

# Industry-Driven Teaching Reform in Vocational Undergraduate Education: A Case Study of 'Tourism English' Course in Response to Free Trade Port Industry Needs

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**Abstract:** The construction of Hainan Province Free Trade Port has accelerated the development of local tourism markets, leading governments to implement various policies and optimize tourism infrastructure. These initiatives have spurred tourism product innovation in the region, fostering international collaboration and exchanges. However, they have also imposed higher demands on tourism professionals. In response to the industry needs of free trade ports, this paper examines the current state of the 'Tourism English' course in vocational undergraduate tourism management education. It aims to propose avenues and recommendations for teaching reform to better align the revised course with the free trade port industry's requirements. The objective is to enhance students' professional competence and practical skills, contributing to the cultivation of highly skilled talent for the development of the free trade port's tourism sector.

**Keywords:** Teaching Reform; Vocational Undergraduate Education; Tourism English; free trade port

## 1. Introduction

In alignment with the Master Plan for the Construction of Hainan Free Trade Port, the region seeks to invigorate the tourism, modern service, and high-tech industries as a means to bolster the foundational economy and augment industrial competitiveness. Within this strategic landscape, inbound tourism policies are experiencing increased openness, while industry growth patterns gradually align with global standards. As a fundamental course within vocational undergraduate tourism management curricula, 'Tourism English' must remain attuned to the unique aspects of free trade port development and the shifting dynamics of its domestic and international milieu. Therefore, it is crucial to adapt talent development strategies continuously to boost students' professional competitiveness and cultivate skilled tourism professionals who possess exceptional English communication abilities and a thorough understanding of industry knowledge.

## 2. Talent Demand in the Tourism Industry within the Free Trade Port Context

### 2.1. Boosting Inbound Tourism Market through Free Trade Port Construction

Since 2018, when the Measures for the Service and Administration of Foreigners Visiting Hainan for Tourism Without a Visa came into effect, Hainan Province has been committed to fostering growth and progress in the inbound tourism sector. Nationals from 59 countries enjoy the advantage of visa-exempt entry into Hainan<sup>[1]</sup>, ushering in a new era for the region as an international tourist destination. Hainan has capitalized on its exclusive policy advantages to attract both domestic and foreign investments, driving innovation in tourism products and services, enriching tourist experiences, and elevating the overall quality of tourism consumption.

As the free trade port policy takes root, international airline networks expand, and visa policies become more streamlined, Hainan Province saw a remarkable 189% year-on-year increase in inbound tourists in the first three quarters of 2024, welcoming 750,000 visitors<sup>[2]</sup>. These efforts have not only

invigorated Hainan's tourism industry, paving the way for sustainable growth but also contributed to the emergence of a diverse and international tourism landscape.

## ***2.2. English Proficiency Expectations for Tourism Industry Professionals***

In response to the substantial influx of inbound tourists and foreign investors facilitated by the Free Trade Port policy, Hainan's hotel industry, catering services, tourist attractions, and affiliated tourism sectors are experiencing a heightened demand for proficient English-speaking professionals. This urgency to meet the needs of international tourists and investors has resulted in the following key requirements for English language proficiency within the tourism industry:

1) English Language Proficiency for Communication and Expression: Tourism industry professionals are expected to demonstrate competency in English, particularly in speaking and listening, to facilitate effective daily communication with international tourists. This includes the ability to precisely convey relevant tourism information, respond to inquiries, provide valuable recommendations, and maintain clear communication in unforeseen circumstances. Moreover, proficiency in English writing is crucial for efficiently managing English email correspondence, curating travel itineraries, and producing promotional materials and other administrative tasks <sup>[2]</sup>.

2) Intercultural Communicative Competence: Given the diverse range of clientele within the tourism industry, spanning various nationalities and cultural backgrounds, cross-cultural communication skills are pivotal for comprehending and addressing the needs of tourists, ultimately enhancing their overall experience<sup>[4]</sup>. Tourism industry professionals must exhibit a high degree of cross-cultural competence, which includes recognizing and respecting the behavioral norms, values, and communication styles inherent to different cultural settings. Moreover, they should demonstrate international etiquette in multicultural environments, exhibiting cultural sensitivity and cultivating a global sense of community.

3) Extensive Knowledge of the Tourism Industry and Professional Terminology: Possessing comprehensive industry knowledge and mastery of relevant terminology ensures the precise and effective transmission of information<sup>[5]</sup>. Tourism industry professionals should have a thorough understanding of the industry's operational models, market dynamics, policies, and regulations. They must be proficient in English professional terminology including tourist attractions, hotel accommodations, catering services, transportation, tourism policies, and related sectors. Moreover, they should be capable of articulating professional information accurately and engagingly in English to provide tourists with top-notch, efficient, and reliable tourism services.

Ability of Enhancing Regional Cultural Promotion: Within the context of the Free Trade Port, tourism professionals in Hainan Province should precisely utilize English to articulate the region's cultural attributes and distinctive geographical features. Employing diverse methods, including presentations, cultural exchange events, and tourism marketing collateral, they ought to present Hainan's natural splendor and cultural heritage, highlighting the island's allure and tropical ambiance for foreign visitors. Simultaneously, they should promote Hainan's distinctive cultural heritage and contemporary advancements, thereby effectively elevating Hainan's public perception and amplifying the global impact of its cultural identity.

## **3. Current State of the 'Tourism English' Course**

### ***3.1. Curriculum Standards and Course Positioning***

Offered as a core professional course in the third semester for the Tourism Management majors, 'Tourism English' seeks to cultivate students' practical English language skills pertinent to the tourism sector while emphasizing service consciousness and deepening domain-specific understanding. Upon completing this course, students will be capable of executing fundamental tour-guiding tasks in English, gain familiarity with primary processes and methodologies employed in tour-guiding roles, and undergo specialized instruction to refine operational expertise spanning various dimensions of tour guide duties.

The course is positioned to enhance students' professional English knowledge in the tourism field and assist them in obtaining the tour guide qualification certificate. The course content covers tourism professional knowledge, tour guide English, tourism service English, tourism document writing, and cross-cultural communication, in order to meet the tourism industry's demand for high-quality,

international talents.

### ***3.2. Issues in Course Implementation***

Within the current pedagogical framework of the 'Tourism English' course, several noteworthy issues persist:

1) **Discrepancy between Course Positioning and Industry Requirements:** As the global tourism industry experiences rapid growth and international exchanges increase in frequency, the demand for interdisciplinary professionals with domain-specific English proficiency has diversified and specialized. There is a discernible discrepancy between the competency development within 'Tourism English' courses and the actual needs of the industry. From an industry perspective, the tourism sector now spans various specialized domains such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, wellness tourism, smart tourism, and other emerging fields, each with its distinct service contexts and particular English communication needs. However, the existing curriculum still primarily concentrates on English instruction for conventional tourism settings like hotels, restaurants, and traditional attractions, neglecting these emerging specialized areas. Consequently, upon graduation, students often encounter a substantial disparity between their learned knowledge and actual job requirements, hindering their ability to swiftly adapt to their professional roles. Additionally, the current course's emphasis on cross-cultural communication skills primarily remains theoretical, lacking profound integration into practical teaching content and session designs. This can result in students overlooking cultural differences while serving foreign tourists in real-life scenarios, potentially affecting service quality and tourist satisfaction.

2) **Overly Conventional Pedagogical Approaches:** The 'Tourism English' course persists in employing predominantly teacher-centered and lecture-based teaching methods. Instructors occupy a majority of class time delivering knowledge related to vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures, and fixed expressions within various tourism contexts. While the course may incorporate basic interactive components such as question-and-answer sessions and role-playing exercises, teachers tend to prioritize the precision of students' language expression, overlooking essential aspects like communication strategies, adaptability, and cross-cultural awareness. Consequently, the full educational potential of these interactive elements remains untapped. This pedagogical method might inadvertently cause students to perceive specialized English learning as a mere continuation of general English courses, failing to emphasize its professional nature and obstructing the cultivation of industry-ready professionals.

3) **Insufficient Industry Practicum Opportunities:** The scarcity of practical industry experience presents multiple detrimental effects on students' capacity to effectively transition their acquired knowledge into applied skills, ultimately impeding their ability to meet the demands of the tourism sector. On one hand, a substantial disconnect exists between practical on-campus instruction and authentic industry scenarios. Although simulated practice sessions are organized within the school environment, such as facilitating tour guide simulations in training rooms, these fabricated settings are inherently simplified and idealized, failing to capture the intricacy and dynamism of actual work in the tourism industry. On the other, the depth and breadth of cooperation with off-campus practice partners require improvement. Collaboration with tourism enterprises, attractions, travel agencies, and other stakeholders should serve as an essential avenue for providing students with rich, real-world industry experience. However, the current state of these partnerships necessitates further enhancement in both depth and scope.

4) **Limitations in the Assessment System:** The existing evaluation framework for the "Tourism English" course exhibits several shortcomings. Firstly, the assessment dimensions are relatively constrained. The existing framework places an unbalanced importance on students' understanding of the subject matter, as indicated by the considerable weight given to their final exam scores. Secondly, process evaluation is inadequate. Students' classroom performance, completion of daily assignments, engagement in group collaboration, and commitment to extracurricular learning are crucial factors reflecting their learning disposition and ability development. Yet, the existing evaluation framework fails to adequately account for these process-related components. Lastly, the homogeneity of assessment subjects is a concern. Currently, evaluations are primarily administered by teachers, who base their judgments on classroom observations and exam results. This single-assessor method lacks the benefit of varied perspectives and is susceptible to biases and subjectivity.

#### **4. Reform Strategies for the "Tourism English" Course in Vocational Undergraduate Education**

##### ***4.1. Adjustment of Course Objectives***

Course objectives should be meticulously aligned with industry requirements, extending beyond the prerequisites for tour guide licensure to encompass practical competencies in industry-specific English, professional English, and Free Trade Port English. By cultivating strong partnerships with tourism industry associations and businesses, students gain comprehensive knowledge of the multifaceted English language proficiency requirements within diverse tourism organizations, thereby equipping them with a nuanced understanding of the industry's linguistic demands. Sustaining regular collaborations with industry specialists and enterprises will facilitate ongoing curriculum updates and the formulation of more precise course objectives.

##### ***4.2. Enhancement of Teaching Content***

The Tourism English curriculum should be adjusted to meet the needs of the practical requirements of the Free Trade Port, addressing the specific needs of diverse roles within the tourism sector. This involves a comprehensive review and integration of existing textbook content, complemented by the incorporation of industry-relevant case studies and authentic work scenarios into instructional materials. Concurrently, the curriculum should fundamentally integrate cross-cultural communication as an essential component that permeates all aspects of the course. On one hand, it requires a systematic examination of foundational knowledge related to cultural customs, values, religious beliefs, and other dimensions of diverse countries and regions, which fosters a deeper understanding of cultural variations within the tourism context, ultimately cultivating students' cultural sensitivity and awareness. On the other hand, specialized cross-cultural communication training projects should be established, simulating tourism settings amid diverse cultural backgrounds to enable students to refine their cross-cultural communication abilities through hands-on experiential learning.

##### ***4.3. Innovation in Teaching Methods***

To foster engaging learning experiences, the curriculum should proactively embrace diverse teaching methodologies such as project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and online instruction. These approaches stimulate students' intrinsic motivation for autonomous learning, promote the application of acquired knowledge in real-world settings, and enhance their adaptability and linguistic self-assurance. Moreover, leveraging modern technology is essential for information-based teaching, utilizing interactive and intelligent platforms like Rain Classroom and Superstar Learning Through to facilitate language exchange and contextual simulations. Such tools foster students' active participation, increase engagement, and enable flexible, mobile-friendly learning.

Strengthening collaborations with the tourism industry is also crucial for integrating industry and education, as well as promoting school-enterprise cooperative training. Incorporating internships, apprenticeships, and project-based practices can bridge theory and practice, allowing students to refine their language proficiency and professional competencies within authentic work environments. Consequently, students will gain a more profound understanding of industry characteristics and career expectations.

##### ***4.4. Refinement of Evaluation Methods***

To enhance student involvement and motivation for learning, it is essential to establish a comprehensive, multi-faceted assessment system for the course. Considering the practical emphasis of Tourism English, the evaluation should prioritize assessing students' practical abilities and cross-cultural communication skills. Moreover, students' self-directed learning capabilities should be appraised, with a strong focus on evaluating team collaboration and innovative problem-solving competencies.

Diversification of evaluators is also crucial. In addition to teacher-led assessments, students should be encouraged to partake in self-evaluation, regularly reflecting on their learning processes and outcomes. Furthermore, following group projects, classroom discussions, and other collaborative learning activities, students should engage in peer assessments. Peer evaluation fosters a learning environment where students can analyze their classmates' performance from multiple perspectives, recognize strengths, and identify areas for improvement. This process encourages mutual learning and

collective development.

## 5. Conclusions

Within the context of Free Trade Port development, the tourism industry is presented with unparalleled opportunities and challenges. It is crucial to recognize the pressing need for cultivating tourism professionals who possess exceptional English communication skills, cross-cultural competence, and a robust understanding of industry-specific knowledge and terminology. To address this imperative, vocational undergraduate institutions must remain attuned to the distinct characteristics of Free Trade Port construction and the dynamic shifts in both domestic and global tourism industry landscapes. By persistently refining talent cultivation programs to align with the evolving requirements of emerging industry sectors, these institutions can ensure the preparation of graduates capable of meeting the demands of the contemporary tourism industry.

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