

Developing Wellness Tourism Communication: A Strategic Response to the Internationalization Needs of Emerging Tourist Destinations"

DAHLIA HUSAIN, ANA MARIANA, YUMANRAYA NOHO

Abstract: *The rapid growth of wellness tourism has created new opportunities for emerging destinations to attract international visitors seeking holistic and health-oriented experiences. However, language barriers often limit these destinations' ability to compete globally. This study explores the strategic development of English for Wellness Tourism Communication (EWTC) as a tailored linguistic and pedagogical framework designed to enhance the communicative competence of tourism practitioners in emerging markets. By integrating the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with the contextual needs of wellness tourism, the framework aims to improve service quality, cultural interaction, and international market readiness. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, combining literature review, field observations, and stakeholder interviews to identify communicative needs and propose curriculum design elements. Findings indicate that developing English proficiency aligned with wellness tourism contexts strengthens global competitiveness, supports sustainable development, and promotes inclusive participation in the international tourism industry. This strategic linguistic initiative thus serves as a key instrument for bridging local wellness values with global standards, ensuring that emerging destinations can thrive in the era of internationalization.*

Keywords: Wellness tourism, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), communication, internationalization, sustainable development, emerging destinations

Introduction

Wellness tourism has become a major trend in the global tourism industry. This trend has intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic, as travelers seek not only entertainment but also experiences that support physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health (Rahjasa & Naur, 2024; Ulya et al., 2024). This shift in traveler preferences toward health- and wellness-based activities indicates that wellness tourism offers strategic prospects for development in various Indonesian destinations.

Previous research confirms that wellness tourism not only provides health benefits for tourists but also contributes to economic development and the preservation of local culture (Andriani et al., 2024; Wijaya & Prianthara, 2024). For example, Bali has long been recognized as an international wellness tourism hub, offering activities such as yoga, meditation, spas, and the traditional melukat ritual (Wijaya & Prianthara, 2024). Similarly, tourist villages like Bonjeruk in Lombok have integrated cultural, environmental, and spiritual attractions to create a holistic experience for tourists (Ulya et al., 2024).

The concept of wellness in wellness tourism encompasses various dimensions, including social, physical, emotional, intellectual, environmental, and spiritual (Rahjasa & Naur, 2024). Thus, the tourism experience is viewed not only from a recreational perspective but also from how these activities enhance the overall quality of life of tourists. This model aligns with the concept of tourism and wellbeing, which emphasizes the balance between hedonic happiness (momentary pleasure) and eudaimonic happiness (deeper meaning in life) (Smith & Diekmann, 2017).

Indonesia has significant potential for developing wellness tourism due to its rich culture, healing traditions, and biodiversity, which can be developed into tourist attractions. Besides Bali, other regions, such as Gorontalo, also boast unique traditions such as herbal therapy, self-cleansing rituals, and nature-based meditation, all of which offer authentic value to international tourists. However, this potential faces several obstacles, including limited basic facilities, unintegrated promotion, and limited communication skills among tourism operators (Andriani et al., 2024; Ulya et al., 2024).

One of the biggest challenges in the context of internationalizing wellness tourism in Gorontalo is the limited English proficiency of tourism operators. Yet, cross-cultural communication skills are crucial for explaining the philosophical meaning and spiritual values inherent in wellness practices. Inadequate communication can lead to international tourists failing to understand the uniqueness of local culture, resulting in a shallow experience. Therefore, a communication strategy based on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and cultural storytelling is needed to convey cultural narratives authentically and engagingly (Husain, 2023).

Thus, this research focuses on developing an English for Wellness Tourism Communication (EWTC) model in Gorontalo. This model is expected to provide a solution for improving the communication capacity of tourism operators while preserving local cultural values so they can be understood and appreciated by international tourists.

Methods and Informants

This study uses a qualitative approach with exploratory methods to understand the communication phenomenon in wellness tourism in Gorontalo. This method was chosen based on the need to explore the experiences, narratives, and perceptions of tourism actors and tourists regarding authentic wellness practices. According to Andriani et al. (2024), a qualitative approach is highly relevant in the study of wellness tourism because it can capture the social construction and cultural meanings inherent in tourism experiences.

Research informants consist of three main groups:

1. **Local Wellness Actor**– consisting of traditional spa service providers, herbal therapists, nature meditation facilitators, and culturally-based tour guides. They were selected because of their direct involvement in wellness tourism practices in Gorontalo.
2. **Foreign and Domestic Tourists**– who have participated in wellness activities in Gorontalo, such as cleansing rituals, natural yoga, and spas using local coconut oil. These informants provide a user perspective on the quality of the experience.
3. **Local Policymakers and Academics**– including representatives from the tourism office and academics who research the tourism sector.

The informant selection technique was carried out using purposive sampling by considering direct involvement and relevance to the research objectives (Wijaya & Prianthara, 2024).

Data was collected through several techniques:

- **In-depth Interview** with 15 wellness practitioners, 10 foreign tourists, 5 domestic tourists, and 3 policy makers.
- **Participatory Observation** in several wellness activities such as beach meditation, coconut oil spa, and flower bath rituals.
- **Documentation** in the form of brochures, promotional materials, and local policy notes related to tourism.

Source and method triangulation techniques were used to increase data validity (Ulya et al., 2024).

The analysis was conducted using the Miles & Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The data was analyzed thematically to identify related patterns:

1. The value of authenticity in wellness practice.
2. Communication barriers between tourism actors and international tourists.
3. The role of digital facilities and promotions in supporting wellness tourism.

This thematic approach is in line with the model used in wellness tourism research in Bali and Lombok, which emphasizes exploring the physical, mental, spiritual, and environmental dimensions of the tourism experience (Rahjasa & Naur, 2024; Ulya et al., 2024).

Research Results and Discussion

3.1 Motivations for Following or Offering Wellness Practices

Motivation is a key factor influencing the participation of both local residents and tourists in wellness tourism activities in Gorontalo. The majority of informants stated that their involvement in traditional spa practices, yoga, meditation, hydrotherapy, and grounding is not merely intended as entertainment or recreational activities. For locals, these practices are a cultural heritage passed down through generations, as well as a means of maintaining balance between body and mind.

A traditional spa therapist, Ms. Ratna (27), a therapist at Azzahra Spa Gorontalo, emphasized that traditional massage is not just a physical activity, but is accompanied by small prayers that bring inner peace. This indicates the spiritual dimension inherent in local wellness practices. Meanwhile, from the perspective of foreign tourists, their motivation is more focused on seeking new, authentic experiences. Thomas (34) from Germany, for example, stated that he had attended several yoga retreats in Bali, but Gorontalo offered a different feel because it was more natural and closer to the local community.

These findings confirm the study by Dryglas and Salamaga (2018), which emphasized that wellness tourists value authenticity and closeness to local culture over standardized modern services. Thus, tourist motivations in the context of Gorontalo's wellness tourism are multidimensional: a search for inner peace, an appreciation for cultural authenticity, and a drive to gain unique experiences not found in other destinations.

3.2 Traditional Wellness Spa Activities

Traditional spas based on local oils, spice scrubs, ratus, and other treatments performed at one of the spas (Azzahra Gorontalo) visited by researchers are the most dominant wellness practices in Gorontalo. Therapists explained massage techniques involving heated coconut oil, the use of herbal concoctions, and aromatherapy with local flowers. These spas are often combined with flower bathing rituals, which serve as a symbol of self-purification. Researchers conducted participant observation by directly experiencing the unique and healthy experience of traditional Gorontalo spas. The aroma of coconut oil, olive oil, and a blend of local plants created a distinctive atmosphere. The strains of traditional music and the therapists' explanations of the function of massage as a means of dispelling negative energy added meaning. This demonstrates that traditional spas offer not only physical treatments but also emotional and spiritual dimensions. This aligns with a study by Medina-Muñoz et al. (2020) which states that wellness tourism must be understood as a combination of physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. Thus, traditional Gorontalo spas have a competitive advantage because they are able to integrate these three aspects.

Figure 3.1 Traditional Spa Practices at Azzahra Spa, Gorontalo



Source: Researcher Documentation, 2025

The most significant obstacle is a lack of English language skills. Spa therapists in Gorontalo generally only know simple phrases to greet or give basic instructions, such as "please relax" or "lie down here." This results in tourists experiencing the massage only physically, without understanding the symbolism of the use of coconut oil and prayers in the massage process. Beyond language, therapists also struggle to convey cultural meanings in simple narratives. Many therapists understand the philosophy of their ancestors but are unaccustomed to re-articulate it in a language that foreign tourists can understand. Foreign tourists end up interpreting massage as merely a natural treatment, rather than a spiritual ritual.

Observations at the spa revealed no English-language information boards or brochures explaining the spa's meaning or the history of the rituals. Consequently, all explanations depend on the therapists. This suggests that the limited support materials exacerbate the communication gap.

There's also a psychological barrier where therapists feel less confident when dealing with foreign tourists. They fear mispronouncing English. As a result, they choose to remain silent or simply smile when tourists ask questions. This psychological barrier exacerbates the language barrier, making communication almost impossible. In Gorontalo culture, explanations are often implicit and conveyed through symbols or long stories. In contrast, foreign tourists are accustomed to explicit and direct explanations.

Another challenge concerns the time or duration of the treatment. Traditional spa treatments typically focus on touch and a quiet atmosphere. Therapists often feel that too much talk disrupts the relaxing atmosphere. As a result, opportunities to explain cultural meanings are severely limited.

Wellness Activities in the Pioneer Lake Area

Perintis Lake is a natural tourist destination that is beginning to be utilized as a location for ecotourism-based wellness activities. The lake's surroundings offer a tranquil atmosphere, cool air, and calming water views. In recent years, local management has tried to transform it into a space for meditation, light yoga, and simple self-purification rituals, such as soaking feet in the lake's edge.

Observations show that tourists, especially young people and families, enjoy the tranquil atmosphere along the lakeshore. Organized wellness activities are simple: brief guided meditations, breathing exercises, and serving herbal drinks made from local plants. International tourists who happen to stop by are drawn to the serenity and authenticity of the setting, similar to those they found at Bohulo Camp and Kurenai Beach.

However, communication barriers reappeared in a form consistent with other wellness locations in Gorontalo:

1. **Minimal and Intermittent Instructions**

Local instructors or facilitators use simple phrases like "breathe... relax... nature is good." Explanations about the lake's meaning as a symbol of natural balance or as a medium for spiritual reflection are not readily conveyed to foreign tourists.

2. **Inability to Convey Philosophical Narrative**

In an interview, a local facilitator said: "We know that our elders used to believe that the lake water brought peace of mind, but it was difficult to explain to foreign tourists." This barrier meant that the cultural and spiritual dimensions were only understood by local people, while foreign tourists interpreted it as a recreational activity.

3. **The Absence of Bilingual Media**

There are no information boards or leaflets explaining the history and significance of Perintis Lake in English. Foreign tourists only get general information from social media or brief stories from guides.

4. **Differences in Tourist Expectations**

Domestic tourists tend to be satisfied with the serenity and natural surroundings, while international visitors expect a deeper narrative about local philosophy. One German tourist commented: "The lake was beautiful and peaceful, but I wanted to know if locals see it as spiritual or simply natural."

The case of Danau Perintis confirms a similar pattern to other wellness locations in Gorontalo. International tourists experience hedonic wellbeing through physical relaxation, but fail to achieve eudaimonic wellbeing because the cultural meaning is not communicated (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Yet, the lake's water, as a symbol of serenity and natural harmony, has strong narrative potential to be marketed as a culture-based wellness experience.

Consistent with findings at the spa, Bohulo Camp, Kurenai, and Oceana, communication barriers at Danau Perintis highlight the urgent need for English for Wellness Tourism Communication (EWTC). Simple phrases like "In Gorontalo, the lake is believed to bring peace of mind and spiritual balance" can help foreign tourists understand local philosophy without losing authenticity.

Figure 3.5 Wellness Activities in the Pioneer Lake Area



Source: Internet and Researcher Documentation, 2025.

Table 3.1 Gorontalo Wellness Tourism Research Results Matrix

Location / Activity	Types of Wellness Activities	Key Findings	English Language Barriers	EWTC Needs
Traditional Spa	Coconut oil massage, spice scrub, flower bath	Traditional spas contain physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions; foreign tourists appreciate the authenticity.	The therapist only knows simple phrases (“please relax”); it is difficult to explain the philosophy of coconut oil & prayer	Spa vocabulary; symbolic narrative of prayer & coconut oil; bilingual brochure media
River at Bohulo Camp	River yoga, meditation, hydrotherapy, herbal drinks	Natural atmosphere supports relaxation; foreign tourists like natural atmosphere	The instructor only uses short phrases (“inhale... exhale”); is unable to explain the philosophy of water & herbs.	Yoga/meditation vocabulary; storytelling of the meaning of water & herbs; bilingual digital promotional materials
Kurenai Beach	Grounding (walking on gravel)	Grounding is understood locally as self-	The guide only explained “good for health” → tourists were	Simple grounding vocabulary; “connecting with the earth” narrative;

Developing Wellness Tourism Communication: A Strategic Response to the
Internationalization Needs of Emerging Tourist Destinations"

Location / Activity	Types of Wellness Activities	Key Findings	English Language Barriers	EWTC Needs
		purification & life balance.	confused; there were no English brochures.	bilingual leaflet & video
Beaches in the Oceana Area	Sunrise yoga on the beach	Foreign tourists feel the positive energy of sunrise yoga	The instructor only gives movement instructions without any philosophical meaning; tourists lose the narrative dimension.	Beach yoga vocabulary; "sunrise = new energy" storytelling; bilingual instructor training
Pioneer Lake	Meditation, breathing exercises, simple self-purification	The lake environment supports relaxation	Minimal explanation ("breathe... relax"); cannot convey the philosophy of lake water	Meditation vocabulary; spiritual narrative about lake water; bilingual information board
Common Constraints	All wellness locations	Foreign tourists can only experience hedonic wellbeing (physical) without eudaimonic wellbeing (meaning)	Minimal instructions, lack of confidence, lack of supporting media	EWTC based on ESP, cultural storytelling, bilingual media, digital training
General Recommendations	Wellness experiences must be complemented by cultural narratives so that tourists gain holistic meaning.			

Needs AnalysisEnglish Language Needs for Wellness Tourism Practitioners

5.1 Limitations of Practical English

Reports indicate that spa therapists in Gorontalo generally only know simple phrases like "please relax" or "lie down here." As a result, foreign tourists experience massage as a physical activity without understanding the symbolism of coconut oil or the prayers involved.

The same thing happened with the yoga and meditation instructors at Bohulo Camp, who only used short phrases like "inhale... exhale... relax" or "feel nature, Gorontalo spirit." Yet, these activities have a deep spiritual meaning that should be conveyed to tourists.

5.2 Loss of Narrative Dimension

Wellness tourism In Gorontalo, the practice is steeped in cultural philosophy, such as the significance of river water as a means of purification or the grounding of Kurenai Beach as a symbol of balance in life. However, limited English language skills prevent these meanings from being conveyed. Foreign tourists ultimately understand only the physical health aspects, not the spiritual values behind the practice.

5.3. Psychological Barriers

Many tourists feel insecure about speaking English. They fear making mistakes, so they prefer to remain silent or simply smile when tourists ask questions. This psychological barrier exacerbates the limitations of verbal communication, making interactions awkward.

5.4. Absence of Bilingual Media

There are no English-language brochures, information boards, or leaflets available at the spa, Bohulo Camp, or Pioneer Lake. All explanations rely solely on direct communication from tourism operators. Consequently, the philosophical dimensions and cultural narratives are increasingly difficult for international tourists to grasp.

Based on the findings above, four main categories of English language needs for wellness tourism practitioners can be identified:

1. Functional English

- Give warm greetings and greetings.
- Delivering simple instructions for spa activities, yoga, meditation, grounding, and hydrotherapy.
- Answering basic traveler questions about schedules, procedures, and safety.

2. Narrative English (Cultural Storytelling)

- Conveying the cultural and spiritual meaning behind each practice, for example:
 - *"This herbal drink is believed to cleanse the body and soul."*
 - *"Walking on the stones symbolizes balance and connection with nature."*
- Use simple but meaningful vocabulary so that it is easy for tourists to understand.

3. Digital English

- Write a short description for promotion on social media or website.
- Create visual content with bilingual subtitles or captions.
- Respond to foreign tourists' messages via email or messaging apps.

4. English for Psychological Strengthening

- Role play based conversation exercises to build self-confidence.

Developing Wellness Tourism Communication: A Strategic Response to the Internationalization Needs of Emerging Tourist Destinations"

- Simple strategies to overcome the fear of speaking incorrectly in front of tourists.
- Use polite expressions when you don't understand a tourist's question, for example "Could you repeat that slowly, please?"

In order to make the development of English for Wellness Tourism Communication (EWTC) more effective, training materials need to be prioritized into three main stages:

Stage 1: Basics

- Greetings, self-introductions, and brief service instructions.
- Common vocabulary to describe physical activities (breathing, stretching, relaxing, herbal, water, balance).
- Practice daily conversation with tourists.

Stage 2: Intermediate

- An introduction to simple cultural and spiritual concepts.
- Narrative exercise: telling the philosophy of spa, yoga, or herbal drinks in short sentences.
- Preparation of bilingual brochures or information boards.

Stage 3: Advanced

- Cultural storytelling training with role play techniques.
- Use of digital media: writing Instagram captions, making short videos with English subtitles.
- Simulation of interactive communication with foreign tourists in various scenarios (spa, yoga, nature tours, cultural rituals).

Implications for Tourism Development

1. Increasing International Competitiveness

English communication skills will strengthen Gorontalo's wellness tourism appeal in the global market. International tourists tend to choose destinations that offer authentic and understandable experiences.

2. Strengthening Cultural Identity

EWTC enables tourism operators to convey local philosophies like "Mopolihu lo Limu" in simple terms. This way, tourists not only experience physical relaxation but also take home a deeper understanding of the culture.

3. Empowering Local Communities

English language training has a direct impact on enhancing the capacity of local communities. They no longer rely on translators or outsiders, but instead become key actors in the cultural tourism narrative.

4. Support Digital Promotion

Social media is currently a key channel for tourism promotion. Bilingual content will increase international reach and project a professional image for Gorontalo's wellness destinations.

Conclusion

The development of English for Wellness Tourism Communication represents a vital strategic response to the growing internationalization of emerging tourist destinations. As wellness tourism becomes a key driver of global travel trends, the ability of local stakeholders—such as spa operators, retreat managers, tour guides, and hospitality professionals—to communicate effectively in English determines their competitiveness in the global market. Tailoring English language programs to the specific needs of the wellness tourism sector not only enhances service quality and visitor satisfaction but also promotes cultural sensitivity and authentic local engagement.

Moreover, integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within wellness tourism training can strengthen human resources, align with sustainable tourism goals, and attract international clients seeking holistic experiences. Ultimately, the strategic development of English proficiency serves as both a communicative tool and an instrument of empowerment—bridging local wellness traditions with global audiences, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and positioning emerging destinations as competitive players in the international tourism landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the needs analysis, there are several strategic recommendations for the implementation of EWTC:

1. **EWTC Module Development**

Modules should be based on real-world practices, such as vocabulary for spas, yoga, meditation, and grounding. They should also include examples of simple philosophical narratives.

2. **Community Based Training**

Training takes place directly at tourist locations (spas, beaches, lakes) using role-play methods. This allows tourism practitioners to practice vocabulary in context.

3. **Provision of Bilingual Support Media**

Brochures, leaflets, and information boards in Indonesian and English. Short videos with subtitles should also be developed as communication tools.

4. **Collaboration with Academics and Government**

Tourism offices and universities can be strategic partners in providing training and mentoring.

5. **Utilization of Digital Technology**

Tourism operators need to be trained to use translation applications, online learning, or simple chatbots to support communication.

Reference

- Rahjasa, I., & Naur, A. (2024). *Tourism and Wellbeing: A Holistic Approach to Post-Pandemic Travel*. *Journal of Tourism Studies*, 12(2), 45–60.
- Ulya, H., Andriani, S., & Pratama, Y. (2024). *Integrating Culture, Nature, and Wellness in Rural Tourism Destinations*. *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 18(1), 77–94.
- Andriani, S., Wijaya, I., & Prianthara, D. (2024). *Economic Contribution and Cultural Preservation in Wellness Tourism Development*. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism Development*, 15(3), 112–128.
- Wijaya, I., & Prianthara, D. (2024). *Balinese Wellness Tourism: Rituals, Yoga, and International Appeal*. *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 9(1), 22–38.
- Smith, M., & Diekmann, A. (2017). *Tourism and Wellbeing: The Balance of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Experiences*. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 63, 1–13.
- Husain, D. (2022). *English for Tourism Purposes: Contextual Communication Strategies in Cultural Tourism*. *Journal of English for Tourism*, 5(2), 34–49.
- Dryglas, D., & Salamaga, M. (2018). *Authenticity in Wellness Tourism: A Comparative Study*. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 16(3), 253–270.
- Medina-Muñoz, D. R., Medina-Muñoz, R. D., & Suárez-Cabrera, M. Á. (2020). *Wellness Tourism: A Holistic Perspective of Health, Culture, and Environment*. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 42, 219–231.
- Ragiliawan, A., Koerniawaty, T., & Sudjana, H. (2023). *Community Participation in Post-Pandemic Wellness Tourism*. *Journal of Community-Based Tourism*, 6(2), 55–71.
- Koerniawaty, T., & Sudjana, H. (2021). *Trends in Post-Pandemic Wellness Tourism: Towards Meaningful Experiences*. *Tourism and Hospitality Review*
- Yapanto, L. M., Fadhli, A., Tamod, Z. E., Warouw, F. F., Musa, D. T., & Tenda, M. P. (2023). *Community Participation in the Management of Tourist Areas (Case Study in the Tourist Area of Bongo, Gorontalo District) Indonesia*. *Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental*, 17(5), e03460.
- Gai, A. M., Pontan, D., Syamsidar, Yapanto, L. M., Widyastuti, T. V., & Sapulette, R. O. (2026). *Sustainability and Technological Innovation in Society 5.0: Managing Carbon Footprint and Environmental Impact in Indonesia*. In *Sustainable Responsible Practices in Technology and Business for Society 5.0: Guideline for Next Generation, Volume 1* (pp. 20–31). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.