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THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, DISABILITY, AND MIGRANT IDENTITY IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN GREEK TOURISM VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract:
This qualitative interview study explores the intersecting barriers of gender, disability, and migrant identity in learning English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within Greek tourism vocational training programs. Drawing on the experiences of 11 female migrant students with learning disabilities, the study investigates how institutional practices, including exclusive teaching methods and limited multilingual support, exacerbate feelings of exclusion and hinder English language learning, which is critical for employment in the highly feminized tourism sector. Participants reported challenges such as inaccessible teaching materials, low teacher expectations, and social marginalization in the classroom, which collectively undermine their educational and tourism career aspirations. Despite these obstacles, students employed diverse coping strategies such as peer support, translanguaging, and generative AI tools to overcome the overt and covert barriers they faced in Greek tourism vocational education. The findings suggest there is an urgent need for inclusive pedagogies and tailored support in vocational tourism education to address the complex needs of marginalized EFL learners. This study contributes to the growing body of research on equity and inclusion in tourism education and offers practical implications for policy and teaching practices in multilingual, multicultural vocational settings.

Keywords: English for tourism, gender, disability, migrants, intersectionality

1. Introduction

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the use of English as a common means of communication among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. In the current

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global tourism landscape, ELF plays a crucial role in various sectors such as hospitality, marketing, management, branding, promotion, and customer service (Lee & Lee, 2025). English has become the dominant language of communication among hotel employees, travel agents, airline staff, restaurants and tourists, even in countries such as Greece where English is not the primary language. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the significance of ELF in facilitating intercultural communication within tourism (Liu & Liu, 2022). With globalization expanding the geographical reach of tourism, encounters between culturally and linguistically diverse individuals have become more common, and English is now the default language in these exchanges, not only in urban centers but also in rural areas where international tourists expect to communicate easily (Lee & Lee, 2023).

Understandably, English is a vital component of tourism education, as proficiency in the language is often required even for entry-level roles such as housekeeping, kitchen staff, porters, and cleaning crews, where basic communication with international guests and staff is essential (Fujita, 2019). In Greece, both public and private institutes for vocational training (SAEKs) that offer tourism-related post-secondary programs include English for Tourism courses in their curriculum throughout the two years of study. Nevertheless, existing research on the effectiveness of these courses is scarce, especially regarding students with diverse social identities such as students with learning difficulties, migrant backgrounds and women. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the English language learning experiences of women who have recently graduated or are currently students in public vocational institutes on the island of Crete, Greece. More specifically, the study employs an intersectional lens in order to explore the barriers as well as the strategies female students attending English for Tourism courses at the intersections of their gender, disability, nationality and cultural identities.

2. Intersectionality

This study employs an intersectional lens to examine the barriers encountered by female students with disabilities who are also EFL learners in Greek post-secondary tourism education. English is essential for employability, yet for many female students, particularly those from migrant backgrounds or with learning disabilities, language learning intersects with broader systems of marginalization. Intersectionality provides a critical lens to understand how these students' experiences are shaped by the convergence of multiple social identities and systemic constraints. The term, which was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, focuses on how identity categories such as gender, disability, language status, class, and ethnicity are interwoven and, as a result, produce unique forms of disadvantage. This study adopts an intracategorical intersectionality framework, which focuses on differences within a specific group, in this case, female students in tourism VET who are simultaneously EFL learners and individuals with disabilities and diverse cultural backgrounds. Central to this analysis are two principles of intersectional research, namely multidimensionality (McCall,2005),

which emphasizes the simultaneous influence of social identities such as gender, ability, and language status and contextual specificity, which places these identities within a particular sociocultural setting, in this case, the Greek vocational education and tourism industry context. In this context, English functions not just as an extra subject to be learned, but as an essential skill without which it is almost impossible to work in tourism (Stergiou & Airey, 2017; Vergis *et al.*, 2025). Thus, this study seeks to shed light on how intersecting identities, gender, disability, language status, and class shape the language learning trajectories and employment possibilities of female tourism students in Greece. By exposing the systemic and structural factors that disadvantage EFL learners with disabilities in Greek vocational institutes, the study offers valuable information for more targeted interventions that will promote inclusion in Greek tourism education.

3. Context and method

3.1 The Greek tourism education system

Tourism education in Greece is offered through vocational programs that focus on skill-based, practical training and academic programs within higher education, which are mostly designed for students who aim for managerial or leadership roles within the sector (Malagas *et al.*, 2024). Vocational programs are available at both the upper-secondary and post-secondary levels. Upper secondary VET is delivered through vocational high schools known as EPAL, where students begin at the age of 16. The first year includes general education subjects, after which students choose a vocational specialization for the remaining two years. Graduates can either take the nationwide Panhellenic exams to pursue higher education or continue with an optional apprenticeship year for hands-on work experience. Post-secondary tourism education is provided by vocational institutes (SAEKs) (Kotsifakos *et al.*, 2024).

Vocational education in Greece, particularly in the field of tourism, continues to be shaped by longstanding societal attitudes that favor general academic education over vocational training. Despite the fact that the tourism sector is a vital pillar of the Greek economy, which significantly contributes to the national GDP and employment, tourism education remains undervalued in the public (Katemliadis & Papatheodorou, 2021). Government campaigns and mainstream media have in recent years attempted to rebrand vocational pathways, by changing the titles of the Vocational Institutes (IEK), to Vocational Schools which resembles more the Greek terminology for Higher Education institutions (SAEK) and by constantly advertising the alignment of vocational high schools and post-secondary vocational institutes with labor market needs and their ability to prepare students for immediate employment. In tourism specifically, VET programs offer hands-on training in areas such as hospitality, travel services, culinary arts, and hotel management, which are directly linked to one of Greece's most dynamic and expanding industries. However, these efforts have done little to shift the deeply rooted perception that vocational schooling is a second-choice option. In fact, among middle-class Greek families, VET, regardless of sector, is often associated with low-

prestige, manual occupations and limited upward mobility (Giannakaki & Batziakas, 2016; Kotsifakos *et al.*, 2024). This is particularly true for the tourism sector, where roles such as hotel staff or culinary workers are viewed as service-oriented jobs with low social status and instability (Vergis *et al.*, 2025).

3.2 Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through purposive sampling, drawing on the researcher's professional involvement in tourism post-secondary education. Having worked for several years as an English language educator in post-secondary tourism programs in Crete, I maintained close connections with vocational educators and administrators, particularly in evening vocational schools and institutes. The final sample consisted of eleven women, aged between 19 and 38, all enrolled in evening VET programs focused on tourism-related fields. All participants had a formally diagnosed learning difficulty and were currently attending or had graduated from a vocational high school or a vocational institute in a tourism-related program. Their inclusion in the study was based not only on their demographic and educational profiles but also on their unique position at the intersection of gender, language learning, disability and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within a field that relies heavily on English as a Lingua Franca. Most participants were from working-class families with migrant backgrounds and were juggling work in low-paid tourism jobs while attending a tourism course in public vocational institutes. They all were first- or second-generation migrants from countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia.

3.3 Interviews and data analysis

Online and in-person individual interviews were conducted from 2023-2025. The participants were asked to reflect on their current and past experiences of learning English. They described the challenges they faced, the kinds of support or solutions that were offered, what they felt could have helped them overcome these challenges, and suggested changes that could encourage other women with learning difficulties and migrant backgrounds to take up English language learning in tourism-related programs. To analyze the data collected from participants, I employed a narrative inquiry approach, which aimed to explore how individual life stories reveal the intersections of gender, disability, and English language learning within the context of post-secondary Greek tourism education. Each interview transcript was carefully read multiple times, during which I created detailed annotations and highlighted key elements of the participants' EFL educational experiences, identity struggles, and strategies for coping with linguistic and institutional barriers. Patterns began to emerge across narratives, particularly on how the participants' learning difficulties, migrant backgrounds and gendered expectations within the tourism sector affected their English language learning. Some participants, for example, described how the lack of support, such as differentiated English instruction, led them to rely on generative AI applications as informal learning aids. They used such tools to translate unfamiliar terms, rehearse job interview dialogues

in English, and draft written assignments for their English for Tourism courses. After this initial phase of narrative immersion, I proceeded with thematic coding using qualitative analysis software. I began with open coding, reviewing each transcript line by line to generate first-level descriptive codes directly from participants' words. These included codes such as "Language anxiety," "Lack of accommodations," and "self-directed learning." From these codes, I developed thematic clusters that reflected broader social and educational themes, such as "Invisible barriers to English learning," "Gendered pathways in tourism careers," and "Coping strategies".

A codebook was constructed to organize these emerging categories and guide the second round of analysis. This phase involved axial coding to explore relationships between themes, particularly how intersecting social identities, such as being a woman with a learning disability in a tourism VET program, affected English learning experiences and tourism career aspirations. Narrative excerpts were then revisited within their full context to preserve the richness of each participant's voice. Through this iterative and interpretive process, I tried not only to identify commonalities across cases but also to recognize each participant's individual experience. The goal was to explicate how the Greek post-secondary tourism education system often downplays the specific needs of women with learning difficulties who are also English learners, as well as the strategies and the agency these learners exercise for overcoming these challenges.

4. Findings

Participants' accounts reveal a variety of barriers to English language learning within tourism programs at Greek vocational institutes, along with coping strategies which were shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of inequality rather than a single factor. The analysis showed that both the challenges and the strategies were interrelated and influenced each other, which shows their dynamic and interconnected nature.

Theme I: Learning barriers

Sub-theme: Exclusive teaching practices

For some of the participants, English language learning in the VET institutes was not only an academic challenge, but it was an emotional and social struggle shaped by intersecting factors of gender, disability, and linguistic background. As students in the Greek under-resourced vocational education context, they encountered a range of barriers that were often overlooked by their EFL teachers and peers alike. A common thread across their narratives was a persistent sense of exclusion within the English classroom. Participants described, for example, that the pace of instruction often left them behind. They also explained that in their English classes, there was always a heavy emphasis on written grammar-based tasks that clashed with their needs. Those with diagnosed learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or auditory processing disorders, reported feeling overwhelmed, especially during listening or reading comprehension tasks, where content was delivered quickly and with little repetition:

"*Writing, writing and writing. This is all we did. We had to copy everything from the board, quickly, or use our phones to copy things from there, again quickly…For me, as a dyslexic, this was a torture. I always felt stressed and embarrassed cause I was keeping the whole class back*." (Anna, 19, Albania)

"*It was basically like we were in school again, but with a couple of texts and terms related to tourism. I never understood English grammar and spelling at school because I didn't attend a private language center like everybody else and I have dyslexia and the same thing continued when we went to the vocational institute…Anxiety, stress, not a lot of speaking in the class. I didn't understand what they were saying, I just remained silent for the hour to pass*." (Nadia, 22, Georgia)

"*Sometimes we used to do type of listening tasks, usually from the teacher's laptop, I wasn't able to hear anything because of my disorder, but believe me, even the other students couldn't hear anything*." (Olga, 24, Georgia)

The monolingual nature of classroom instruction further intensified the difficulties, especially for the first-generation participants who lacked a high level of Greek proficiency. Most EFL teachers used only Greek and English, without taking into consideration the students' multilingual backgrounds. For first-generation immigrants like Lilla and Annita, for example, this added another layer of complexity, as they were expected to learn English through a language in which they were already struggling:

"*I wanted to learn English, cause it is so important for work, but I really couldn't. Not at the evening high school I was before the vocational institute and not at the vocational institute which I expected it would be different, but it really wasn't. We changed three English teachers during the two years, they all did the same thing. They mostly spoke Greek, very fast, they answered the questions and the exercises in English and that was it. I didn't understand almost anything in class*." (Lilla, 32, Bulgaria)

"*My Greek still is at a low level, I cannot understand someone who explains something fast…When I first went to the vocational institute, English was one of my top priorities, I wanted to learn proper English but I realized pretty quickly that I wouldn't.*" (Annita, 28, Albania)

Sub-theme II: Feelings of embarrassment

Participants also described feeling ashamed or embarrassed when they were unable to follow instructions, answer questions, or pronounce English words correctly. This fear of public failure often led them to withdraw from class discussions or avoid participating altogether. Their reluctance to speak was intensified by prior schooling experiences of being corrected harshly, reinforcing the belief that they did not "belong":

> "*My accent in English is horrible, I never had proper training, private lessons like the others, even when we had a really nice teacher, who was really encouraging, I would blush and look down and deny to speak in English…The idea of having a whole class, especially the boys looking at me and making fun of me and my pronunciation was killing me*." (Adriana, 21, Romania)

While some classmates were helpful in translating or clarifying, others were indifferent or impatient. Participants recalled instances where they were left out of group activities or politely pushed aside when group tasks demanded English fluency. This isolation reinforced their self-doubt and, in some cases, decreased their motivation to continue with their studies:

> "*We were about 25 students in class, most of them boys, they didn't even want to be there, their parents sent them because they didn't pass the panhellenic exams to enter university…Tourism is considered an easy subject and in Crete everybody can get a job in tourism, so they were there, but didn't want to be there…They would make fun of every single mistake I was making, not just me and others, but for me, it was unbearable, so I ended up not participating*." (Maria, 26, Albania)

In addition, the vocational focus on tourism intensified the pressure. English was not just an academic subject; in fact, participants described it as a critical tool for employment in customer service, hospitality, and front-desk positions. Yet, the support needed to develop that level of communicative competence was often absent. The gap between what was expected in terms of language proficiency and what was realistically attainable within their learning conditions at their vocational institutions left some of the participants feeling unprepared for the job market they were being trained to enter:

> "*You cannot work anywhere in tourism without English…In Crete they ask for English even for cleaning jobs, you cannot imagine the pressure I get…This is exactly the reason why I wanted to learn English at the vocational institute, I went there when I was 21, I knew exactly the importance of learning English, I knew my difficulties because of my dyslexia and I went there determined to learn what I hadn't learned at school all these years…But it didn't happen…It was a repetition of the vocational high-school…I didn't learn anything there, except from a list of expressions for my cleaning job a teacher gave me…But I didn't go there for that. I went there to get proper tourism education for something better*." (Crina, 22, Romania)

Sub-theme III: Gendered barriers

The accounts of participants revealed that gender shaped their educational experiences in important and often under-recognized ways. While all students in vocational education faced certain structural challenges, the female participants with learning disabilities and migrant backgrounds described a specific set of barriers that were

influenced by classroom gender and broader social expectations. Several participants noted that male classmates often dominated classroom interactions and, in some cases, made dismissive or mocking comments when female students made mistakes in English. This was especially difficult for those already struggling with pronunciation or comprehension due to dyslexia or limited language support. These interactions contributed to a sense of discomfort and reluctance to participate, particularly in speaking activities:

> "*Even when I knew the answer, I didn't raise my hand. Because the boys would laugh if I said something wrong or if my accent was bad*." (Anna, 19, Albania)

> "*Sometimes, to be honest, the situation in English was literally chaotic…There are eighteen year olds, with a high level of English because their parents have paid a lot of money to learn English since primary school, and then there was me, with dyslexia and with no private tuition during my school years…Boys are the worst, it was the same when I was at school…They were on their phones during the lesson and the only reason they would speak was to make fun of me and a couple of other students who also didn't know English*." (Alina, 20, Romania)

Participants also reflected on how their educational needs were not always taken seriously. While this was partly due to the lack of training or resources in vocational education, some felt that as young women, their struggles were often overlooked or dismissed. For example, Anna described instances where her EFL teacher assumed she was less committed to learning or more suited to low-skilled roles in tourism, such as housekeeping or front-desk support, where limited English was seen as sufficient:

> "*She told me that basically, there is no way I will be able to learn English in two years at the vocational institute because I hadn't had attended private language schools as everybody else and because of my dyslexia and I should focus on specific phrases*." (Anna, 19, Albania)

In addition, gendered responsibilities outside school, such as caregiving roles at home or pressure to enter the labor market quickly, often affected participants' abilities to actively engage in class:

> "*Some of our teachers, treated us like we are just going to be waitresses or cleaners, I could feel it. And maybe we will, but we still need English…Sometimes it felt like I wasn't really taken seriously, it seemed like, ok we will give you the paper, even if you don't know English and you are not really going to need it because you will end up in a low-ranking job and they will hire you cause they are desperate.*" (Alina, 20, Romania)

> "*Some of them were really supportive, but others were really looking down on me…I was always late because I work long hours and I have two young children…My level of English is very low, so I was asking for help constantly but I wasn't really getting it…I probably was asking too much. The truth is, you cannot really learn English in two hours a week when all the other have a high-level and you are supposed to learn terminology and specific English for tourism*." (Aria, 29, Romania)

Alina also referred to the fact that women in Crete are usually hired in "smiling service" roles while managerial positions are usually reserved for men, but even for these positions, fluent English is considered vital:

> "*I dream of getting a proper manager position at a hotel here, but I am aware that this is difficult even for women with university degrees…Women are mostly hired for positions at the reception, but even in these cases, you have to be able to speak fluent English, with a soft sort of female voice and they don't like strong accents like mine.*" (Alina, 20, Romania)

Theme II: Coping strategies

Sub-theme I: Social strategies

Despite the challenges participants faced in learning English, they all developed practical strategies to overcome the linguistic and educational barriers within the tourism vocational classroom. A recurring theme was the informal support they received from peers. Two participants explained that classmates who were more fluent in English helped clarify instructions, explain key tourism vocabulary, and even review material outside class hours. These relationships often went beyond academic assistance, offering emotional support in a context where formal help was scarce:

> *"I had classmates who helped me, a lot, both for the mid-terms, the assignments and the exams, but also for actually learning English…One classmate of mine, Sonia, she used to be my teacher essentially, she described every little exercise we did in the class…I didn't just want the answers, this wasn't the point, I needed to learn English…I am twenty-two years old, I went there because I want to have a career in tourism and English is the first step, you cannot have any sort of career in tourism without it."* (Crina, 22, Romania)

> *"If it weren't of my friends, who literally felt sorry for me, I would have never passed English and most importantly, I wouldn't have learned even the basics…They could see I was struggling and they were helping me even after class and they still help me sometimes."* (Alina, 20, Romania)

Other participants described using code-switching and translanguaging during group work and oral activities. Anna, for example, explained how she switched between Greek, Albanian, and English to complete classroom tasks:

> *"I use everything, blended, Albanian, Greek, English just to convey the meaning I wanted, other Albanian students also did the same, but our teacher didn't like it much…She thought we were talking about irrelevant things, she thought it was rude, basically but we still did it in order to be able to complete the tasks."* (Anna, 19, Albania)

Repetition and memorization were also commonly used survival strategies. Some participants described copying notes repeatedly, listening to the same audio recordings many times, or writing key phrases phonetically in Greek or Albanian to help with pronunciation:

> "*It was very hard to learn how to pronounce specific words I really wanted to learn in English, I used to write them in Greek or Albanian just to remember how they are pronounced, I still do it…I am also watching a lot of YouTube videos, for tourism specifically, whenever I can. I am really trying*." (Maria, 26, Albania)

Others relied on family or friends outside school who had stronger English skills to help them prepare for tests, review dialogues, or explain grammar concepts:

> "*My little sister became my EFL teacher for English, sometimes it was a bit hard for her because she knows English, but not tourism English, but still she helped me a lot…Whatever questions I had from class, I would go back to her, even though she's only fourteen, she still helped a lot*." (Adriana, 21, Romania)

Sub-theme II: Generative AI-assisted strategies

Participants also described how they increasingly incorporated generative AI tools into their English learning routines. Anna, for instance, began using ChatGPT and other AI applications in her second year at the vocational institute, especially when she struggled to follow classroom instruction:

> "*I typed the phrase into my phone and quickly got a short explanation in Greek or Albanian, asked it other questions if something wasn't clear, it literally saved me, much better than Google Translate. The teacher didn't like it, she kept telling me to stop doing it, but at the same time, she never had time to explain to me the things I needed in English*." (Anna, 19, Albania)

Lilla also explained how generative AI tools helped her stay engaged despite struggling with the course materials:

> "*For learners with dyslexia and sort of beginners like me, these Tourism English textbooks are horrible, they are very dense, full of tourism and hospitality jargon, in class I couldn't really keep up with what was going on…I go home, I paste paragraphs in ChatGPT or*

Deepseek and ask a summary or phonetic breakdown in Albanian or Greek." (Lilla, 32, Bulgaria)

Several participants also used ChatGPT to write assertive English responses for role-playing customer interactions, such as handling complaints or negotiating with suppliers. This allowed them to practice using the authoritative language expected in higher-status tourism roles, challenging classroom norms that implicitly trained women for more passive communication styles.

5. Discussion and implications

Findings from this study suggest that for many of the women participants, learning English for tourism in Greek vocational institutes was an overwhelming experience. Their accented Greek, emerging English skills, and learning difficulties such as dyslexia marked them as peripheral within the classroom environment and triggered feelings of exclusion and a lack of belonging. Although VET programs in tourism are intended to provide practical training and facilitate direct pathways into the tourism labor market, the Greek public vocational education system fell short of accommodating the specific needs of these learners, both in terms of their learning disabilities and their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These findings align with previous works conducted in the Greek vocational education context (Seiradakis, 2024) and higher education (Seiradakis, 2022, 2023), which also suggest that there is a systemic lack of adequate support for adult EFL learners with intersecting social identities in Greece.

Participants' narratives revealed a significant absence of inclusive pedagogies and multilingual support within their English classes. Teaching materials and assessments were predominantly delivered in Greek or English with minimal scaffolding for beginners, and instruction rarely incorporated differentiated learning strategies tailored to students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities. Moreover, the low expectations expressed by teachers, as reported by participants, reflect findings from related studies indicating that educators often hold low academic expectations for students with disabilities and migrant backgrounds. These lowered expectations negatively affect students' classroom engagement, self-esteem, and long-term educational and professional aspirations (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014).

The gendered dimension of these barriers further compounds the difficulties faced by female EFL learners in tourism, who not only contend with linguistic and cognitive challenges but also deal with classroom dynamics and broader social expectations that often marginalize their voices and limit their participation. Women in the tourism sector are often put into roles that demand emotional labor and controlled, simplified English use, rather than communicative competence or advancement. This form of "bridgework," where workers mediate between clients and the service environment, reinforces gendered expectations around language and behavior (Otis, 2016). Current findings suggest that in Greek tourism, VET programs and particularly in the English class, these

same assumptions are often translated into limited learning opportunities, as participants were implicitly seen as fit only for lower-tier roles requiring basic English, rather than being supported to achieve fluency or leadership potential.

Additionally, participants' coping strategies, including peer support, translanguaging, repetition, and the innovative use of generative AI tools, highlight both the resilience of these learners and the critical gaps in formal institutional support. These informal and technological strategies partially compensated for systemic shortcomings but also point to opportunities for integrating such approaches into teaching English for tourism in vocational education.

Despite high levels of motivation and effort, these findings suggest that participants faced significant challenges in EFL due to their underlying learning difficulties. These barriers, if not adequately addressed through instructional design, limit not only students' progress in English but also their confidence and access to employment in the tourism sector. Migrant women in Greece often experience multiple forms of disadvantage, including limited previous education, socio-economic constraints, cultural and linguistic adjustment, and caregiving responsibilities (Xhaho *et al.*, 2021). These intersecting factors can make participation in vocational education more complex and demanding. English classes in tourism-related vocational programs should be culturally relevant and practical. Teaching materials should include visual aids, simplified texts, and examples that reflect learners' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds to enhance understanding and relevance.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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