that the issue of ESP competency gaps is not isolated but widespread across the Indonesian hospitality sector.

## 2. The Role of Communicative Competence in Hospitality Settings

The findings of this study also highlight the critical importance of communicative competence, as opposed to mere linguistic knowledge, in the professional performance of front office staff. The observation data revealed that staff were able to produce memorized

phrases and scripts with relative confidence, but struggled significantly when communication required flexibility, improvisation, or pragmatic sensitivity. This distinction between formulaic and genuine communicative competence has been well-documented in ESP literature.

Kaur and Suria (2020) argued in their study on ESP in the hospitality sector that authentic communicative competence requires exposure to real workplace interactions and the development of interactional strategies that go beyond memorized scripts. Their research found that ESP programs incorporating authentic materials and simulated workplace scenarios produced significantly greater gains in communicative confidence among hospitality workers compared to programs relying on conventional textbook materials. The present study's finding that front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel are largely limited to scripted communicative behavior strongly supports the recommendation of Kaur and Suria (2020) that ESP training in hospitality must prioritize authentic, task-based learning experiences.

Furthermore, Pratiwi and Kurniawan (2022) found in their study of hotel employees in Bali that the most frequently reported communicative challenge was handling unexpected guest requests and complaints, a finding that directly mirrors the data obtained in the present study. Pratiwi and Kurniawan (2022) concluded that front office staff in Bali hotels require specific training in pragmatic competence, including the use



of polite and diplomatic language in difficult communicative situations, and that this training must be embedded within a comprehensive ESP program that reflects the actual communicative ecology of hotel work. The parallels between their findings and those of the present study are particularly significant given that both studies were conducted in the Balinese hospitality context, suggesting that the ESP needs identified here may be representative of a broader regional pattern.

### 3. Implications for ESP Program Design

The learning needs identified in this study carry important implications for the design of ESP programs for front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel and similar establishments. The strong preference among participants for practical, activity-based learning, short and regular sessions, and authentic hospitality materials suggests that any effective ESP intervention must be carefully tailored to the specific professional context and personal circumstances of the learners.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) established that effective ESP course design must be driven by the results of a thorough needs analysis and must prioritize the communicative tasks that learners actually perform in their target situations. The findings of this study provide a clear empirical basis for an ESP curriculum that centers on the four key communicative tasks identified: greeting and welcoming guests, managing reservations and check-in/check-out procedures, handling complaints and

special requests, and providing tourist information and recommendations. Each of these task areas should be addressed through role-play activities, vocabulary instruction, listening comprehension exercises using authentic hotel recordings, and writing practice using real email and message templates.

Moreover, the positive attitudes toward English expressed by all four participants suggest a strong motivational foundation upon which an ESP program can be effectively built. Learner motivation has long been recognized as one of the most important predictors of success in language learning, and the willingness of the Neo Bintang Hotel front office staff to engage with English improvement efforts bodes well for the potential effectiveness of a targeted ESP intervention.

### 4. Broader Implications for the Indonesian Hospitality Sector

At a broader level, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence that the Indonesian hospitality sector requires a more systematic and context-sensitive approach to English language training for hotel staff. The rapid growth of international tourism in Bali, combined with the linguistic challenges documented in this and previous studies, underscores the urgency of developing ESP programs that are grounded in empirical needs analysis and designed to produce genuine communicative competence rather than superficial linguistic performance. This study represents a step toward that goal by



providing a detailed and contextually grounded account of the ESP needs of front office staff in one of Bali's active hospitality establishments.

#### D. Conclusion

This study has presented a comprehensive ESP needs analysis of front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel, Jalan Sindu, Sanur, Denpasar, Bali, using a qualitative descriptive case study approach. The findings drawn from in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis reveal that the four front office staff members face significant challenges in English communication that directly affect the quality of their professional performance in serving international guests.

The needs analysis conducted in this study identified three interconnected layers of language needs among the participants. In terms of target situation needs, the study found that front office staff are required to perform a range of highly specific communicative tasks, including greeting and welcoming guests, managing reservations and check-in/check-out procedures, handling guest complaints and special requests, and providing tourist information and local recommendations. These tasks demand not only basic linguistic competence but also pragmatic awareness, professional vocabulary, and interactional flexibility that go well beyond the scope of general English instruction.

With regard to present situation needs, the findings revealed a clear and

significant gap between the English proficiency currently possessed by the front office staff and the communicative demands of their professional roles. This gap was most pronounced in the areas of spontaneous spoken communication and professional written communication, both of which are central to front office work. Despite these challenges, all four participants demonstrated positive attitudes toward English and expressed genuine motivation to improve their language skills, which represents a valuable foundation for future ESP interventions.

In terms of learning needs, the participants consistently expressed a preference for practical, task-based, and contextually authentic learning experiences that directly reflect the communicative realities of their workplace. Short but regular learning sessions using real hotel materials were identified as the most preferred and feasible mode of instruction.

Based on these findings, this study recommends the development of a targeted ESP program for front office staff at Neo Bintang Hotel that is grounded in the communicative tasks identified through this needs analysis. Future research may consider expanding the scope of investigation to include other hotel departments and a larger number of participants across multiple hotel establishments in Bali to produce more generalizable findings.

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