

Developing Genre and Pragmatic Competence Through Service-Learning: A Discourse-Based Study in a Vietnamese Transnational Hospitality ESP Programme

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how service-learning supports the development of genre awareness and pragmatic competence among Vietnamese hospitality students in an English for Specific Purposes programme. Conducted in the Vietnamese context as part of a transnational bachelor's degree programme, the research adopts a qualitative multiple-case design, drawing on learner-produced texts, recorded service interactions, reflective journals, and stimulated recall interviews. Anchored in genre theory and interlanguage pragmatics, the study investigates how learners engage with professional tourism genres, enact speech acts in authentic communicative situations, and reflect on their language use. The findings reveal that service-learning facilitates uptake of genre-specific discourse structures, encourages the use of context-sensitive pragmatic strategies such as mitigation and repair, and fosters metapragmatic awareness through structured reflection. Nonetheless, challenges remain in sustaining register consistency, managing intercultural framing, and aligning performance with professional discourse norms. The study concludes that service-learning, when integrated with explicit linguistic scaffolding, constitutes a productive environment for applied language development in ESP. It advocates for further discourse-analytic inquiry into learner language use in situated, multilingual settings.

Keywords: Service-learning; English for Specific Purposes; English for tourism; Genre pedagogy; Hospitality communication

INTRODUCTION

In the first six months of 2024, the service and tourism sector emerged as a bright spot in Vietnam's economy, contributing significantly to national GDP growth due to increased domestic demand and a strong recovery in international tourism. The rapid expansion of the tourism and hospitality sector has intensified the need for a professionally competent workforce, particularly those with operational knowledge, service orientation, and strong English proficiency, which requires non-native speakers to develop communicative competence across all core language skills

(Laosrirattanachai & Ruangjaroon, 2021). However, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in Vietnam often fails to prepare students for the communicative complexity of real-world hospitality encounters. Curricula tend to emphasise general linguistic competence rather than functional, context-sensitive, and genre-informed language use, leaving learners underprepared for workplace discourse (Pham, 2023). Pham's (2023) needs analysis of hotel receptionists reveals frequent use of incomplete utterances, idiomatic language, and facework strategies rarely addressed in textbooks. Even English majors with part-time hospitality experience report difficulty transferring classroom language to on-the-job communication (Bui et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by a lack of teacher expertise in the hospitality domain and an over-reliance on imported materials with limited local adaptation (Bui et al., 2024). Students often struggle with task-specific vocabulary, intercultural interaction, and real-time fluency in high-pressure service scenarios. This disconnect between classroom instruction and professional communication highlights the need for pedagogical innovation grounded in authentic language use, genre knowledge, and intercultural pragmatics.

One increasingly recognised response is service learning. Scholars such as Jacoby (2014), Crossman et al. (2024), and Ayala Pazmino (2019) advocate service-learning as a means of aligning ESP instruction with workplace realities, especially when instructors lack direct industry experience. Rooted in experiential education, service-learning immerses students in meaningful, socially embedded projects such as co-developing promotional content or supporting bilingual events where communication is purposeful, strategic, and context-sensitive (Ayala Pazmino, 2019; Crossman et al., 2024). Unlike simulated tasks, these experiences provide opportunities for genuine genre engagement and pragmatic development. Equally important is the role of structured reflection in consolidating learning. Tools such as reflective journals and guided debriefs help learners analyse their language choices, assess intercultural dynamics, and connect discourse performance to professional goals (Le & Le, 2024). These metalinguistic practices support a shift in ESP from skill acquisition to discourse socialisation, aligning with contemporary views of language learning as situated and socially mediated.

Despite growing interest, research on service-learning in Vietnamese ESP contexts remains limited, especially regarding its role in fostering pragmatic competence and discourse control. Existing studies tend to focus on attitudinal outcomes, such as student motivation or civic values, rather than on the linguistic strategies learners use during service tasks (Liu et al., 2022). To address this gap, the present study investigates how service-learning shapes genre awareness, audience adaptation, and pragmatic reflection among first-year Vietnamese students enrolled in a transnational hospitality programme. Anchored in genre theory, ESP pedagogy, and experiential learning, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how situated language use can be fostered through integrated, community-engaged learning models.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN HOSPITALITY EDUCATION

ESP is a recognised field within applied linguistics that focuses on preparing learners to meet the communicative demands of specific professional contexts (Basturkmen, 2005; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In hospitality and tourism, where real-time, guest-facing interaction is the norm, ESP instruction must develop not only language proficiency but also pragmatic and discourse competence.

Hospitality learners need to manage routine speech acts such as greeting, recommending, apologising, and refusing with politeness and context sensitivity (Ishak, 2022). These functions follow predictable rhetorical patterns—for example, complaint responses often involve acknowledgement, apology, explanation, and resolution (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990;). Yet many ESP textbooks underrepresent these structures, particularly in Asian contexts, where imported materials often lack cultural or occupational relevance (Nabung et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2018;). Vietnam-based studies have echoed these concerns. Vu (2018) notes that hotel staff need formulaic yet nuanced English for currency and check-in services, but current curricula rarely reflect this. Le and Le (2024) found that even English majors with real work experience struggled to transfer classroom knowledge to spontaneous service encounters. These findings point to a persistent gap between pedagogical input and workplace demands.

Pragmatic competence further complicates instruction. Hospitality students often overuse direct, formulaic expressions and lack strategies for hedging, softening, or redirection (Prima et al., 2023). This is critical in EFL contexts, where effectiveness depends more on politeness and adaptability than grammatical precision (Crossman et al., 2024). Lexical gaps are also common. Learners struggle to describe dishes or respond to guest inquiries due to limited domain-specific vocabulary, particularly for metaphorical or culturally specific items. Corpus-informed and context-rich vocabulary instruction is needed. Another challenge lies in teacher expertise. Many instructors lack industry background, resulting in textbook-driven instruction disconnected from hospitality discourse (Suherman, 2023). Basturkmen (2005) advocates for genre-based and task-oriented approaches grounded in authentic communication. Recent research supports this direction. Ishak (2022) and Hyland (2007) demonstrate how explicit modelling of rhetorical and interpersonal features can enhance learners' genre control. In Vietnam, Pham (2023) emphasises the need to align ESP instruction with actual service-language use. To meet industry demands, hospitality ESP programmes must move beyond general language drills. They should integrate genre modelling, pragmatic scaffolding, and reflective tasks to bridge the classroom–workplace divide.

GENRE AND DISCOURSE IN TOURISM COMMUNICATION

Tourism communication comprises a distinctive set of genres that operate at the intersection of information provision, persuasion, and interpersonal engagement. These genres include brochures, promotional videos, online travel reviews, guided tour scripts, and service dialogues, each shaped by the communicative goals of the tourism industry and the expectations of culturally diverse audiences. From a linguistic perspective, these genres function as semiotic templates that encode recurrent rhetorical structures, discourse strategies, and lexico-grammatical features, allowing speakers and writers to perform institutionally recognised communicative acts (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990).

Drawing on genre theory, Swales (1990) conceptualises genres as “communicative events” characterised by shared purpose, form, and discourse structure. These are typically realised through a sequence of rhetorical moves and steps, such as in a brochure: (1) attention getter, (2) background information, (3) persuasive claim, (4) call to action. Bhatia (1993) extends this view through the lens of interdiscursivity, noting how tourism genres often borrow elements from advertising, narrative, and informational texts to fulfil multiple communicative aims simultaneously. This hybridity is particularly salient in online and multimodal formats, where

written, visual, and interactive elements converge to engage potential tourists (Lestari & Ekawati, 2023).

Linguistically, tourism discourse is marked by a combination of evaluative stance, affective lexis, and formulaic structures. Common features include: (1) persuasive lexis: use of superlatives and epithets (e.g., “breathtaking view,” “authentic experience”) to build emotional appeal and construct an idealised destination identity (Karimalieva, 2024), (2) discourse markers of stance and engagement: reader-inclusive pronouns (“you”), imperatives (“discover,” “enjoy”), and rhetorical questions (“Looking for your next getaway?”), often used to simulate conversational interaction and reduce social distance (Hannam & Knox, 2005; Hyland, 2007), (3) lexical bundles and collocations: multiword units such as “all-inclusive resort,” “fine dining experience,” and “eco-friendly retreat,” which enhance genre recognisability and contribute to fluency in text processing (Askehave & Swales, 2001), (4) genre-specific syntactic choices: short declarative clauses, simple sentence structures, and imperative mood predominate in promotional genres to maximise accessibility and immediacy for a global audience (Karimalieva, 2024).

Tourism texts also perform identity construction and branding work through discursive strategies that link destination narratives to national, cultural, or personal identities. As Feighery (2006) argues, tourism discourse frames destinations not just spatially but symbolically, often romanticising the past, exoticising difference, or commodifying culture for global consumption. These symbolic constructions are realised linguistically through metaphor, deixis (“nestled in the heart of...”), and evaluative modality (“must-see,” “once-in-a-lifetime”).

Despite extensive scholarship on professionally produced tourism texts, learner interaction with tourism genres remains under-researched, particularly in ESP classrooms where students are required to reproduce these genres in real or simulated contexts. Genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2007) emphasises explicit instruction in rhetorical structures and discourse features, enabling learners to move from genre recognition to genre production. Yet, as Askehave and Swales (2001) note, the boundaries between genres are increasingly blurred in digital and service-based contexts, creating challenges for both instructors and learners in identifying communicative purpose and textual structure.

In the ESP context, particularly in Vietnamese tourism education, there is growing interest in experiential learning projects such as scripting guided tours, creating bilingual brochures, and responding to guest queries in English. However, these initiatives are still limited in scope and remain largely exploratory. Despite this emerging trend, little empirical research has investigated how students internalise genre norms. Do they apply move structures appropriately? Can they adapt persuasive techniques to intercultural audiences? What linguistic deviations or innovations occur in learner texts under authentic task conditions?

This gap is especially salient in service-learning settings, where students must navigate real-world communicative demands with limited linguistic scaffolding. Learner-produced texts in such environments provide rich data for examining genre uptake, including the extent to which learners approximate professional genre conventions or develop hybrid forms that reflect both instruction and situated practice. As Bhatia (1993) and Feighery (2006) argue, genres are not static templates but negotiated practices, continually reshaped by their users. Understanding how learners engage with these genres thus offers critical insight into language development, genre acquisition, and discourse competence in ESP education.

INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In the global hospitality industry, effective communication requires more than grammatical accuracy. Frontline professionals interact daily with guests from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This reality makes pragmatic competence and intercultural communicative competence essential. Pragmatic competence involves the appropriate use of language in context, while intercultural communicative competence refers to the awareness of cultural expectations, values, and communication styles (Byram, 1997; Taguchi, 2015). In fast-paced service environments, where emotional sensitivity is often required, even minor misunderstandings can negatively affect guest satisfaction, disrupt service recovery, and damage the reputation of the organisation.

Hospitality professionals frequently perform critical speech acts such as requests, apologies, refusals, and offers. These acts must be expressed with politeness and relational awareness to maintain rapport and protect face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, a response like "That is not my fault" may be grammatically correct, but socially inappropriate. A more suitable alternative, such as "I am sorry for the inconvenience. Let me check how we can resolve this," conveys empathy, responsibility, and problem-solving intent. The use of hedging expressions, softeners, and indirect forms plays a vital role in conveying professionalism and building interpersonal trust in intercultural encounters.

Accommodation strategies are also necessary. These include adjusting speech rate, simplifying grammar, using repetition, and strategically switching languages to enhance mutual understanding (Giles et al., 1991). In some Vietnamese service contexts, staff may briefly use the local language to establish rapport with guests before continuing in English. Such linguistic flexibility supports both task completion and relationship-building. However, these strategies require a high level of pragmatic awareness that is rarely addressed in conventional ESP classrooms.

Non-verbal communication further complicates interaction. Eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures carry culturally specific meanings that may be misunderstood across cultures. A smile might suggest friendliness in one culture but seem insincere in another. Misinterpretation of these cues can result in pragmatic failure even when verbal content is appropriate (Liu et al., 2022).

Despite improvements in English proficiency across Southeast Asia, research indicates that hospitality learners still struggle with pragmatic appropriateness. This difficulty arises from limited exposure to authentic interactions, overreliance on memorised expressions, and inadequate instruction in sociocultural norms (Taguchi, 2015). For example, Thai interns have been heard saying "You come here at eight o'clock," instead of more polite alternatives like "Would you be able to arrive at eight?" (Nabung et al., 2024) Vietnamese students often use fixed phrases such as "Don't worry, we'll fix it," which may lack clarity or fail to convey empathy (Bui et al., 2024).

These issues reflect a deeper curricular gap. While grammar instruction remains common, learners are rarely trained in real-time interactional skills such as turn-taking, stance adjustment, or pragmatic repair. To support authentic workplace readiness, hospitality-focused ESP programs should integrate intercultural scenarios, discourse-based pragmatics, and guided reflection into language and service training.

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A SITE FOR GENRE ACQUISITION AND PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT IN ESP

Service-learning offers more than civic engagement; it functions as a dynamic environment for contextualised second language development ESP instruction (Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 2014). Unlike classroom simulations, service learning immerses learners in unscripted communicative events that demand spontaneous negotiation of meaning, institutional discourse performance, and audience-sensitive language use (Nguyen, 2018). This environment creates conditions for both genre acquisition and pragmatic development, two competencies often underrepresented in conventional ESP programmes. Hospitality students participating in community-based service projects must communicate through client-facing genres, such as brochures, tour scripts, and guest interactions. These tasks require more than lexical retrieval. Learners must structure speech acts, adapt register, and reflect rhetorical intent. For example, students typically progress from simplified promotional statements like “Come to our village. It is nice,” to more sophisticated formulations such as “We warmly invite you to discover the charm of our traditional village.” This shift reflects increased genre awareness, lexical range, and evaluative language control (Bhatia, 1993; Hyland, 2007).

Pragmatic development is also observable in live interactions. When responding to guest requests, learners may shift from abrupt rejections such as “No room today” to softened, face-sensitive alternatives like “I am sorry, but we are fully booked at the moment. May I recommend a nearby guesthouse?” This evolution illustrates increasing control of mitigation strategies and discourse politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Conceptually, service learning creates a discourse ecology that activates two interrelated processes: genre uptake and interlanguage pragmatics (Canagarajah, 2013). Learners internalise genre conventions through repeated exposure to authentic communicative situations. They adopt professional rhetorical sequences, such as the structure used in replying to online reviews: acknowledgement, apology, explanation, and positive closure (Ishak, 2022). Pragmatic development occurs as learners engage in noticing and repair during breakdowns, building metapragmatic awareness and strategic flexibility (Schmidt, 1990). Empirical studies support this model. Pham (2023) documents increased discourse adaptability in students handling real-time customer queries. Putri et al. (2018) find that writing for real audiences improves lexical sophistication and coherence. Lestari and Ekawati (2023) observe that students producing tourism web content adopt emotive descriptors and reader-inclusive language. Reflective tasks further strengthen learning.

Despite growing institutional support for service learning in Vietnam, its integration into ESP curricula remains limited. Projects often emphasise social outcomes while neglecting linguistic learning. Systematic research on student language use in bilingual hospitality tasks remains scarce, leaving the pedagogical potential of service-learning underutilised.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is grounded in genre theory (Hyland, 2007; Swales, 1990) and interlanguage pragmatics with the aim of examining how Vietnamese hospitality students use, adapt, and reflect on English in a service-learning environment. The research investigates the relationship between task engagement and the development of situated communicative competence across both written and spoken modalities. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ESP learners in a service-learning context appropriate and realise professional tourism genres in English (e.g., promotional texts, guest communication)?
2. What pragmatic strategies do learners employ to manage hospitality-related speech acts (e.g., apologies, requests, refusals) during real-time service interactions?
3. How does participation in service-learning influence learners' metapragmatic awareness and audience sensitivity in cross-cultural communication?
4. What challenges do learners face in aligning their language use with the genre and pragmatic norms of authentic hospitality discourse?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to applied linguistics scholarship by offering empirical insights into how service-learning fosters the discursive, pragmatic, and reflective dimensions of language development in ESP settings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how service-learning supports the development of genre awareness and pragmatic competence among undergraduate students in a Vietnamese English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programme in hospitality and tourism. The design is informed by principles of discourse-oriented applied linguistics, with an emphasis on situated language use, genre performance, and interlanguage pragmatics in authentic communicative contexts (Hyland, 2007; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in a transnational hospitality and leisure management programme jointly delivered by a Vietnamese university and its European partner. English is the medium of instruction, and all students complete a community-based service-learning project embedded in the “English for Tourism” module. The semester-long project involved student teams co-developing bilingual promotional materials (e.g., brochures, posters, web content) for a local tourism site and interacting with visitors during a live guided tour event. Instructional tasks included genre analysis of tourism texts, role-play simulations, peer feedback sessions, and reflective journaling. These pedagogical components were aligned with the data collection process, which drew on learner-produced texts, video-recorded service interactions, reflective journals, and stimulated recall interviews.

Twelve first-year students (aged 18–20, CEFR B1–B2), all Vietnamese speakers, were purposively selected based on consistent participation, leadership in project tasks (e.g., drafting content, presenting tours), and completion of reflective assignments. Participants were also selected based on their expressed willingness to engage in post-task interviews and articulate their reasoning behind specific communicative decisions.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from four primary sources to ensure methodological triangulation:

Learner-Produced Texts: Students submitted English-language brochures, video scripts, and social media captions created for real clients. These texts were analysed for genre structure and discourse features.

Recorded Spoken Interactions: Students' spoken interactions during the guided tour and client service exchanges were audio-recorded and transcribed. This data captured real-time pragmatic strategies and interactional discourse.

Reflective Journals: Participants submitted two reflective journals (mid-project and post-project), guided by prompts encouraging analysis of communicative decisions, language adaptation, and audience response.

Stimulated Recall Interviews: Eight out of the twelve participants were selected for individual interviews, based on the clarity and relevance of their recorded service interactions. During the interviews, students reviewed excerpts from their own audio-recorded performances and reflected on their language use. This process elicited insights into their metapragmatic awareness and communicative strategies. All participants provided informed consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board of the host university.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Each data source was analysed using an approach grounded in applied linguistics and discourse analysis:

1. **Genre Analysis:** Learner texts were coded using a modified move-step analysis framework (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990), focusing on rhetorical structures (e.g., attention getter, destination description, call to action), lexical density, stance, and engagement features.
2. **Pragmatic Strategy Coding:** Transcribed interactions were analysed for speech act realisation patterns, politeness strategies, and repair sequences, drawing on coding schemes from Taguchi (2015).
3. **Thematic Analysis of Reflections:** Journals and interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method to identify learners' perceptions of genre use, audience adaptation, and pragmatic reflection.

The analysis sought to identify both expected and emergent patterns in learner language, including genre conformity, pragmatic flexibility, discourse appropriacy, and self-reported strategy shifts.

Coding Procedures and Interrater Reliability:

To address potential researcher bias and ensure consistency, all qualitative data were independently coded by four researchers. An initial codebook was developed and refined through two rounds of piloting. Interrater reliability was established through double-coding 25% of the dataset, yielding agreement levels above 85%. Coding disagreements were discussed and resolved collaboratively. This process enhanced interpretive validity and ensured transparency across data sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents key findings in relation to the four research questions. Drawing from genre analysis of learner-produced texts, transcribed student–client interactions, reflective journals, and stimulated recall interviews, the results provide insight into learners’ genre uptake, pragmatic performance, metapragmatic awareness, and the challenges they encountered in service-based English communication tasks.

I: APPROPRIATION AND REALISATION OF PROFESSIONAL TOURISM GENRES

The analysis of student-produced tourism brochures revealed emerging but inconsistent control over professional genre conventions. Most learners showed awareness of the rhetorical structure typical of tourism discourse, including moves such as the attention getter, destination description, value proposition, and call to action. These align with genre frameworks outlined by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993).

One strong example began with: *“Explore the timeless charm of Van Phuc Silk Village—where culture, craftsmanship, and community come together.”* This sentence illustrates successful deployment of evaluative and metaphorical lexis (*“timeless charm”*), parallel syntactic structure (*“culture, craftsmanship, and community”*), and a blended narrative-promotional tone. It combines storytelling elements with marketing intent by inviting the reader to imagine an immersive cultural experience while promoting key tourism values. Other samples employed similar blended tone features, such as: *“Step into a world of tradition and taste the essence of Hanoi’s heritage in every bite.”* In contrast, some texts revealed only partial genre control. For example: *“This village is famous. You can visit and buy souvenirs.”* While factually informative, the sentence lacks lexical sophistication, modality, and reader engagement. It presents information in a flat declarative style, with no attempt to frame value or establish rapport, showing underdeveloped interpersonal function (Martin & White, 2005).

Genre execution was also weakened by coherence issues. Some students produced fragmented moves without clear progression or cohesive devices, limiting overall genre recognisability. For example, one brochure included: *“This is our village. It has many things. You can come.”* This sequence lacks logical connectors and fails to build a coherent promotional narrative, resulting in a disjointed and underdeveloped genre structure. Additionally, lexical choices often relied on memorised chunks such as *“authentic culture”* or *“handmade souvenirs,”* which were sometimes awkwardly placed or not contextually embedded. This suggests limited mastery of genre-specific collocations and discourse fluency. These findings underscore that while service learning offered authentic exposure, learners remained in a transitional phase between imitation and genre control (Tardy, 2009). Performance was shaped by cognitive demands, limited lexical repertoire, and insufficient scaffolding. To bridge this gap, ESP writing instruction should provide explicit modelling of genre moves, stylistic variation, and evaluative language (Hyland, 2007).

In short, service-learning fosters genre awareness but does not have full rhetorical flexibility. For learners to move from structural competence to persuasive effectiveness, genre-based pedagogy must be integrated with task authenticity and iterative feedback.

II: PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES IN HOSPITALITY-RELATED SPEECH ACTS

Analysis of student–client interaction transcripts revealed evidence of an emerging but inconsistent repertoire of pragmatic strategies for managing key hospitality speech acts. These included requests, offers, apologies, and refusals, all of which occurred in time-sensitive and socially consequential contexts. Learners were required to navigate interpersonal expectations while maintaining task efficiency, highlighting the dual demands of hospitality discourse.

USE OF POLITENESS AND MITIGATION

Many students demonstrated growing awareness of facework and relational goals using indirectness, hedging, and polite formulae. These align with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and reflect increasing control over pragmalinguistic forms. For example:

Polite requests: *“Could you please follow me this way?”*

This utterance displays modal politeness (“could”), use of a politeness marker (“please”), and a softened imperative—indicators of sensitivity to negative face needs in guest-facing interactions.

Mitigated refusals: *“I’m afraid we don’t have that option today, but we have something similar.”*

This utterance illustrates the use of a dispreferred move structure, hedging through the phrase “I’m afraid,” and a positive redirection strategy to maintain rapport. These strategies are well-documented in cross-cultural service pragmatics (Taguchi, 2015).

Empathic apologies: *“We’re really sorry for the delay. Thank you for your patience.”*

This structure demonstrates positive politeness through empathy, gratitude, and alignment with professional apology routines.

These utterances were frequently accompanied by supportive non-verbal behaviours such as smiling and gesturing, as well as prosodic softening, all of which reinforced interpersonal rapport.

PRAGMATIC BREAKDOWN AND INTERLANGUAGE INFLUENCE

Despite progress, pragmatic breakdowns were frequent, particularly in high-stakes or unanticipated interactions. Three main patterns emerged:

Over-directness: *“You sit here now.”*

This direct command lacks any mitigation and may be interpreted as rude in English, despite being culturally neutral in Vietnamese.

Lexical reduction: *“Don’t have.”*

Such truncated forms often stemmed from cognitive overload, syntactic transfer, or limited fluency hallmarks of interlanguage performance (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Inadequate escalation or hedging.

Many learners struggled to adapt speech strategies in response to more formal or emotionally charged situations. They often defaulted to direct forms or fixed expressions when more nuanced language was needed.

These difficulties highlight the gap between pragmatic awareness and execution, particularly under real-time communicative pressure. Learners were expected to fulfil multiple discourse functions simultaneously (e.g., decline politely, explain clearly, and redirect positively), but often lacked sufficient strategic competence to manage these moves fluidly.

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A SITE OF PRAGMATIC EMERGENCE

The service-learning environment placed students in high-input, high-output communicative contexts that differed significantly from classroom simulations. Pragmatic competence became essential rather than peripheral, forcing learners to attend to situational appropriateness, face needs, and discourse sequencing. However, the authenticity of the task alone did not guarantee effective performance. These findings support prior research emphasising the need for pedagogical scaffolding, including targeted instruction and post-task reflection (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Learners demonstrated early-stage competence in key hospitality speech acts, particularly in politeness and mitigation, but continued to face challenges with lexical choice, discourse coordination, and intercultural adaptation.

In sum, service-learning promoted greater functional awareness of hospitality pragmatics. Yet without structured feedback and focused practice, learners remained vulnerable to pragmatic infelicities. ESP instruction should integrate pragmatics-focused activities that go beyond awareness-building to support the development of contextually appropriate, interactionally effective speech.

III: METAPRAGMATIC AWARENESS AND AUDIENCE SENSITIVITY

Data from reflective journals and stimulated recall interviews revealed a clear trajectory in learners' development of metapragmatic awareness - the ability to evaluate and adjust language use based on social, contextual, and intercultural cues (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). This awareness plays a critical role in bridging the gap between linguistic accuracy and communicative appropriacy.

Learners increasingly recognised that grammatical correctness did not guarantee politeness or effectiveness in guest-facing exchanges. One student reflected, *"I said, 'Do you understand?' but I think maybe it's too direct. I changed to 'Is that clear for you?' next time."* This revision illustrates Schmidt's (1990) concept of noticing and shows a shift toward relational sensitivity. Similarly, another participant noted, *"I learned to say 'Would you like to try?' instead of 'Eat this,' because it's more polite and friendly."* These examples demonstrate an emerging ability to modify speech for face management, moving from directive to modalised, client-centred forms.

Beyond syntactic and lexical choices, students demonstrated awareness of cultural variation in language use. Several adjusted speech rate, avoided idiomatic expressions, or simplified vocabulary when interacting with non-native speakers. Others used strategic code-switching, especially when explaining culturally embedded concepts. One learner explained, “*I used English mostly, but for the name of the cake, I said it in Vietnamese and explained with hand gestures.*” This reflects the use of multimodal and translanguaging strategies to ensure intelligibility and maintain rapport (Canagarajah, 2013).

These behaviours signal a shift from reactive correction to proactive strategy selection. Learners were no longer merely repairing errors after the fact; they were anticipating pragmatic risks and choosing more socially calibrated forms in real time. Such metapragmatic development illustrates the move from rote reproduction of classroom phrases to context-responsive communication. Crucially, this growth was facilitated by structured reflection. When learners were given space to articulate their communicative decisions through journals, post-task interviews, or discourse logs, they began to verbalise the reasoning behind their language choices. This process supports long-term uptake of sociopragmatic norms and aligns with research emphasising reflection as a catalyst for pragmatic acquisition (Taguchi, 2015). These findings also reinforce the pedagogical value of embedding guided reflection in ESP instruction. Reflection is not just metacognitive; it is social and developmental. It allows learners to reposition themselves within target discourse communities and refine their pragmatic repertoires accordingly.

In sum, students demonstrated a growing ability to notice, interpret, and adapt to the demands of professional service discourse. Their reflections highlight the central role of metapragmatic awareness in building communicative competence in real-world ESP contexts. This competence should be viewed not as an incidental outcome, but as a core instructional goal, cultivated through authentic interaction and deliberate pedagogical design.

IV: CHALLENGES IN ALIGNING LANGUAGE USE WITH PROFESSIONAL NORMS

While students demonstrated measurable progress in genre realisation and pragmatic strategy use, analysis of learner-produced texts, recorded service interactions, and stimulated recall interviews also revealed persistent challenges in aligning their language production with the communicative norms and discourse expectations of professional hospitality contexts. These difficulties were evident across both written and spoken modes and can be broadly categorised into four areas: lexical underdevelopment, register inconsistency, speech act failure, and cultural framing difficulties.

LEXICAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Learners frequently relied on general-purpose vocabulary (e.g., “*nice*,” “*many things*,” “*go there*”) in their promotional texts, which undermined both the specificity and persuasive force required in tourism genres. The absence of field-sensitive lexis (e.g., “*heritage craft demonstration*,” “*artisan workshop*,” “*culinary sampling*”) limited their ability to construct experiential value for the reader—a central feature of promotional discourse (Bhatia, 1993; Hyland, 2007). This lexical gap reflects both limited input and underdeveloped control of genre-specific lexical bundles.

REGISTER INCONSISTENCY

Students often oscillated between overly formal, scripted language and abrupt, casual constructions, resulting in stylistic dissonance. For example: “*We are most delighted to welcome you*” (excessive formality, possibly translated from L1 honorifics), “*You come now*” (bare imperative, lacking mitigation). These shifts indicate uncertainty about audience positioning, and an incomplete grasp of register calibration—the ability to adapt tone, modality, and formality in relation to context and interlocutor expectations (Martin & White, 2005). Learners appeared to be aware of this difficulty. One student reflected: “*Sometimes I don’t know if I am too serious or too friendly.*” This highlights the gap between genre awareness and stylistic execution, a central concern in ESP writing and speaking performance.

SPEECH ACT FAILURE AND POLITENESS BREAKDOWN

In high-stakes service encounters, students at times produced direct, unhedged refusals or abrupt responses, particularly when under time pressure or when navigating unfamiliar speech acts. The failure to hedge, delay, or offer alternatives in refusals and explanations occasionally resulted in unintended rudeness or face-threatening interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One participant commented: “*I want to sound polite, but I don’t have the right words.*” This underscores a lack of pragma linguistic resources—the linguistic tools necessary to express politeness, deference, or indirectness—as well as underdeveloped sociopragmatic sensitivity to context (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

CULTURAL FRAMING DIFFICULTIES

A notable challenge involved students’ efforts to translate culturally specific content, such as food, rituals, or festivals, into English in a way that preserved meaning while remaining accessible to international visitors. Learners often resorted to literal translation or vague descriptors, struggling to find analogical frames or cross-cultural equivalents. For instance, “*We have cake. It’s traditional. You eat it in the New Year.*” While factually accurate, such descriptions lacked the elaboration and cultural contextualisation necessary to create resonance with unfamiliar audiences. Learners rarely used strategies such as cultural bridging metaphors (e.g., “It’s similar to rice pudding, but made with sticky rice and coconut”) or comparative analogies, indicating a need for explicit instruction in intercultural narrative framing.

These findings reveal a performance gap between learners’ emerging discourse knowledge and their ability to mobilise linguistic and pragmatic resources under real-world communicative conditions. The challenges observed are consistent with previous studies on interlanguage performance, where learners exhibit partial awareness of target norms but struggle to execute them fluently in spontaneous production (Taguchi, 2015). Importantly, these difficulties are not indicative of pedagogical failure but rather reflect the developmental nature of pragmatic and genre competence, particularly in high-stakes, low-scaffold contexts like service-learning. While the authenticity of the service-learning environment offers rich opportunities for meaning negotiation and genre enactment, the findings suggest that such environments must be accompanied by: (a) Pre-task modelling of genre features and speech act routines; (b) Lexical enrichment activities focused on ESP collocations and evaluative language; (c) Scaffolded intercultural mediation

practice, helping learners frame local content for global audiences; (d) Reflective protocols that support learners in noticing and addressing breakdowns in tone, style, or audience adaptation.

In general, the data affirm that service-learning constitutes a linguistically rich, interactionally complex environment, where learners must navigate both rhetorical precision and interpersonal appropriacy. Students clearly benefited from situated language use, demonstrated genre uptake, and engaged in pragmatic reflection. However, the persistence of performance challenges underscores that authenticity alone does not guarantee linguistic development. For service-learning to reach its full potential as a vehicle for ESP learning, it must be deliberately integrated with genre-based instruction, explicit pragmatics teaching, and structured feedback loops. This study contributes to applied linguistics by offering empirical insight into how ESP learners use and adapt English in service-based interactions, helping to bridge the gap between language pedagogy, discourse practice, and pragmatic development in real-world learning contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how service-learning functions as a linguistically generative context for developing genre awareness and pragmatic competence among ESP learners in a Vietnamese hospitality programme. Drawing on learner-produced texts, real-time interactions, and reflective narratives, the analysis revealed that students engaged with target genres and speech acts in increasingly sophisticated ways, reproducing rhetorical structures, deploying politeness strategies, and adjusting register in response to audience and context. At the same time, learners encountered persistent challenges related to lexical range, genre execution, cultural framing, and the dynamic demands of real-time communication.

These findings make several key contributions to the field of applied linguistics. First, the study extends genre-based ESP research by illustrating how genre uptake occurs not only through classroom modelling but also through authentic communicative purpose, mediated by interaction with real audiences. Second, it affirms the relevance of interlanguage pragmatics in situated performance, demonstrating that speech act realisation and metapragmatic awareness evolve through experiential negotiation, not mere exposure. Finally, the study reinforces a sociocognitive view of language development, where linguistic competence is shaped by context, agency, and reflective practice.

For ESP pedagogy, the findings underscore the importance of integrating genre-focused instruction, explicit pragmatic scaffolding, and structured reflection into experiential learning curricula. Service-learning offers learners the rare opportunity to activate, adapt, and evaluate their language in high-stakes yet pedagogically supported settings, bridging the long-standing divide between ESP theory and communicative practice.

Future research should investigate the longitudinal impact of such interventions, incorporate multimodal analysis of learner discourse, and explore how service-learning supports language development across diverse domains beyond tourism. In doing so, applied linguistics can further illuminate the dynamic interplay between genre, pragmatics, and performance in real-world language use.

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