

Mastering Tourism Pitch: Exploring Undergraduate ESL/EFL Learners Pitching Ability in Southeast Asia Region

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates pitching competency of university students from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines participating in the International Intervarsity Pitching Competition 2026. The study addresses two primary research questions: (1) What is the overall level of pitching competency demonstrated by university students participating in the International Intervarsity Pitching Competition 2026? (2) What are the strengths and areas for improvement suggested by the judges based on the assessment criteria used in the International Intervarsity Pitching Competition 2026? The data collected for this study were the judges' evaluation scores of the tourism-themed pitching videos the participants had submitted to YouTube for the competition. Overall, the findings demonstrated that 67.6% of the participants scored 70 marks and above. 10.8% achieved excellent marks, whereas only 13.5% who scored below 60 marks required major improvement for their pitch. In general, participants from the three nations were able to embrace the "tourism vibe" in their pitch on a famous tourist attraction in their region. This may contribute to the understanding that ESL/EFL learners are able to perform in the academic setting as they were able to produce a tourism pitch. This study also contributes to the field of ESP, workplace communication as well as tourism education by providing empirical evidence of learners' pitching competency in an authentic Asian regional competition which offers valuable insights for various parties to strengthen ESL/EFL learners communicative competence as well as employability. This also provides a foundation for further research on communicative competence in pitching related to project-based learning in ESL/EFL context.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, ESL/EFL, Project-Based Learning, Tourism Pitch, Workplace Communication

INTRODUCTION

Speaking in public is a constant fear faced by many learners of English. Some struggle to produce impromptu utterances whereas others thrive in public speaking, namely pitching an idea which is closely related to workplace communication. The ability to deliver a pitch on famous tourist attractions or tourist spots among learners coming from the Asian regions can be challenging to ESL/EFL learners. Proficient speakers of English may be more equipped to interact with tourists and visitors which allow them to meet other specific demands of the tourism industry. However, there is little attention to tourism pitching as a distinct practice in developing communicative competence. Additionally, studies exploring the pitching ability of ESL/EFL learners within the Asian regional context remain limited.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the overall level of pitching competency demonstrated by university students participating in the International Intervarsity Pitching Competition 2026

2. To identify the strengths and areas for improvement suggested by the judges based on the assessment criteria used in the International Intersvarsity Pitching Competition 2026

This study aims to explore the pitching ability of ESL/EFL learners in the Asian regional context through these research questions:

1. What is the overall level of pitching competency demonstrated by university students participating in the International Intersvarsity Pitching Competition 2026?
2. What are the strengths and areas for improvement suggested by the judges based on the assessment criteria used in the International Intersvarsity Pitching Competition 2026?

With regard to the significance of the study in the context of theoretical significance, this study contributes to understanding the communicative competence of ESL/EFL learners in the South East Asian context, pertaining to tourism pitching, which has been underexplored in literature. In terms of practical significance of the study, the findings can contribute to the curriculum development in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and tourism education. This can also help promote international intersvarsity pitching competitions as well as pitching competitions among local universities not only limited to Southeast Asia region but also other parts of the world that can promote authentic language learning and employability skills. Since tourism pitches are multimodal and context-dependent, further research is necessary to understand how ESL/EFL learners apply linguistic as well as communicative resources when promoting tourism destinations. Addressing this gap will contribute to the literature on tourism pitching and provide insights to ESL/EFL learners' pitching ability as an indicator of their communicative competence which is closely related to workplace communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative competence

Communicative competence is clarified by Hymes (1979) as an individual's ability to use their linguistic knowledge appropriately depending on the social context and demands of the situation. Communicative competence, then, may serve as a defining factor in whether a learner has progressed in their language acquisition. This is because competent language users should be able to understand information as well as articulate their ideas, opinions, and arguments clearly and effectively; verbally and in writing (Heryani et al., 2026), with respect to the situation.

Anchondo (2018) investigated the communicative competence awareness of forty-six English as a Foreign Language learners in Mexico. The learners noted that linguistic competence (involving vocabulary knowledge and usage) as well as pragmatic competence (ability to relay information and knowing how to provide services to visitors) are important for productive interactions with tourists and visitors. This shows that communicative competence in English is perceived to be important to interact effectively with tourists; with a pressing concern on speaking ability. Thus, specific exposure activities that could help develop a student's communicative competence must be established.

Hymes' 1979 Communicative Competence Model

In transformational generative grammar, linguistics is separated into two parts. The first of which is linguistic competence that is concerned with the knowledge of language structure while linguistic performance is related to the processes of language encoding and decoding. Hymes (1979) noted that these two competencies do not account for the sociocultural features that influence a speaker's language choice according to the social contexts, the speaker's and listeners' background, multilingual mastery (if any) and the shared norms between the speaker and the listener themselves. Therefore, communicative competence is introduced to represent the sociocultural features underlying a speaker's competency.

Hymes' Communicative Competence model addresses communication through four aspects; *possibility*, *feasibility*, *appropriateness* and *performance*. *Possibility* is concerned with whether something is formally possible, *feasibility* looks at whether (and to what degree) something that was said is implemented,

appropriateness observes whether the communication is appropriate in context while *performance* dictates whether a speech act can accomplish what it entails. These systems function as interconnected circles serving as a matrix that develops as a learner acquires a language. Depending on the purposes of the speech act, one system may be prioritized above others and a speaker's competence is dependent on their ability to comprehend these aspects and demonstrate them in their communication. In this sense, an ungrammatical sentence used in daily life that manages to accomplish the speaker's social purposes, especially when strict grammar control is unexpected, demonstrates good communicative competence. For example, one would opt for a laxer language when shopping at the farmer's market and using Received Pronunciation (RP) itself may be considered socially inept and ineffective. Although these aspects of communicative system are available to any member of a language community, one should not assume that different language users have acquired these systems at identical levels, and a passable (not hindering understanding) speech delivery that fulfils the speaker's purpose should attest to their competence. In short, communicative competence actualise a communicative theory of performance where communication is realised depending on the necessary dominance of the different systems of possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance, and how they are executed by the speaker.

Pitching as a project-based learning task for communicative competence in ESL/EFL

Al-Eiadeh et al. (2016) noted that '*limited amount of vocabulary*' and '*confusion, worry, embarrassment, shyness, and non-confidence*' pose as the main weaknesses in students' speaking skills and the most probable solution to these weaknesses is practice. English lecturers should therefore create situations that encourage learners to produce verbal English interactions, and that task-based learning is the ideal approach in enhancing the communicative ability of learners (Al-Eiadeh et al., 2016). This underscores the idea of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a primary tool in language learning. PjBL, where learning is organized around projects for the students to complete, allows them to face real-world problems that they do not face in a classroom (Sofriyah et al., 2024). In a study involving 20 6th semester students in Central Java, 80% of respondents agree that PjBL makes them feel more confident in their English performance and increases their responsibility and confidence level. One can therefore assume that PjBL is effective in enhancing students' English skills and communicative competence as it allows for students to practice adapting to different situational needs of their English language use.

One dominant task in PjBL is digital storytelling (DST). Digital storytelling is a 2 – 6-minute short duration task with strong emotional content that consists of existing photographs, music, video and voice of the narrator (Kearney, 2009). Widodo (2016) stated that for learners who are reluctant to speak in front of their audience because communicating in a foreign language can feel 'face-threatening', digital storytelling may be particularly helpful as it is done virtually. Through digital storytelling, speaking in front of an audience may be less threatening for the language learning community as they are not physically confined to the immediate response of their audience. Next, Putri (2018) studied the implementation of digital storytelling for critical environmental education in English language teaching and noted that students found language use, particularly word choice, challenging in the digital storytelling creation process. This result is compatible with McEntee's (2025) study, which was conducted over a 14-week group project in a university in Japan and noted that for the English for Tourism students, communication skills such as fluency and pronunciation may still be an issue. Digital storytelling provided a unique approach that allows the integration of vocational skills and authentic English language use in the curriculum where learners could use multiple skills that ensures they become engaged in the creation of multimodal narrative text that they do not experience in their formal English learning (Widodo, 2016; McEntee, 2025).

The use of PjBL in English courses is supported by Petliovana and Bidasiuk (2025) who listed it as one of the strategic approaches to equip learners with necessary English communication skills. Pitching itself is especially effective as students tend to be more motivated in learning when they are actively involved and can see learning outcomes that are tangible. Another approach includes incorporating creativity and student autonomy because when students bring their own ideas to a project, their language acquisition and confidence improve (Petliovana & Bidasiuk, 2025). Pitching, then, is an applicable task that incorporates both approaches as students will have to come up with their own ideas, conduct research regarding their topic and present their findings in a pitch to complete their project.

An elevator pitch (a short pitch where one would have to convince the audience of their idea in under one minute) is thought to be especially helpful in making sure that learners manage to verbally present information as clearly and as concisely as possible (Lazcano-Santibáñez & Telles-Quezada, 2025). The ability to conduct a successful elevator pitch supports learners' fluency by reducing their hesitations, pauses and corrections when talking. The study questioned students' fluency (in terms of rate, hesitations, pauses and corrections) and found that 11th graders (16 to 17 years old) who are chosen based on their low verbal performance shows progress in their oral fluency; particularly their pronunciation, as well as expanding their vocabulary. This progress is directly linked to the efficiency of communication in an elevator pitch that ensures the students must navigate their thoughts with greater confidence in English to captivate their audience in a short span of time. Participants also had generally favourable perception of the effect of Elevator Pitch in supporting their speaking fluency. The study, however, noted that time constraint is an issue as participants cannot complete their tasks.

Another study by Mahyuddin and Abidin (2013) highlighted the importance of exercise and prior knowledge in a student's pitching abilities. Students who were explicitly instructed in the steps involved and exposed to formal discussions on how to produce effective sales pitch as part of their course syllabus generally performed better than students who are not trained in the same way. The pitch itself was assessed on a pitcher's ability to pitch a product or service and their oral presentation skills itself. Most students who were taught the proper steps of pitching scored at least '*proficient*' on both criteria and are assessed to be more confident with their pitch than their counterpart. In addition, according to Jiménez Muñoz (2019), non-verbal elements are more directly related to pitch success than verbal aspects. In a study involving 140 participants from 11 countries between 2010-2018, confidence and eye-contact served as the most important non-verbal skills for investors when they evaluate a business pitch. Furthermore, the more accurate and appropriate use of hand gestures or eye contact is, the more money the students will raise with their pitch. Thus, pitching does not only address linguistic competence, but it also aids the learners in figuring out the proper body language necessary to effectively communicate in varying social situations.

In short, PjBL serves as the ideal approach in ensuring learners can appropriately develop communicative ability, and pitching itself (with digital storytelling as a less persuasive variant of the pitching structure) underlies a pitcher's ability to effectively communicate their ideas. Pitching ability, then, could be a reliable method of assessment to measure an individual's communicative competence.

Tourism pitch

Astawa and Wijaya (2024) aimed to study how English proficiency aids tourism professionals. Highlighting the importance of English as a lingua franca, the study noted that English proficient professionals can serve visitors more efficiently with the integration of cultural competence. Better English proficiency allows tourism professionals to build stronger relationships with visitors and increase customer satisfaction as they can manage the cultural differences and anticipate customers' needs better. A study focusing on English language needs in the hospitality and travel industry which was conducted by Putri et al. (2018) generally recorded that listening and speaking skills are overwhelmingly used to communicate with visitors, even among those whose first language is not English. This shows that speaking is at the forefront of communicative competence in the tourism industry and indicates how the locals would be able to communicate effectively with tourists and visitors with adequate English language competence.

Having looked at the different aspects of pitching in English language learning as well as the role of English in the tourism industry, one can see how pitching is increasingly constructive for communicative skills in both educational and professional settings. Existing literature evaluated pitching as part of a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) strategy that focuses on speaking skills.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

37 participants from Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Arau Campus, Malaysia, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Republic of Indonesia and Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of

Technology, the Philippines were involved in this study. They are diploma and degree level students coming from various faculties such as Applied Science, Business, Accounting and Computer Science. The entry into the competition was voluntary and it was open to any willing participants. The participants were informed about the competition via Person-in charge of the competition (PiC) of each institution. For the promotional platforms, the poster was circulated via Facebook and active WhatsApp groups to reach potential participants. Before submitting their videos, in order to prepare for the submission, potential participants attended a guidance webinar led by three subject-matter experts from all three collaborating institutions. Through this webinar, participants developed a clearer understanding of the evaluation criteria and strengthened their pitching skills and were more equipped to deliver more compelling pitch.

Six judges, i.e. the Judging Committee, were appointed to evaluate the tourism-themed pitching videos submitted by the participants. They are senior lecturers teaching English subjects from two universities in Malaysia, two universities in the Republic of Indonesia, one university in the Philippines and one university in Thailand. With regard to the selection of the six judges, the PiC of each collaborating institution contacted two English lecturers from other institutions in their respective country who would be interested to offer their expertise as the judge for the competition. Qualified English lecturers were chosen based on strict selection criteria, including a minimum of five years of higher-education teaching experience and proven expertise in assessing spoken communication and students' presentations. Additionally, the judges were required to access the pitching videos and provide comments for each participant on the evaluation form or the score sheet based on the Assessment Criteria. From these six judges, one was appointed as the chief judge who was responsible for coordinating and stipulating the data to ensure scoring consistency across the judging committee.

The judges' written comments were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the feedback on participants' pitching performances. The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all judges' comments were compiled and organized according to the participants and the Assessment Criteria. The researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the comments several times and noting preliminary ideas. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful words, phrases, and statements related to participants' strengths and areas requiring improvement. Examples of initial codes included *relevant tourism information*, *persuasive language*, *clear pronunciation*, *limited eye contact*, and *weak call-to-action*. Third, related codes were grouped into potential themes. For example, codes concerning destination details, cultural information, and supporting evidence were categorized under **Content Quality and Tourism Information**. Fourth, the preliminary themes were reviewed against the original comments to ensure that they accurately represented the data and were sufficiently distinct from one another. Overlapping themes were combined, while themes with insufficient supporting evidence were revised or removed.

Data collection

Data were obtained from the judges' evaluation scores of the tourism-themed pitching videos the participants had submitted to YouTube for the competition. The participants were informed to abide to the International Intervarsity Pitching Competition 2026 rules and regulations as follows:

General Submission

Duration: The pitch must be 3 - 5 minutes.

Format: Submission must be a recorded video (Upload to YouTube) with landscape orientation.

Language: Conducted in English

Topic/Theme: Famous Tourist Spot/Attraction in your region OR Famous Tourist Spot/Attraction in your country.

Note: Participants may reword the topic/ title to suit the nature of their pitch.

Presentation Structure

To achieve a high score, the pitch must include:

Introduction: Greet the audience, establish credibility, and provide a clear background and attention-getter.

The Body: Clearly define the topic, promote a tourist spot/tourist attraction, and provide strong justifications.

Conclusion: Summarise three main points and deliver a persuasive call to action.

Disqualifications and Penalties

Reading from Scripts: Total reliance on notes or reading will significantly lower the score.

Usage of AI Applications: Presentation must be original and without reliance on AI applications or software.

Incomplete Content: Failure to include a call to action or failing to state the central idea may result in penalties.

Inappropriate Values and Attitudes: Failure to adhere to appropriate values and attitudes will result in a low score.

The appointed panel of judges evaluated the videos submitted by the participants based on the following Key Evaluation Criteria as well as the Assessment Criteria and Score Sheet. They were adapted from ELC590 English for Oral Presentations, Pitching Descriptors as well as LCC503 English for Business Communication, Business Pitch Presentation Assessment Criteria.

Table 1 Key evaluation criteria

Category	Descriptions
Delivery	Excellent vocal variety, fluency, a wide range of nonverbal cues and conversational tone.
Visuals	Effective use of visual aids without total reliance on notes.
Non-Verbal	Direct eye contact, natural gestures, and confident posture.
Language	High grammatical accuracy, use of connectives, and persuasive vocabulary.
Impact	Ability to express ideas persuasively and adapt to the target audience.
Displayed appropriate values and attitudes	Appropriate appearance and attire. Appropriate behaviour, language and use of visual aids.

Table 2 Assessment criteria and score sheet

CRITERIA		MARK
1	INTRODUCTION (Total: 20 marks)	
	Greeted the audience appropriately	5
	Created interest for information regarding the famous tourist spot / attraction (with the use of attention- getter)	5
	Establish credibility and deliver appropriate background information	5
	Previewed main points of the pitch	5
2	LANGUAGE (Total: 25 marks)	
	Used grammatically accurate structures	10
	Used appropriate words and structures	10
	Draw attention to key points by using the right amount of repetition, pointer phrases, and oratorical emphasis.	5
3	BODY / CONTENT (Total: 15 marks)	
	Conveyed ideas which are comprehensible and interesting for the audience	5
	Reasoned carefully and supported claims using relevant details, examples, evidence, etc.	5

	Achieved clarity, focus and control of thinking through a balanced and insightful treatment of the topic.	5
4	CONCLUSION (Total: 10 marks)	
	Reinforced central idea	5
	Deliver or incorporate a persuasive call for action.	5
5	DELIVERY (Total: 30 marks)	
	Maintained eye contact and confident posture	5
	Used appropriate oratorical devices (dramatic pauses, vocal inflections, changes in volume, gestures, etc.)	5
	Had fluency and used proper pronunciation & enunciation	5
	Used appropriate attire and non-verbal communication	5
	Managed time effectively (3 - 5 mins)	5
	Appropriate and effective use of visual aids	5
Total mark (100)		

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile

A total of 37 participants took part in the International Interschool Pitching Competition 2026 representing three distinct higher education institutions across Southeast Asia namely the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Majority of the contestants were from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Perlis Branch Malaysia (n=28, 75.7%), followed by Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) Philippines (n=5, 13.5%), and Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) Indonesia with 4 participants (10.8%). The six judges appointed to evaluate the tourism-themed pitching videos submitted by the participants of the competition are senior lecturers teaching English subjects from universities in the Southeast Asia region, i.e. two from Malaysia, two from the Republic of Indonesia, one from the Philippines and one from Thailand.

Data analysis

Participants' performance

The results presented in this study are based on the scores awarded by the six judges from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand appointed by the organising committee. The analysis presented below addresses RQ 1) What is the overall level of pitching competency demonstrated by university students participating in the International Interschool Pitching Competition 2026? Table 3 below shows the overall mean score of 74.9 which indicates that participants demonstrated a good standard of pitching competency. The participants' scores ranged from 53.25% to 95.5% indicating that students possessed different mastery levels of pitching techniques influenced by their levels of English language proficiency, presentation skills and experience, confidence level and familiarity with the project-based learning that they worked on. This finding suggests that the International Interschool Pitching Competition 2026 serves as an effective experiential learning platform for students' pitching skills while identifying areas for continuous improvement in oral communication and presentation skills.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of pitching scores

Statistic	Value
Number of participants analysed	37
Number of judges	6
Overall mean score	74.9
Median score	74.9
Highest score	95.5
Lowest score	53.25

Table 4 Overall performance of participants (N=37)

Score Band	Frequency	Percentage
90–100	5	13.5%
80–89	8	21.6%
70–79	12	32.4%
60–69	7	18.9%
Below 60	5	13.5%

As presented in Table 4, the overall performance of the 37 participants reveals a positive trend in pitching competency. The majority of students (67.6%) achieved scores of 70 marks and above, indicating a commendable grasp of pitching techniques. Specifically, 13.5% (n=5) of the participants were placed in the 90–100 range, demonstrating excellent mastery. Another 21.6% (n=8) achieved scores between 80–89, while the largest cohort, 32.4% (n=12), fell within the 70–79 score band. Conversely, a smaller portion of the participants scored below 70, with 18.9% (n=7) in the 60–69 range and 13.5% (n=5) scoring below 60. These findings suggest that while a significant number of learners have successfully adapted to the demands of the tourism pitch, there remains a need for targeted interventions to support those struggling with foundational presentation skills. It is important to highlight that prior to this competition, students were invited to participate in a live webinar session involving three speakers from the collaborating institutions. This webinar session helped to prepare the participants for the pitching competition by developing their ability to structure their persuasive ideas, use effective tones and pitching techniques and deliver the presentations confidently.

Table 5 Participant-level score breakdown by judges

Rank	Participant	Judge	Introduction /20	Language /25	Content /15	Conclusion /10	Delivery /30	Total /100
1	P20	D	18.75	23.75	15.00	9.25	28.75	95.50
2	P7	B	20.00	21.00	15.00	9.00	27.00	92.00
3	P21	D	18.25	22.25	14.25	8.75	27.75	91.25
4	P32	F	18.00	22.00	15.00	9.00	27.00	91.00
5	P1	A	18.80	22.50	13.40	9.40	26.60	90.70
6	P26	E	18.50	22.40	13.90	9.80	25.00	89.60
7	P33	F	18.00	20.00	12.00	9.00	27.00	86.00
8	P8	B	19.00	20.00	15.00	10.00	22.00	86.00
9	P22	D	17.50	20.00	11.25	7.75	28.50	85.00
10	P9	B	19.00	20.00	14.00	8.00	24.00	85.00
11	P13	C	15.00	25.00	10.00	8.00	25.00	83.00
12	P34	F	15.00	20.00	10.00	9.00	28.00	82.00
13	P35	F	15.00	19.00	12.00	9.00	26.00	81.00
14	P2	A	13.20	20.20	13.00	7.60	25.50	79.50
15	P14	C	15.00	24.00	10.00	6.00	24.00	79.00
16	P15	C	14.00	23.00	9.00	8.00	23.00	77.00
17	P3	A	14.20	20.00	10.00	8.00	23.60	75.80
18	P36	F	14.00	18.00	10.00	8.00	25.00	75.00
19	P4	A	15.80	19.20	11.00	9.60	19.30	74.90
20	P16	C	14.00	23.00	10.00	7.00	20.00	74.00
21	P37	F	15.00	18.00	10.00	7.00	24.00	74.00
22	P27	E	12.90	21.00	12.70	4.80	22.20	73.60
23	P10	B	15.00	19.00	12.00	7.00	20.00	73.00

24	P17	C	14.00	21.00	9.00	6.00	22.00	72.00
25	P11	B	14.00	19.00	10.00	8.00	19.00	70.00
26	P28	E	11.00	19.00	12.60	6.10	20.30	69.00
27	P29	E	14.50	21.20	9.00	4.90	18.20	67.80
28	P5	A	13.00	18.60	10.80	8.00	17.40	67.80
29	P18	C	14.00	21.00	9.00	6.00	17.00	67.00
30	P19	C	12.00	19.00	9.00	6.00	19.00	65.00
31	P23	D	11.50	17.75	9.00	5.75	20.00	64.00
32	P30	E	12.00	18.70	11.30	4.60	16.12	62.72
33	P31	E	12.20	17.00	7.50	5.50	15.30	57.50
34	P12	B	10.00	15.00	9.00	6.00	17.00	57.00
35	P24	D	10.25	12.50	8.25	5.25	18.50	54.75
36	P6	A	11.00	12.60	9.70	5.00	15.40	53.70
37	P25	D	10.50	12.50	7.75	5.00	17.50	53.25

Table 5 shows the participant-level score breakdown presenting the performance of all 37 participants across five Assessment Criteria: Introduction, Language, Content, Conclusion, and Delivery. The participants' total scores ranged from 53.25 to 95.50, with an overall mean score of 75.01. Participant P20 achieved the highest total score of 95.50, followed by P7 with 92.00 and P21 with 91.25. In contrast, P25 recorded the lowest score of 53.25.

The criterion-level results, i.e. Table 6 shows that Language recorded the highest average achievement relative to its maximum mark, at 78.7%. This was followed by Delivery at 74.0%, Content at 73.9%, Introduction at 73.5%, and Conclusion at 73.3%. These findings indicate that the participants generally demonstrated stronger language performance, while conclusion development was comparatively the weakest area. The relatively narrow range of mean percentages, from 73.3% to 78.7%, indicates generally consistent performance across the five assessment criteria. Delivery recorded the largest standard deviation (SD = 4.09), suggesting greater variation in participants' delivery performance, whereas Conclusion showed the least variation (SD = 1.64).

However, the overall rankings should be interpreted cautiously because different judge assessed different participants. Differences in total scores may therefore reflect both participant performance and variations in scoring severity among the judges.

Table 6 Descriptive statistics of participants' scores according to assessment criteria

Assessment criterion	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Maximum possible score	Mean score (%)
Introduction	14.70	2.82	10.00	20.00	20	73.5
Language	19.68	2.98	12.50	25.00	25	78.7
Content	11.09	2.22	7.50	15.00	15	73.9
Conclusion	7.33	1.64	4.60	10.00	10	73.3
Delivery	22.21	4.09	15.30	28.75	30	74.0

Judges' scoring process

The six judges appointed to evaluate the pitching competition were given one week to evaluate the videos based on the evaluation rubric given. Each judge was given a different set of videos therefore, inter-rater reliability analysis could not be carried out because each participant was evaluated by only one judge. Due to time constrain, these judges were not able to conduct any discussion, negotiation or marks moderation after they evaluated the videos. The winners were decided based on the highest overall scores and the Chief Judge was given a task to choose winners for special awards such as Most Creative Video, Outstanding Presenter, Outstanding Sound Effect, Most Creative Visuals and Honourable Mention.

In terms of reliability of the Pitching Evaluation Rubric, it was found the rubric had good internal consistency (Table 7). A reliability analysis was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the five-component pitching evaluation rubric using scores from 37 participants. The analysis produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.872, indicating that the rubric had good internal consistency. The standardized Cronbach's alpha was 0.899, further demonstrating a high level of consistency among the rubric components.

Table 7 Overall reliability statistics for the pitching evaluation rubric

Reliability measure	Value
Cronbach's alpha	0.872
Standardised Cronbach's alpha	0.899
Number of rubric components	5
Number of participants	37

Note. An alpha coefficient of 0.70 or above is generally considered acceptable, while a coefficient above 0.80 indicates good internal consistency.

Table 8 Item-total statistics for the pitching evaluation rubric

Rubric component	Mean	Standard deviation	Corrected item-total correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Introduction	14.70	2.82	0.866	0.803
Language	19.68	2.98	0.624	0.863
Content	11.09	2.22	0.710	0.848
Conclusion	7.33	1.64	0.768	0.855
Delivery	22.21	4.09	0.774	0.850

Note. Corrected item-total correlations above 0.30 indicate that an item is adequately associated with the overall construct measured by the rubric.

The corrected item-total correlations in Table 8 ranged from 0.624 to 0.866, exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.30. Introduction recorded the highest corrected item-total correlation ($r = 0.866$), while Language recorded the lowest ($r = 0.624$). Nevertheless, all five components were positively and adequately associated with the overall rubric score. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained when individual components were deleted ranged from 0.803 to 0.863. All these values were lower than the overall alpha coefficient of 0.872. Therefore, removing any component would not improve the reliability of the rubric. The results support the retention of all five components: Introduction, Language, Content, Conclusion and Delivery. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the pitching evaluation rubric is internally consistent and reliable for assessing participants' pitching performance.

Analysing the judges' feedback

The judges' written comments were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis presented addresses RQ 2) What are the strengths and areas for improvement suggested by the judges based on the assessment criteria used in the International Interschool Pitching Competition 2026? First, the comments were compiled and repeatedly read to ensure familiarisation with the data. Meaningful segments of the comments were then assigned initial descriptive codes, such as *confident delivery*, *effective visuals*, *insufficient destination information*, *weak call to action*, and *poor audio clarity*. Codes expressing similar ideas were compared and grouped into potential themes. The themes were subsequently reviewed against the original comments to assess their internal consistency, conceptual distinctiveness, and relevance to the research purpose. Overlapping categories were consolidated, while ambiguous themes were refined and clearly defined. This process generated 11 final themes, which were further organised into three higher-order categories: message and persuasive content, presenter communication and delivery, and multimedia and production management. Finally,

the findings were reported through a thematic table (Table 9) and an NVivo coding tree showing the relationships between the higher-order categories and final themes (Figure 1).

Coding Tree of Judges' Comments

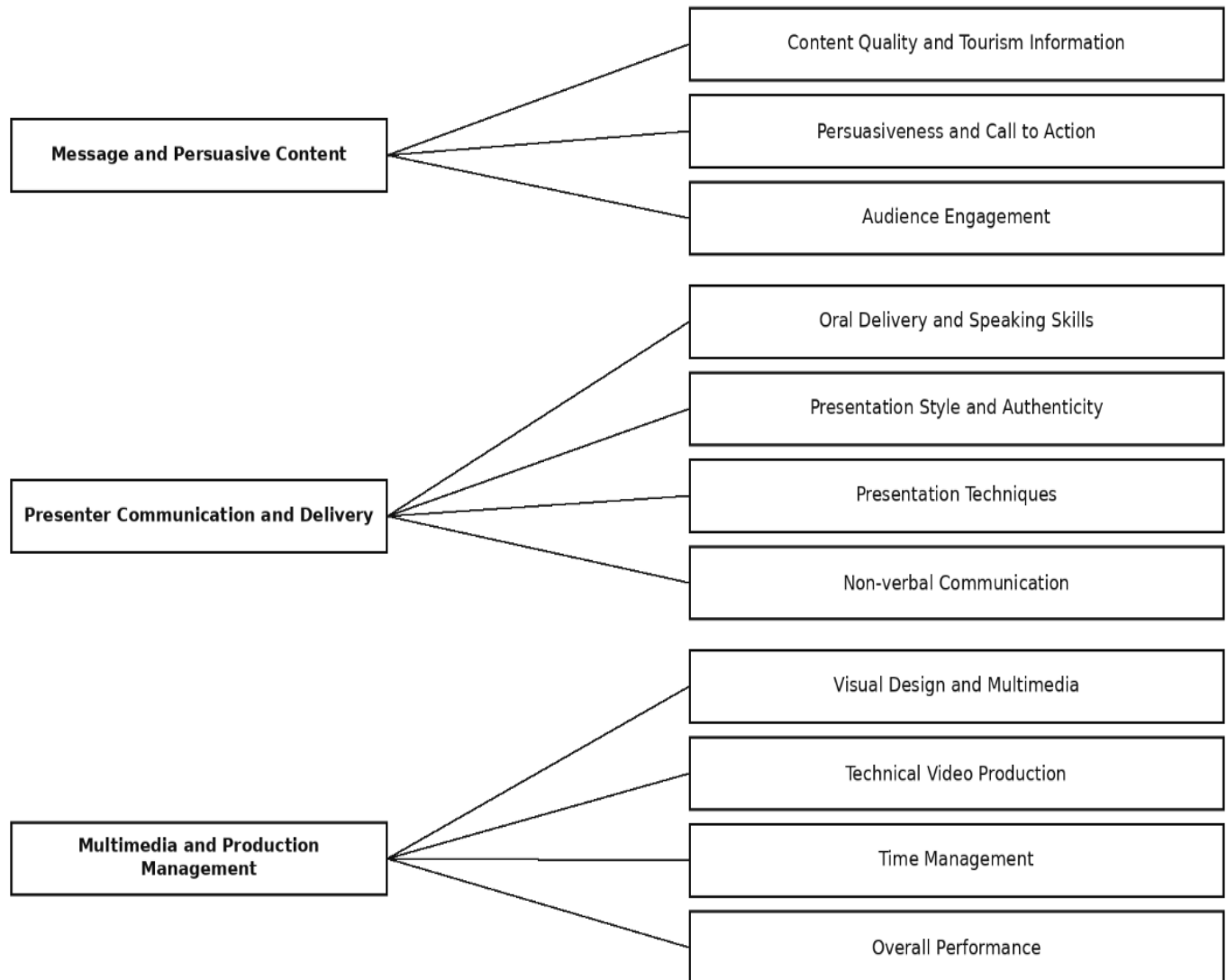


Figure 1 Coding tree from judges' comments

Table 9 Thematic analysis of judges' comments

Theme	Positive Feedback	Areas for Improvement
1. Content Quality & Tourism Information	Content was appropriate, informative, and relevant to the destination. Some pitches successfully highlighted attractions and encouraged tourism.	Provide richer information about the destination, local culture, heritage, and unique attractions. Include stronger supporting details to enhance credibility.
2. Persuasiveness & Call-to-Action	Convincing invitation to visit the destination; enthusiastic promotion; successful in creating audience interest and desire to visit.	Strengthen persuasive language and emotional appeal. Make the call-to-action more impactful and convincing.
3. Oral Delivery & Speaking Skills	Good delivery, confident presentation, pleasant voice, effective intonation, expressive gestures, enthusiastic speaking style, and good rapport with the audience.	Improve pronunciation, articulation, vocal projection, speaking pace, intonation, and avoid monotone delivery. Use a tone that better suits tourism promotion.

4. Presentation Style & Authenticity	Natural presenter presence; engaging introduction; presenter appeared throughout the video; audience could connect with the speaker.	Reduce reliance on scripts and slides. Avoid sounding overly formal or like a political speech. Speak more naturally and conversationally. Increase presenter visibility where necessary. Present while standing to improve confidence and professionalism.
5. Audience Engagement	Effective rapport with viewers; engaging opening; enthusiastic presentation; interactive delivery to maintain audience interest.	Increase audience interaction throughout the presentation and sustain engagement until the conclusion.
6. Visual Design & Multimedia	Attractive visuals, effective background images, creative use of videos, background music, interactive multimedia, and creative editing enhanced the presentation.	Balance visuals with presenter appearance. Include more authentic footage of the tourist destination rather than excessive self-recording or stock videos. Ensure visuals support rather than distract from the message.
7. Technical Video Production	Good editing, smooth use of multimedia, effective background music, appropriate video duration, and creative production quality.	Improve scene transitions, audio quality, and voice clarity. Record videos in landscape orientation instead of portrait mode. Ensure technical elements do not overshadow the tourism message.
8. Presentation Techniques	Good overall presentation, effective use of presentation techniques, creative opening, and professional effort.	Employ more dynamic presentation techniques, stronger storytelling, better body language, and more impactful opening and closing strategies.
9. Non-verbal Communication	Appropriate gestures, expressive facial expressions, and confident presenter presence contributed positively to audience engagement.	Improve eye contact, body posture, movement, and overall stage presence. Standing during the presentation is recommended to enhance confidence and professionalism.
10. Time Management	Most presentations remained within the required 4–5-minute duration and demonstrated effective time allocation.	Maintain a balanced pace throughout the presentation, avoiding overly slow or rushed delivery while staying within the allocated time.
11. Overall Performance	Judges recognised the presenters' creativity, effort, enthusiasm, professionalism, and overall ability to promote tourism destinations effectively.	Continue refining presentation skills, language proficiency, technical production, and persuasive communication to produce a more polished and professional tourism pitch.

Content Quality and Tourism Information was one of the recurring themes. The judges acknowledged that most participants presented relevant and informative tourism content that successfully introduced their selected destinations. However, they also suggested enriching the presentations with more detailed information about local culture, history, heritage, and unique attractions. For example, Judge A noted that the presentation “could have been better if the speaker could give more detailed information about Iligan City and its cultures”. Similarly, Judge B suggested “if the participant can add info on reviews of the island, it will be better”. This suggests that providing deeper contextual information would make the pitches more informative and persuasive. Next, Persuasiveness and Call-to-Action, highlighted the participants' ability to encourage audiences to visit the destinations. Many judges praised the enthusiastic and convincing promotional approach used by several presenters. Judge A described one presentation as “a very convincing call for visit” but added “the call for action is there, but not emphasised in the conclusion.” Therefore, some participants were advised to strengthen their persuasive language, emotional appeal, and concluding call-to-action to leave a stronger impression on the audience.

The largest number of comments focused on Oral Delivery and Speaking Skills. The judges appreciated participants who demonstrated confidence, good intonation, expressive gestures, and pleasant vocal delivery. Judge F highlighted a participant’s “good voice”, while Judge B praised the use of “great intonation and gestures”. However, pronunciation, articulation, vocal projection, speaking pace, and voice modulation were repeatedly identified as areas requiring improvement. Several presentations were described as monotonous, too soft, or delivered too quickly or too slowly, reducing their overall effectiveness. One of the comments made by

Judge B is, “pace is too slow for the audience to listen”. These findings indicate that an effective tourism pitching requires clear pronunciation, articulation, vocal projection and speaking pace. For Presentation Style and Authenticity, participants who appeared natural on screen and established rapport with viewers received positive evaluations as highlighted by Judge F as “established rapport”, “built rapport” and “always in the video”. In contrast, Judge B noted that some presentations relied heavily on reading scripts or presentation slides, resulting in a “formal delivery that resembled a political speech rather than an engaging tourism promotion” as described by Judge A. The judges recommended adopting a more conversational and authentic communication style while increasing direct interaction with the audience. Another important theme was Audience Engagement. Effective openings, enthusiastic delivery, background music, and rapport-building techniques were recognised as strengths that captured viewers' attention. Nevertheless, the judges encouraged participants to sustain audience engagement throughout the entire presentation by maintaining interaction and enthusiasm until the conclusion.

The judges consistently praised the participants' Visual Design and Multimedia such as creative use of background images, videos, music, and interactive visual elements which significantly enhanced the attractiveness of many presentations. However, some participants were advised to include more authentic footage of the tourist destinations instead of relying heavily on self-recordings or stock videos as what reported by Judge F. Visual elements should complement rather than distract from the spoken message. Similarly, Technical Video Production emerged as another prominent theme. Most presentations demonstrated good editing quality and appropriate use of multimedia. Despite these strengths, improvements were recommended in terms of smoother scene transitions, better audio quality, clearer voice recording, and using landscape rather than portrait orientation to produce a more professional presentation. Judge B observed that “some part of the video did not have a smooth transition.” Judge D commented one participant to “check the audio of your video”, while Judge A noted that “some detailed technical support blurred the pitch.” The participants are also encouraged the use of more dynamic storytelling, stronger opening and closing techniques, and more varied presentation strategies to maximise audience engagement and enhance persuasive impact. The theme of Non-verbal Communication emphasised the importance of body language in tourism pitching. Positive comments highlighted appropriate gestures and expressive facial expressions that supported the spoken message. Nevertheless, judges suggested improving posture, eye contact, movement, and overall stage presence. One specific recommendation was for presenters to stand while presenting, as this was perceived to project greater confidence and professionalism (Judge E). Regarding Time Management, most participants successfully complied with the required presentation duration of four to five minutes. However, some presentations would benefit from a more balanced pacing to ensure that information is delivered clearly without appearing rushed or overly slow. Finally, for Overall Performance, the judges acknowledged the participants' creativity, enthusiasm, professionalism, and commitment to producing engaging tourism pitches. At the same time, they agreed that further development in language proficiency, persuasive communication, presentation delivery, and technical production would significantly enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of future tourism pitches.

Overall, the findings indicate that the participants generally possessed strong creative and multimedia production skills, enabling them to produce visually appealing tourism presentations. However, the judges consistently emphasised that successful tourism pitching depends not only on attractive visuals but also on effective oral communication, persuasive delivery, authentic audience engagement, and comprehensive destination knowledge. Viewed through Hymes's Communication Competence Model, a successful pitching involves producing language that is grammatically accurate, comprehensible, contextually appropriate and effectively used in authentic communication. Therefore, this study suggests that future tourism pitching training should integrate language proficiency, public speaking, storytelling, persuasive communication, multimedia production, and presentation skills to prepare students for professional tourism promotion in international contexts.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is Cronbach's alpha only evaluates the internal consistency of the rubric components and does not measure agreement among the judges. Therefore, inter-rater reliability could not be established from this dataset because different judge evaluated different participants. Another limitation is with regard to the relatively small sample size ($n=37$). The justification for this is according to the PiCs of the collaborating institutions, their students are rather timid when it comes to public speaking competitions, hence

the small number of participations from the other two collaborating institutions. The predominance participation from a single institution, i.e. UiTM Perlis, was because the institution had organized an international intervarsity public speaking competition a year earlier and therefore the lecturers encouraged their students to take part in this year's competition. As a result, these limitations may affect the generalizability of the findings. It is highly recommended that future research should consider larger-scale studies which involved more institutions and not limited to only those in Southeast Asia region. Various stake holders could also benefit from studies that examine the relationship between pitching competency and other communicative competence assessments such as informative speech and persuasive speech.

Implications for Pedagogical Practice

There is a potential misalignment between the skills emphasized in language instruction and the demands of pitching tasks as it was found that some participants who exhibited excellent score on visual design and multimedia struggled with oral delivery. This is clearly shown as the findings also indicate that the participants' conclusion development was comparatively the weakest area, which proposes intervention in improving learners' skill in developing effective conclusion. A greater emphasis on communication skills is needed in ESL/EFL curricula, especially in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Tourism courses. The findings may reflect broader trends in ESL/EFL education, where it remains evident that greater emphasis is given for writing and digital communication such essay and email writing than oral presentation skills.

Higher learning institutions should consider including specific English courses that provide a structured pitching training that integrates language proficiency development such as public speaking skills, storytelling techniques, persuasive communication strategies, as well as multimedia production skills with effective feedback mechanisms on the learners' performance from the lecturers and language instructors. This can benefit future graduates as effective pitching skills can increase their employability. With the advancement of AI technology, learners should be encouraged to make use of the technology to help improve their pitching ability such as the use of video analysis tools, peer feedback platforms, and AI-powered pronunciation mobile applications as well as fluency training mobile applications. However, learners must be reminded to abide to the institutions' rules and regulations with regard to usage of AI applications in competitions and assessments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance university students' pitching competency in tourism and entrepreneurial contexts. Firstly, tertiary level institutions in Asian regions should incorporate structured pitching activities into their English language and tourism-related courses. Embedding authentic pitching tasks within English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Tourism, and entrepreneurship curricula can provide students with regular opportunities to develop persuasive communication, presentation delivery, and critical thinking skills in real-world contexts.

Secondly, explicit instruction on pitching techniques should be integrated into communication courses in line with workplace communication. Training should focus on key components of effective pitching, including audience engagement, storytelling, persuasive language, non-verbal communication, visual presentation design, and responding confidently to questions. Regular formative feedback using standardised rubrics may further support students' continuous improvement. Universities should encourage greater participation in local intervarsity and international intervarsity pitching competitions. Such competitions provide authentic learning experiences that expose students to diverse audiences, foster intercultural communication, and enhance employability skills required in the tourism and hospitality industries. Finally, future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples involving participants from multiple countries and institutions. Researchers are also encouraged to examine specific dimensions of pitching competency, such as language accuracy, presentation delivery, persuasive communication, and audience engagement, as well as investigate factors that influence successful pitching performance, including English language proficiency, communication anxiety, self-confidence, and prior presentation experience.

Recommendations for future research also include a longitudinal study that tracks the development of pitching skills in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom over time across their educational levels. This will

allow for the documentation of how specific pitching skills affect the communicative competence of the students. Additionally, there is an opportunity for a comparative study to examine the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches to coach pitching abilities in the classroom, as well as whether technology-enhanced learning may further impact the communicative competence of the pitchers. It would also be interesting to observe if the pitching skills that the learners acquire in the ESP classroom are transferable to their professional performance and whether their pitching performance may be used to predict their communicative competence in the professional environment. The scope of the study itself can also be tested in courses other than strictly tourism – related courses to investigate whether other professional settings can benefit from graduates with pitching experience.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that competitive pitching serves as an effective authentic learning platform for developing essential 21st-century skills, including oral communication, persuasion, critical thinking, creativity, and professional presentation, which are vital in the workplace communication, namely the tourism industry. While participants generally demonstrated encouraging pitching competency, variations in performance suggest the need for greater emphasis on presentation techniques and persuasive communication through structured pitching instruction in English language subjects and tourism programmes. Overall, this study contributes to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), workplace communication and tourism education by providing empirical evidence of ESL/EFL learners' pitching competency in an authentic Asian regional competition, offering valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and competition organisers to strengthen students' communicative competence and employability.

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