

English Language Needs of Retail Store Employees: A Study on Communication Demands in Business Transactions

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the English language needs of retail store employees in conducting business transactions and identifies the types of English-speaking activities required to support effective communication in retail settings in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive design with thematic analysis following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, workplace observations, and document analysis involving twelve retail store employees and four store managers across four retail establishments. Thematic analysis revealed five principal English language need domains: transactional communication, product knowledge communication, complaint and conflict resolution, relationship-building and rapport, and digital-mediated communication. Furthermore, seven essential English-speaking activity types were identified: greeting and service initiation dialogues, product inquiry and recommendation exchanges, negotiation and price discussion activities, complaint handling and problem-solving conversations, telephone and digital communication practices, cross-cultural interaction simulations, and professional presentation and reporting activities. The findings demonstrate that retail employees' English communication needs extend significantly beyond basic conversational competence to encompass domain-specific vocabulary, pragmatic awareness, and interactional strategies essential for navigating the communicative demands of contemporary retail environments. These findings contribute to the needs analysis literature in English for Specific Purposes and offer empirically grounded implications for language curriculum design, workplace training programs, and English language policy in retail and service industries.

KEYWORDS: Business transactions, English language needs, English for Specific Purposes, Needs analysis, Retail store employees, Speaking activities.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global economy, English has emerged as the dominant language of international commerce, serving as the primary medium of communication across retail, hospitality, tourism, and service industries worldwide (Crystal, 2019). For retail store employees operating in regions increasingly exposed to international tourism, cross-border trade, and global supply chains, the ability to communicate effectively in English is no longer a supplementary skill but a professional necessity (Nickerson, 2021). In Indonesia, where the tourism sector continues to expand and foreign direct investment drives growth in retail and commercial sectors, English communication competence among frontline service employees has become a critical determinant of business performance and customer satisfaction (Widianto & Pusse, 2025).

Toraja, South Sulawesi, represents a particularly compelling context for examining retail employees' English language needs. Renowned internationally for its distinctive funeral ceremonies, traditional tongkonan architecture, and highland landscapes, Toraja has experienced substantial growth in international tourism over the past decade (Adams, 2022). This influx of international visitors creates significant and sustained English communication demands for retail store employees who interact daily with foreign customers in diverse transactional contexts from product inquiries and price negotiations to complaint management and cultural explanation. Despite this practical reality, systematic research on the specific English language needs of retail employees in this context remains conspicuously absent from the academic literature.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides the theoretical and methodological foundation for investigating language needs in professional and occupational contexts. Needs analysis, a cornerstone methodology in ESP research, involves the systematic identification of learners' current language abilities, their target language requirements, and the communicative demands of their professional environments (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Contemporary needs analysis frameworks distinguish between target needs what learners must be able to do in the target situation and learning needs what



learners require in order to achieve communicative competence (Berwick, 1989; Brindley, 1989). Applied to retail workplace communication, needs analysis enables researchers and curriculum designers to identify the specific linguistic, pragmatic, and interactional competencies that employees require for effective job performance.

Research on workplace English communication has grown substantially over the past two decades, with studies examining language needs in contexts including healthcare (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2020), aviation (Moder & Halleck, 2022), tourism and hospitality (Cheng & Mok, 2021), and business and commerce (Nickerson, 2021). However, the retail sector has received comparatively limited attention, particularly in non-Western and developing country contexts. Existing studies on retail communication have predominantly examined English as a native language context or focused on customer service more broadly without specifically addressing the vocabulary, speaking activities, and communicative strategies required for business transactions (Forey & Lockwood, 2020; Fong, 2022). This gap is significant because retail communication encompasses distinctive discourse patterns including product promotion, price negotiation, complaint resolution, and relationship maintenance that differ substantially from communication in other service sectors.

In the Indonesian context, the intersection of local linguistic practices, cultural communication norms, and international English communication standards creates additional complexity for retail employees navigating multilingual business environments (Poedjiastutie, Mayaputri, & Arifani, 2021). Indonesian retail employees frequently code-switch between local languages, Indonesian, and English depending on the customer and communicative situation, yet the specific English competencies required for this code-switching and for effective foreign customer service have not been systematically examined. Understanding these needs is essential for designing relevant English language training programs, developing appropriate instructional materials, and informing broader language education policy for the retail and service sectors.

Responding to these research gaps, the present study investigates the English language needs of retail store employees in Toraja, Indonesia, with particular attention to communication demands arising in business transactions. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the English language needs of retail store employees in conducting business transactions? (2) What types of English-speaking activities are needed by retail store employees to support effective business transactions? By addressing these questions through qualitative descriptive inquiry and thematic analysis, the study aims to generate empirically grounded insights that contribute to ESP needs analysis research and offer practical guidance for retail sector language training in Indonesian and comparable postcolonial commercial contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the English language needs of retail store employees in Toraja, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected as most appropriate for this investigation because the research questions seek to understand the nature, scope, and contextual dimensions of participants' language needs phenomena that are fundamentally experiential, socially situated, and not amenable to reduction to numerical measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A descriptive orientation was adopted because the study aims to provide a rich, systematic account of participants' communicative needs and experiences rather than to test theoretical propositions or establish causal relationships. This design enabled the researcher to capture the complexity and diversity of retail communication demands as experienced by employees themselves, grounding the findings in participants' authentic workplace realities.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, specifically in the commercial district of Makale and surrounding areas where retail establishments regularly serve both domestic and international customers. Four retail establishments participated in the study, selected to represent variation in size, product type, and frequency of foreign customer interaction: a traditional craft and souvenir shop, a general merchandise store, a fashion and clothing boutique, and a grocery and consumer goods store. This variation was deliberately sought to ensure that the range of communicative contexts and English language demands identified in the study reflects the diversity of the retail sector rather than being limited to a single type of commercial environment.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to maximize variation in relevant characteristics while ensuring all participants had direct experience of English communication demands in their retail roles. Twelve retail store



employees (7 female, 5 male; ages 19–38 years) and four store managers participated in the study. Employee participants had between one and eight years of retail experience and varying levels of English education, ranging from secondary school English instruction to diploma-level study. Four participants reported having received some form of workplace English training; the remaining eight had not. All participants had direct experience communicating in English with foreign customers, ranging from occasional interactions to daily communication. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were generated through three complementary methods to ensure triangulation and comprehensive coverage of participants' communicative experiences. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all sixteen participants (employees and managers), lasting between 45 and 75 minutes each. The interview protocol explored participants' experiences of English communication in their workplace, their perceptions of their English language strengths and limitations, the specific communicative situations in which English was required, the types of language tasks they found most challenging, and their views on the English training they had received or wished to receive. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to enable participants to express themselves fully, with specific English terms and phrases discussed in English where relevant. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Second, non-participant observation was conducted across the four retail establishments over a total of 48 hours of structured field observation, distributed across different times of day and days of the week to capture the full range of communicative situations. Observation focused on documenting English communication events as they occurred naturally in the retail environment, including service encounters with foreign customers, telephone interactions, and communication with suppliers and business visitors. Structured field note protocols were used to record the nature of communicative events, the language functions deployed, apparent comprehension difficulties, and communication strategies employed by employees. Third, document analysis was conducted on available workplace texts including product labels, promotional materials, customer communication records, and staff training manuals, to identify the written English demands of the retail environment and contextualise the spoken communication needs identified through interviews and observation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, comprising three concurrent and iterative activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and document analysis summaries were integrated into a unified data corpus, which was read repeatedly to achieve familiarization before coding began. Data condensation involved systematic coding in two phases: initial open coding to identify discrete units of meaning related to English language needs and speaking activities, followed by focused coding to develop higher-order categories through constant comparative analysis. Both deductive codes derived from the ESP needs analysis literature and inductive codes emerging directly from participant narratives were employed, enabling the analysis to be theoretically informed while remaining responsive to participants' own categories and framings (Saldaña, 2021).

Theme development involved grouping related focused codes into thematic categories representing coherent dimensions of English language need and speaking activity type. Themes were reviewed and refined through iterative comparison across data sources, checking for internal coherence and adequate coverage of the data. Member checking was conducted with six participants who reviewed summary interpretations and confirmed the accuracy and resonance of the thematic findings with their experiences. Peer debriefing with two colleagues specializing in ESP and workplace communication was conducted to challenge emerging interpretations and strengthen analytical rigor. Trustworthiness was further enhanced through thick description, audit trail maintenance, and prolonged engagement with the research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent following detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and the anonymity of reported findings; pseudonyms are used throughout. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely with access restricted to the research team. Store managers provided organizational consent for observation activities, and individual employee consent was obtained separately to ensure voluntary participation was not influenced by employer expectations.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of interview data, observation field notes, and document analysis yielded two sets of findings corresponding to the study's two research questions. The first set comprises five thematic domains of English language needs identified among retail store employees. The second set comprises seven types of English speaking activities identified as necessary for supporting effective business transactions. Together, these findings provide a comprehensive account of the English communicative demands faced by retail employees in Toraja's commercial environment and the instructional activities most relevant to addressing them.

English Language Needs of Retail Store Employees

Research Question 1 asked: What are the English language needs of retail store employees in conducting business transactions? Analysis of participant narratives and observational data revealed five principal thematic domains of English language need, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. English Language Need Domains of Retail Store Employees

1	Transactional Communication	Greeting customers, explaining products, handling payments, processing returns, providing receipts and invoices	<i>"Most foreign tourists ask about prices and products. I need to explain clearly in English but sometimes I don't know the right words." (Riko, employee)</i>
2	Product Knowledge Communication	Describing product features, materials, origins, uses; explaining differences between products; making recommendations	<i>"Tourists want to know the meaning of the carvings, the wood type, the ceremony it's used in. I know it in Toraja language but translating to English is hard." (Sari, employee)</i>
3	Complaint and Conflict Resolution	Handling product complaints, managing misunderstandings, apologizing professionally, offering solutions and alternatives	<i>"When a customer is not happy, I panic because my English is not good enough to explain the situation calmly." (Lina, employee)</i>
4	Relationship-Building and Rapport	Small talk, expressing interest in customers, remembering preferences, making customers feel welcome and valued	<i>"Good service is not just selling. You need to make friends with the customer. But in English, I only know formal words, not friendly conversation." (Budi, employee)</i>
5	Digital-Mediated Communication	Responding to English messages via WhatsApp, email, and social media; writing product descriptions; managing online orders	<i>"Many tourists contact us through Instagram or WhatsApp before visiting. I need to reply in English but writing is more difficult than speaking for me." (Maya, employee)</i>

Domain 1: Transactional Communication. The most consistently and urgently identified English language need concerned transactional communication the core verbal exchanges through which retail business is conducted. All twelve employee participants and all four managers identified transactional communication as the primary English need domain, reflecting its centrality to daily retail work. Transactional needs encompassed a range of communicative functions including initiating service encounters, responding to customer inquiries, explaining prices and payment procedures, processing returns and exchanges, and providing purchase documentation. Observation data confirmed that transactional exchanges with foreign customers occurred



regularly in all four retail establishments, with an average of three to seven English-medium service encounters documented per two-hour observation period across the four sites.

Participants described a consistent pattern of communicative confidence for basic transactional exchanges greetings, price statements, and payment processing combined with significant difficulty when transactions became more complex or when customers' language use diverged from anticipated scripts. Riko, a senior sales employee at the craft shop, articulated this pattern clearly: transactional communication with foreign customers was generally manageable for routine exchanges but became stressful and sometimes unsuccessful when customers asked follow-up questions, sought additional explanation, or used idiomatic expressions unfamiliar to staff. This finding suggests that while employees had developed competence in scripted transactional sequences, they lacked the flexible communicative resources needed for the unpredictable demands of authentic retail interaction.

Domain 2: Product Knowledge Communication. The second major need domain concerned the communication of product knowledge to foreign customers a requirement that proved uniquely challenging in the Toraja retail context due to the culturally embedded nature of many products sold in the region. Traditional Toraja crafts, textiles, and ceremonial objects carry complex cultural meanings rooted in the Aluk Todolo belief system and social practices that are deeply familiar to local employees but require sophisticated translation and explanation for international visitors. All twelve employees identified this as an area of significant linguistic and cultural need, and observation data documented numerous instances of communicative breakdown when employees attempted to explain product origins, symbolic meanings, or ceremonial uses in English.

Sari's reflection captured a challenge articulated by multiple participants: the knowledge gap was not one of content employees possessed deep cultural knowledge about the products they sold but of linguistic resources for translating this culturally embedded knowledge into comprehensible English explanation. This represents a distinctive feature of the Toraja retail context that distinguishes it from more generic retail environments: employees function simultaneously as sales staff and cultural interpreters, requiring not only transactional English but also the specialized vocabulary and explanatory discourse structures needed for cultural mediation. Managers confirmed this observation, noting that employees with stronger English product explanation abilities consistently achieved higher customer satisfaction ratings and more successful sales outcomes.

Domain 3: Complaint and Conflict Resolution. A third major need domain concerned the management of customer complaints, misunderstandings, and dissatisfaction. While complaint interactions constituted a smaller proportion of overall customer communication than transactional or product knowledge exchanges, participants consistently identified them as disproportionately stressful and communicatively demanding. The affective intensity of complaint situations, combined with their unpredictability and the face-threatening nature of both receiving and addressing complaints, created particular anxiety among employees with limited English proficiency. Observation data documented several instances of complaint interactions in which employees' limited English resources led to communication breakdowns that escalated rather than resolved customer dissatisfaction.

Lina's account of panicking during complaint interactions reflected a pattern found across multiple participants: the cognitive load of managing both the emotional complexity and the linguistic demands of complaint situations simultaneously exceeded employees' current English resources. Participants identified specific linguistic needs within this domain including vocabulary for apologizing, acknowledging problems, explaining policies, offering alternatives, and managing aggressive or frustrated communication from customers. The pragmatic dimension of complaint management knowing not only what to say but how to say it in ways that de-escalate tension and restore positive customer relationships was particularly emphasized as an area requiring deliberate development.

Domain 4: Relationship-Building and Rapport. The fourth need domain concerns the communicative work of building and maintaining positive relationships with customers beyond the immediate transactional exchange. Participants and managers alike identified relationship communication as a critical differentiator of retail performance, noting that foreign customers who felt personally welcomed and valued were more likely to make purchases, return to the store, and recommend it to others. This domain encompassed informal conversation, expressions of interest in customers' backgrounds and experiences, humor and playfulness, and the kind of personal connection that transforms a commercial transaction into a memorable interpersonal encounter.

Budi's reflection highlighted a gap between employees' formal English knowledge developed through school-based instruction focused on grammar and written accuracy and the informal, conversational English required for relationship-building



with customers. Multiple participants described feeling constrained in their interpersonal interactions with foreign customers by the formal register of their school English, which felt inappropriate or awkward in contexts requiring warmth, humor, and spontaneous social engagement. This finding underscores a well-documented limitation of formal English education in Indonesia, which has historically prioritized grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency and sociolinguistic flexibility (Poedjiastutie et al., 2021).

Domain 5: Digital-Mediated Communication. The fifth and most recently emerged need domain concerns English communication through digital channels, including social media platforms, messaging applications, and email. All four store managers identified digital communication as a growing English language requirement, reflecting broader transformations in retail commerce driven by digitalization and the increasing use of social media marketing and online customer engagement. Employees were increasingly expected to respond to English inquiries via Instagram direct messages and WhatsApp, to write English product descriptions for social media posts, and in some cases to manage basic email correspondence with foreign suppliers or international customers.

Maya's account of receiving Instagram messages from international tourists before their visit illustrates the way digital communication extends English language demands beyond face-to-face service encounters into asynchronous written interaction. Participants generally reported that written digital English was more difficult than spoken English for them, as it required not only linguistic competence but also the ability to compose coherent, appropriately formal or informal text without the interactional supports including gesture, facial expression, and real-time feedback available in face-to-face communication. Document analysis of available store social media content confirmed that existing English captions and product descriptions were often grammatically incorrect, stylistically inconsistent, or culturally awkward, suggesting a gap between the digital communication demands placed on employees and their current written English competencies.

Types of English Speaking Activities Needed by Retail Store Employees

Research Question 2 asked: What types of English speaking activities are needed by retail store employees to support effective business transactions? Analysis of participant responses to questions about preferred learning approaches, observed communicative challenges, and identified training gaps, combined with theoretical grounding in ESP and workplace communication research, revealed seven types of English speaking activities as most relevant and necessary for retail employee development. These are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. English Speaking Activity Types for Retail Store Employees

1	Greeting and Service Initiation Dialogues	Role-play of opening service encounters, welcoming customers, offering assistance; practice of appropriate register, politeness formulae, and service scripts	<i>"I want to practice how to start talking to foreign customers naturally, not just 'hello, can I help you?'" (Adi, employee)</i>
2	Product Inquiry and Recommendation Exchanges	Simulated conversations in which employees respond to customer product questions, explain features and benefits, compare alternatives, and make personalized recommendations	<i>"Practicing how to explain our products in English would help a lot. Especially the traditional items with cultural meaning." (Sari, employee)</i>
3	Negotiation and Price Discussion Activities	Activities simulating price discussion, discount negotiation, bulk purchase inquiry, and payment method communication; focus on polite but firm language for commercial negotiation	<i>"Tourists always ask for discounts. I need words to say yes or no politely in English without making them angry." (Riko, employee)</i>
4	Complaint Handling and Problem-Solving	Structured practice of complaint reception, acknowledgment, apology,	<i>"I need to learn how to stay calm and talk properly when a</i>



	Conversations	explanation, and resolution sequences; emphasis on de-escalation language and professional composure	<i>customer complains. I always lose my English when I'm nervous." (Lina, employee)</i>
5	Telephone and Digital Communication Practices	Practice of telephone inquiry responses, WhatsApp and email message composition, social media comment replies; focus on appropriate digital register and written accuracy	<i>"I need to practice writing English messages. When I type in English, I worry about making mistakes that will make the store look unprofessional." (Maya, employee)</i>
6	Cross-Cultural Interaction Simulations	Role-play activities simulating interaction with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds; focus on cultural sensitivity, communication style adjustment, and intercultural pragmatics	<i>"Customers from Europe, Australia, and Asia all behave differently. I want to learn how to adjust my English for different kinds of tourists." (Budi, employee)</i>
7	Professional Presentation and Reporting Activities	Structured activities for presenting product information to groups, explaining store policies and procedures, and reporting communication issues to management in English	<i>"Sometimes I need to explain our products to a group of tourists at once. That is very different from talking to one person and I haven't practiced this." (Anton, employee)</i>

Activity Type 1: Greeting and Service Initiation Dialogues. The most universally endorsed speaking activity type concerned greeting and service initiation the opening exchanges of retail service encounters that establish the tone, register, and relational character of subsequent interaction. Ten of twelve employee participants identified this as a priority activity type, reflecting both its frequency in daily work and the anxiety many participants reported about opening English conversations appropriately. Observation data confirmed that service initiation was a critical interactional moment: encounters that began with confident, warm, and natural English greetings consistently led to more positive and productive customer interactions, while hesitant or formulaic openings sometimes created an awkward relational dynamic that persisted through the subsequent transaction.

Participants' expressed desire to move beyond scripted service openers toward more natural, context-sensitive greeting language reflects an important pedagogical challenge: the gap between the predictable opening formulas that formal English instruction provides and the flexible, socially attuned language that effective service initiation requires. Activity designs for this type should include both structured practice of core greeting formulas and more open-ended role-play that requires learners to adapt their opening language to varied customer characteristics, moods, and contexts.

Activity Type 2: Product Inquiry and Recommendation Exchanges. The second activity type concerns extended exchanges in which employees respond to customer product inquiries and provide recommendations. Given the distinctive product knowledge communication needs identified in Domain 2 of Research Question 1 particularly the challenge of explaining culturally embedded Toraja products in English this activity type received strong endorsement from participants across all four retail sites. Effective product inquiry and recommendation activities need to simultaneously develop domain-specific vocabulary (including the English terminology for Toraja cultural concepts and practices), explanatory discourse structures, and the interactional skills required for dialogic product explanation in which employees respond to follow-up questions and adjust their explanations in response to customer feedback.

Activity Type 3: Negotiation and Price Discussion Activities. Price negotiation and discount discussion emerged as a high-frequency and high-stakes communicative situation in Toraja's tourist retail context, where bargaining is culturally expected by many international visitors but requires delicate management to preserve both commercial interests and customer relationships. Riko's reflection captured a widely shared need: the ability to discuss prices firmly but politely in English, maintaining a positive relationship with the customer while also protecting the store's commercial interests. Activity designs for this type should address



the specific speech acts involved in price negotiation including offers, counter-offers, justifications, concessions, and polite refusals and the pragmatic strategies for managing negotiation face-threats in culturally sensitive ways.

Activity Type 4: Complaint Handling and Problem-Solving Conversations. Complaint handling activities were identified as necessary by all twelve employee participants and strongly endorsed by all four managers, reflecting the high stakes of complaint interactions for both individual employees and store reputation. The anxiety-related communicative breakdown described by Lina losing her English when nervous points to an important design consideration for this activity type: effective complaint handling practice must address not only the linguistic resources required for professional complaint management but also the emotional regulation skills needed to maintain communicative composure under stress. Structured exposure to increasingly challenging complaint scenarios, combined with explicit instruction in de-escalation language and composed professional discourse, was identified by managers as the most valuable training format for this competency area.

Activity Type 5: Telephone and Digital Communication Practices. Given the growing digital communication demands identified in Domain 5 of the needs analysis, activities specifically addressing telephone and digital English communication were identified as important by all four managers and eight of twelve employee participants. These activities are distinctive in requiring employees to manage English communication without the visual and gestural supports available in face-to-face interaction, and in the case of written digital communication, to compose accurate and appropriately styled texts independently. Activity designs should address both synchronous digital communication (telephone calls, voice messages) and asynchronous written communication (WhatsApp, email, social media), with attention to the different register, formality, and accuracy expectations that apply across these channels.

Activity Type 6: Cross-Cultural Interaction Simulations. The sixth activity type reflects the reality of Toraja retail as a multicultural communication environment in which employees interact with customers from diverse national and cultural backgrounds, each bringing different communication styles, expectations, and pragmatic norms. Budi's observation about the different interactional styles of European, Australian, and Asian tourists captures an important dimension of communicative competence that is often neglected in formal English instruction: sociolinguistic and pragmatic flexibility the ability to adapt language use to the cultural communication expectations of different interlocutors. Cross-cultural interaction simulations provide opportunities to develop this flexibility through practice with a range of culturally differentiated customer profiles.

Activity Type 7: Professional Presentation and Reporting Activities. The seventh activity type, endorsed by eight of twelve employees and all four managers, concerns more extended and formal English-speaking activities including group product presentations, policy explanations, and management reporting. Anton's account of needing to address groups of tourists differently from individual customers highlights a monologic dimension of retail communication that requires specifically different linguistic and presentational skills from dyadic service encounter interaction. Professional presentation activities develop employees' ability to organize and deliver extended English discourse, manage group attention and questions, and project professional confidence competencies increasingly relevant as retail stores expand guided product experiences and cultural interpretation services for international visitors.

DISCUSSION

The Complexity of Retail English Communication Needs

The five-domain English language needs framework identified in this study reveals the substantial complexity and multidimensionality of communicative demands facing retail store employees in Toraja's international tourist retail environment. Far from being reducible to basic conversational English, the needs identified span a continuum from routine transactional scripts to sophisticated cultural interpretation, from emotionally demanding complaint management to emerging digital communication challenges. This complexity aligns with and extends findings from comparable retail and service communication research (Forey & Lockwood, 2020; Fong, 2022), while contributing distinctive insights specific to the Toraja cultural and commercial context.

The identification of product knowledge communication as a major need domain is particularly noteworthy for its theoretical implications. Unlike the product knowledge communication needs documented in generic retail contexts, the Toraja employees' needs involve what might be termed ethnolinguistic translation the challenge of rendering culturally embedded indigenous knowledge into comprehensible English explanation for international audiences. This places Toraja retail employees in the role of cultural brokers or interpreters, requiring not only transactional English but also the specialized discursive resources needed for



cultural mediation. This finding extends existing ESP needs analysis frameworks by highlighting the intersection of language needs and cultural knowledge in heritage tourism retail contexts, suggesting that curriculum design for such contexts must integrate cultural content knowledge as well as linguistic competency development.

The digital communication domain represents a forward-looking dimension of retail English needs that aligns with broader observations about the digitalization of customer service communication (Nickerson, 2021). The finding that all four managers identified digital English communication as a growing requirement reflects the rapid transformation of retail customer interaction patterns driven by social media marketing, messaging-based customer service, and online order management. This domain's emergence also highlights a productive tension in the needs identified: while employees generally rated their spoken English as more developed than their written English, the growing importance of digital written communication means that addressing only speaking needs is insufficient for comprehensive retail English preparation.

English Speaking Activities and Workplace-Oriented Language Teaching

The seven speaking activity types identified in this study collectively constitute a framework for workplace-oriented English language development that is grounded in the authentic communicative demands of the retail context. This framework resonates with established principles of ESP pedagogy, TBLT, and communicative language teaching while generating context-specific guidance for the Toraja retail sector. Several aspects of the framework merit particular theoretical discussion.

The endorsement of complaint handling activities as a high-priority speaking practice type is consistent with research documenting the disproportionate communicative challenge and professional significance of service recovery interactions in retail and hospitality contexts (Forey & Lockwood, 2020). The anxiety-driven communicative breakdown described by multiple participants losing their English under the stress of complaint management points to an affective dimension of communicative competence that is frequently underaddressed in formal language instruction. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis provides a partial explanation for this phenomenon: the anxiety generated by complaint situations raises the affective filter, impairing access to linguistic resources that would otherwise be available. Activity design for complaint handling must therefore address both linguistic and affective dimensions, providing structured exposure that gradually builds confidence alongside competence.

The identification of cross-cultural interaction simulations as a necessary activity type reflects the pragmatic and intercultural dimensions of English communication competence in multicultural retail environments. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a framework for understanding why cross-cultural simulation is necessary: face-threatening acts such as price refusal, complaint reception, and product criticism are managed differently across cultural contexts, and employees who lack exposure to diverse cultural communication norms may inadvertently violate customers' face needs through culturally inappropriate linguistic choices. Cross-cultural simulation activities provide a rehearsal space for developing the sociolinguistic flexibility needed to navigate these cultural differences skillfully.

The seven activity types also reveal an important curricular implication: effective retail English preparation requires a carefully sequenced instructional program rather than discrete or isolated skill instruction. The activities form a pedagogical progression from foundational service encounter skills (greeting and initiation, product explanation) through complex interactional challenges (negotiation, complaint management) to extended and digital communication competencies (professional presentation, digital communication). This progression aligns with Nation and Newton's (2023) recommendation that speaking development programs be organized around increasingly demanding communicative tasks that build systematically on previously developed skills.

Implications for ESP Curriculum Design

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the design of ESP curricula and workplace English training programs for the retail sector. Most fundamentally, they demonstrate the inadequacy of generic English courses for preparing retail employees for the specific communicative demands of their work contexts. The domain-specific vocabulary required for product knowledge communication including English equivalents for Toraja cultural terms and the explanatory discourse structures needed for cultural interpretation cannot be developed through general English instruction alone but requires deliberately contextualized vocabulary teaching integrated with cultural content knowledge development (Nation & Newton, 2023).

The digital communication domain's emergence as a significant and growing need area suggests that future retail English curricula should incorporate dedicated attention to written digital communication alongside the speaking activities identified in this study. Given participants' reports that written English was more challenging than spoken English, integrated skills approaches that connect spoken rehearsal with written consolidation may be particularly effective for developing digital communication competence. Furthermore, the finding that only four of twelve employee participants had received any workplace English training highlights the substantial gap between the current provision of English language development opportunities and the communicative needs of retail employees a gap that has clear implications for both employer investment in training and government policy regarding workplace English education in the tourism and service sectors.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The study's focus on a single geographic context Toraja while contributing valuable context-specific depth, limits the generalizability of findings to retail environments with different cultural, commercial, and linguistic characteristics. Future research should replicate the needs analysis methodology across diverse Indonesian retail contexts including Bali, Yogyakarta, and urban commercial centers to test the transferability of the five-domain framework and identify context-specific variations in English communication needs. The study's qualitative design, while appropriate for the exploratory goals of needs analysis research, does not enable quantification of the relative frequency or priority of identified needs; future research might profitably combine the qualitative framework developed here with survey-based quantitative methods to establish the relative salience of different need domains across larger employee samples. Finally, the study examined needs at a single point in time; longitudinal research tracking how retail employees' English needs evolve in response to changing tourist demographics, digital communication practices, and business conditions would contribute valuable insight into the dynamic character of workplace language needs.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the English language needs of retail store employees in Toraja, Indonesia, and identified the speaking activity types most relevant to effective business transaction communication. Through qualitative descriptive research employing thematic analysis, the study identified five principal domains of English language need transactional communication, product knowledge communication, complaint and conflict resolution, relationship-building and rapport, and digital-mediated communication and seven types of English speaking activities needed to develop competence in these domains: greeting and service initiation dialogues, product inquiry and recommendation exchanges, negotiation and price discussion activities, complaint handling and problem-solving conversations, telephone and digital communication practices, cross-cultural interaction simulations, and professional presentation and reporting activities.

These findings make several contributions to the ESP needs analysis literature and to practical language education in retail contexts. Theoretically, they extend existing needs analysis frameworks by documenting the ethnolinguistic translation demands specific to heritage tourism retail, where employees function simultaneously as salespeople and cultural interpreters, and by identifying the emergence of digital communication as a growing and distinct English need domain in retail environments. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of triangulated qualitative methods combining interview, observation, and document analysis for generating comprehensive and nuanced needs analysis data that captures both the content and the interactional dynamics of workplace communication demands.

Practically, the findings provide an empirically grounded foundation for designing contextually appropriate ESP curricula and workplace English training programs for the retail sector. The five-domain needs framework and seven-activity-type curriculum guide offer retail employers, language educators, and curriculum developers a structured basis for planning and evaluating English communication development initiatives. For policymakers, the findings highlight the significant gap between current English language preparation and workplace communication demands in Indonesia's tourism-linked retail sector, underscoring the importance of investment in sector-specific workplace English education as a strategy for enhancing both employee professional development and retail sector competitiveness.

Future research should address the identified limitations by extending the needs analysis to diverse Indonesian retail contexts, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and examining the long-term development of retail employees' English communicative competence through targeted training. By systematically building the empirical base for retail sector ESP,



researchers can contribute to a more equitable and effective integration of English language education with the practical communicative requirements of Indonesia's growing service and tourism economy.

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