Perceptions of tourism students regarding readiness to serve Chinese tourists: A qualitative study from the learner's perspective

Nguyen Van Tien

Department of Chinese Studies, Thai Nguyen University of Science, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: *The Chinese tourist market plays an important role in Vietnam's tourism industry, creating high demands for human resources with appropriate linguistic and intercultural communication competencies. This study aims to explore tourism students' perceptions of readiness to serve Chinese tourists from the learner's perspective. The research employs a qualitative approach with 30 in-depth interviews and thematic analysis.*
The findings indicate that students demonstrate high awareness of the importance of the Chinese tourist market; however, their actual level of confidence remains limited. Readiness is constructed through three main components: awareness of market requirements, belief in personal competence, and practical experience. The gap between awareness and confidence mainly stems from limited practice opportunities, insufficient professional Chinese language proficiency, and lack of real interaction with Chinese tourists.
This study contributes to clarifying the perceptual structure of readiness within the context of tourism education in Vietnam and proposes implications for enhancing practical training, integrating intercultural communication, and improving students' self-efficacy.
KEYWORDS: *tourism education; service readiness; Chinese tourists; self-efficacy; qualitative study; intercultural competence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese tourist market has gradually recovered and continues to play an important role in the tourism industries of many Asian countries, including Vietnam. Recent studies indicate that the behaviors and preferences of Chinese tourists have shifted toward greater emphasis on safety, quality experiences, and reliable information (Huang et al., 2021; Liu & Cheng, 2021). This recovery places urgent demands on tourism human resources with appropriate linguistic and intercultural communication competencies.

In the tourism and hospitality sector, service quality strongly depends on the interaction between employees and guests. Intercultural communication competence and situational handling ability are considered crucial factors in serving international tourists (Koc, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). However, several studies indicate that a significant gap may exist between perceived competence and actual competence, particularly when practical experience is lacking (Hong et al., 2023). In tourism education, "career readiness" is not merely a matter of skills but also relates to confidence in one's abilities and the perception of being adequately prepared for future work. When students have limited opportunities for real interaction with international tourists, especially Chinese tourists, their level of confidence and perceived readiness may be affected.

Although numerous studies have examined Chinese tourist behavior and tourism training, research exploring students' perceptions of readiness to serve a specific market remains limited. From the learner's perspective, the concept of "readiness to serve Chinese tourists" may encompass multiple dimensions such as professional Chinese language competence, cultural understanding, situational handling ability, and personal confidence.

Therefore, this study aims to explore tourism students' perceptions of readiness to serve Chinese tourists through a qualitative approach. The study addresses three research questions: 1 - How do students understand "readiness"? 2 - What factors influence their perceived readiness? 3 - What do they expect from the training program to enhance their career preparation?

By approaching the issue from the learner's perspective, this study contributes to clarifying the perceptual structure of service readiness in tourism education and provides practical implications for curriculum improvement.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The concept of "readiness" in tourism education

In vocational education, "readiness" is commonly understood as the degree to which individuals feel they possess sufficient competence, skills, and confidence to perform a specific professional role. In tourism and hospitality, career readiness encompasses not only professional knowledge but also communication skills, adaptability, and confidence in service environments (Hong et al., 2023).

Recent research in tourism education indicates that readiness is influenced by learning experiences, the level of practical engagement, and institutional support. When students lack real-world exposure, particularly in internationalized contexts, they tend to underestimate their competence despite being aware of professional requirements (Hong et al., 2023). This suggests that readiness is not merely the result of knowledge accumulation but is also associated with subjective perceptions and practical experience.

In the context of serving international tourists, the concept of "readiness" should be expanded to include intercultural competence and professional language competence.

2.2. Self-efficacy and perceived service competence

Self-efficacy, as understood in contemporary education and service research, reflects individuals' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform specific tasks. In tourism and hospitality environments, self-efficacy directly influences confidence in communicating and handling situations with international tourists (Koc, 2021).

Koc (2021) indicates that in tourism contexts, self-assessed confidence may not always correspond to actual competence, particularly in intercultural communication. This implies that improving competence requires not only knowledge but also opportunities for students to experience successful performance in practical situations. From this perspective, readiness to serve Chinese tourists may be viewed as the result of the interaction between awareness of market requirements and belief in personal competence.

2.3. Intercultural communicative competence in tourism

Tourism is a highly cross-cultural service industry. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is considered a foundational factor in ensuring quality interaction with international tourists (Liu et al., 2022).

Liu et al. (2022) demonstrate differences among stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry regarding the components of ICC, including attitudes, communicative behaviors, emotional aspects of interaction, and language competence. This suggests that ICC training should adopt a multidimensional approach linked to specific professional contexts.

For the Chinese tourist market, differences in communication culture, service expectations, and behavioral styles may create psychological pressure for students who lack sufficient practical experience. Recent studies on post-COVID-19 Chinese tourist behavior also indicate changes in tourism priorities, emphasizing safety, experience quality, and service professionalism (Huang et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023). These changes further increase demands on service personnel.

2.4. Research gap

Most existing studies focus on two main directions: (1) analyzing Chinese tourist behavior and trends (Huang et al., 2021; Liu & Cheng, 2021), and (2) assessing tourism students' competence or career readiness in general contexts (Hong et al., 2023). However, qualitative studies exploring students' perceptions of readiness to serve a specific market—such as Chinese tourists—remain limited.

Furthermore, most studies employ quantitative approaches to measure readiness levels, whereas qualitative approaches can provide deeper insights into how students construct the meaning of "readiness," including their concerns and expectations within real training contexts.

Therefore, this study focuses on exploring tourism students' perceptions of readiness to serve Chinese tourists through qualitative methods in order to clarify the perceptual structure and influencing factors from the learner's perspective.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using an interpretive qualitative approach to understand how tourism students perceive and interpret readiness to serve Chinese tourists within the current educational context. This design allows for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, meaning construction, and contextual factors influencing learners' perceptions.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 students at a public university in Northern Vietnam. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, when analytical themes began to repeat and no significant new information emerged. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diversity in year of study, internship experience, and level of exposure to the Chinese language.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and fully transcribed. Interview content focused on how students defined "readiness," the factors influencing their perceived readiness, and their expectations regarding the training program.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including coding, grouping codes, and constructing overarching themes. The analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure rigor and interpretive depth. Research credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer academic discussion during the coding process, and ensuring confidentiality of all collected data..

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Description of the research sample

The characteristics of the 30 interviewed students are presented in Table 1. The sample included 9 second-year students, 11 third-year students, and 10 fourth-year students, indicating a relatively balanced distribution across academic years. This structure allowed for the collection of perspectives from different stages of training, from students with limited practical experience to those approaching graduation.

Regarding professional experience, 18 out of 30 students had participated in internships in the tourism industry, while 12 had not. However, only 10 students reported having direct contact with Chinese tourists, and 20 students had not had such opportunities. This reflects limited real exposure to the Chinese tourist market within the current training context.

Concerning language competence, 14 students had studied Chinese for at least one year, while 16 students either lacked a solid Chinese language foundation or had never studied Chinese. This disparity created diversity in language preparedness, contributing to a clearer understanding of how students evaluate their own readiness.

Overall, the sample characteristics indicate that most participants were aware of market demands, yet their actual experience with Chinese tourists remained limited. This structure aligns with the study's objective, as it allows for in-depth analysis of the difference between professional awareness and perceived readiness in contexts with limited practical exposure.

Table 1. Characteristics of interview participants (N = 30)

Criteria	Category	Frequency
Year of study	Year 2	9
	Year 3	11
	Year 4	10
Internship experience	Yes	18
	No	12
Studied Chinese ≥ 1 year	Yes	14
	No or < 1 year	16
Prior contact with Chinese tourists	Yes	10
	No	20

(Source: Survey results)

4.2. Awareness of the importance of the chinese tourist market

The analysis results show that students' awareness of the role of the Chinese tourist market is very high. As presented in Table 2, 28 out of 30 students (93%) directly mentioned the importance of this market for the tourism industry and personal career opportunities. Only two students did not emphasize this factor during the interviews.

Most students believed that Chinese tourists constitute one of the largest international visitor segments and significantly influence the demand for Chinese-speaking personnel. Some respondents emphasized that proficiency in Chinese could create competitive advantages in recruitment, particularly in destinations with high volumes of Chinese tourists.

However, deeper analysis of the interview content reveals that this awareness primarily reflects "market awareness" rather than "professional preparation." Many students admitted that although they clearly understood market requirements, they did not feel adequately prepared to meet them. This suggests that high awareness of market importance does not necessarily correspond to high readiness.

This discrepancy becomes clearer when compared with Table 4, in which only 4 out of 30 students rated their confidence as high when serving Chinese tourists. Thus, a gap exists between awareness of market demands and perceived personal competence - a matter analyzed further in subsequent sections.

Table 2. Summary of themes and frequency of occurrence

Theme	Number Mentioning (n=30)	Percentage
High awareness of the importance of the Chinese market	28	93%
Lack of confidence in Chinese communication	23	77%
Lack of practical practice opportunities	25	83%

Concerns about cultural differences	19	63%
Gap between training and real-world requirements	21	70%
Need to enhance practical training	27	90%

(Source: Survey results)

This awareness is clearly reflected in the statement of a third-year student:

"I think Chinese tourists are a very large market. If we do not know Chinese, it will be difficult to compete for jobs later." (SV05). Similarly, a fourth-year student commented: "I think in the next few years Chinese tourists will continue to return in large numbers, so tourism students need to prepare from now." (SV18). These quotations demonstrate that students not only recognize the market's scale but also relate it directly to their personal career orientation.

Overall, the results indicate that tourism students clearly understand the importance of the Chinese tourist market; however, this awareness has not fully translated into confidence and perceived professional readiness..

4.3. How students define "Readiness"

When asked to explain what they understood by "readiness to serve Chinese tourists," students' responses revealed diverse conceptualizations. As shown in Table 3, 40% of students (12/30) defined readiness primarily in terms of Chinese language competence, stating that being able to "speak" or "communicate fluently" equates to readiness. This group regarded language as a prerequisite and almost equated readiness with Chinese proficiency.

Approximately 30% of students (9/30) emphasized confidence in handling situations within service environments. For this group, readiness was not limited to language ability but included flexibility in responding to complaints, misunderstandings, or special requests.

The remaining 30% (9/30) adopted a more integrated perspective, viewing readiness as a combination of language competence, cultural understanding, and professional skills. This group mentioned elements such as "understanding Chinese tourists' habits and expectations," "knowing how to behave appropriately," and "not feeling pressured when communicating."

These findings indicate that perceptions of readiness are not uniform among students. Notably, the proportion of students adopting a multidimensional approach (30%) remains relatively lower than those equating readiness with language competence (40%). This reflects a tendency to consider foreign language ability as central, while other components such as intercultural communication competence and situational skills are not yet fully recognized.

Table 3. Students' definitions of "Readiness"

Definition category	Number	Percentage
Readiness = Sufficient Chinese proficiency	12	40%
Readiness = Confidence in handling situations	9	30%
Readiness = Combination of language + culture + skills	9	30%

(Source: Survey results)

One student stated: "In my opinion, readiness means being able to speak Chinese fluently first, because if you cannot speak, other things will also be difficult." (SV09). In contrast, another student expressed a more multidimensional view: "I think readiness is not only about speaking, but also understanding the culture and knowing how to handle situations when guests are dissatisfied." (SV21). These differences reinforce the observation that the perceptual structure of readiness among students remains non-uniform.

The variation in conceptual definitions suggests that "readiness" is not a singular state but a perceptual structure composed of multiple components. This provides an important foundation for deeper analysis of the relationship among awareness, confidence, and practical experience in subsequent sections.

4.4. Self-assessed confidence levels and the awareness–competence gap

Although most students demonstrated high awareness of the importance of the Chinese tourist market (see Table 2) and articulated certain understandings of readiness (see Table 3), their self-assessed confidence levels present a different picture. As shown in Table 4, only 4 out of 30 students (13%) reported high confidence in serving Chinese tourists. Meanwhile, 11 students (37%) rated their confidence as moderate, and 15 students (50%) considered their confidence to be low.

These results reflect a clear discrepancy between awareness and belief in personal competence. While 93% of students acknowledged the importance of the Chinese market (Table 2), only a small proportion felt sufficiently confident to engage in service delivery. This indicates that awareness of professional requirements has not yet translated into a genuine sense of readiness.

Interview analysis revealed that low confidence primarily relates to three factors: (1) limited professional Chinese vocabulary, (2) concerns about pronunciation and fear of making mistakes in direct communication, and (3) lack of experience in handling real service situations. Notably, students who had previously interacted with Chinese tourists (10 participants according to Table 1) tended to rate their confidence as moderate or high more frequently than those without such exposure. This finding suggests that practical experience plays a crucial role in reinforcing belief in personal competence.

Overall, the results in this section reveal the existence of an "awareness–competence gap," in which students clearly understand market demands but do not feel adequately prepared to meet them. This gap serves as a foundation for deeper analysis of barriers and training improvement needs in subsequent sections.

Table 4. Self-Assessed confidence levels

Confidence level	Number
High confidence	4
Moderate confidence	11
Low confidence	15

(Source: Survey results)

4.5. Major barriers affecting readiness

The barriers mentioned by students during the interviews are summarized in Table 5. The findings indicate that readiness to serve Chinese tourists is influenced not only by language competence but also significantly by experiential and cultural factors.

The most frequently mentioned barrier was the lack of practical practice opportunities (24/30 students). Most participants stated that learning primarily occurs in classroom settings and that there are limited simulation activities closely resembling real service environments. This lack of direct interaction experience reduces confidence levels.

The second barrier was insufficient professional Chinese vocabulary (21/30 students). Many students reported that while they could communicate at a basic level, they encountered difficulties using specialized terminology in hotel, restaurant, or tour guiding contexts. This indicates a gap between general language training and professional language requirements.

Additionally, lack of real contact with Chinese tourists (20/30 students) and reluctance to speak or fear of making mistakes (18/30 students) were notable barriers. These factors are closely linked to the confidence levels discussed in Section 4.4. When practical exposure is limited, students tend to experience anxiety and underestimate their abilities.

Furthermore, 17 students stated that they lacked deep understanding of Chinese culture and behavioral patterns, which affects their ability to respond appropriately in intercultural communication contexts. This barrier indicates that readiness involves not only language competence but also intercultural communicative competence.

Table 5. Prominent barriers

Barrier	Number Mentioning
Lack of professional vocabulary	21
Reluctance to speak/fear of mistakes	18
Lack of realistic practice situations	24
Limited understanding of Chinese culture	17
No real contact with Chinese tourists	20

(Source: Survey results)

One student emphasized the lack of practice: "At school we mainly study theory; there are not many real-life situations to practice handling Chinese guests." (SV14). Another mentioned vocabulary limitations: "I lack professional vocabulary, for example when talking about room service or tours, I do not know which words to use accurately." (SV27). These quotations suggest that barriers arise not only from individual limitations but also from the structure of the training program.

Overall, the barriers identified in Table 5 are primarily structural and experiential rather than related to students' attitudes or motivation. This implies that enhancing readiness should be addressed at the curriculum level, particularly through strengthening practical training, situational simulations, and real interaction with international tourists.

4.6. Needs and proposals for training improvement

The analysis indicates that the need for curriculum adjustment and enhancement is one of the most prominent themes. As shown in Table 2, 27 out of 30 students (90%) proposed reforming the program toward

greater practical orientation to improve readiness to serve Chinese tourists. This high percentage reflects relative consensus among learners regarding the gap between training and real-world demands.

Students' proposals focus on four main directions:

First, students expressed a desire to increase situational simulations (role-play) linked to specific professional contexts such as welcoming guests, handling complaints, tour consultation, or communication in restaurant–hotel settings. Many participants believed that "practicing before entering the profession" would reduce anxiety and increase confidence in real situations.

Second, students proposed expanding internship or experiential opportunities in destinations with Chinese tourists in order to increase real exposure. This proposal corresponds directly to the barrier of "lack of practice opportunities" identified in Table 5 (24/30 students).

Third, participants recommended adding more professional Chinese language courses, particularly vocabulary and sentence structures used in service situations. This directly relates to the barrier of "lack of professional vocabulary" (21/30 students – Table 5).

Finally, some students suggested increasing content related to Chinese culture and tourist behavior to enhance appropriate responses in multicultural environments.

The need for practical training was clearly reflected in one student's comment: "If we could practice more through role-playing situations, I think I would feel much more confident." (SV03). Another student proposed: "I hope to have internship opportunities in places with many Chinese tourists so that I can become familiar with the environment before graduation." (SV25). These suggestions demonstrate that students actively identify solutions to narrow the gap between training and practice.

Overall, the proposals indicate that students not only recognize their limitations but also hold clear expectations for improvement. The shift from theory-oriented training toward experiential and situational learning emerges as a dominant trend. This reinforces the finding that readiness is perceived as the outcome of practice and interaction rather than solely knowledge accumulation.

4.7. Synthesis of the perceptual structure of readiness

Synthesizing the findings presented above indicates that readiness to serve Chinese tourists is not perceived by students as a singular state, but rather as a structure consisting of interconnected components.

First, regarding market awareness, most students (93% – see Table 2) highly valued the importance of Chinese tourists for career opportunities. This demonstrates relatively strong professional awareness and sensitivity to market trends.

Second, in terms of conceptual definition, students approached readiness in three main ways (Table 3), with language competence being dominant (40%). However, only 30% adopted a multidimensional view (language–skills–culture), suggesting that the concept is not yet comprehensively understood among learners.

Third, self-assessed confidence levels were relatively low (50% reporting low confidence – Table 4), reflecting a gap between awareness of market requirements and belief in personal competence. This gap is reinforced by structural barriers, particularly lack of practical opportunities (24/30 students – Table 5) and insufficient professional vocabulary (21/30 students – Table 5).

From these data, a perceptual model consisting of three core components can be identified:
- Market awareness
- Belief in personal competence (perceived competence/self-confidence)
- Experiential exposure and practical interaction

Within this model, market awareness forms the foundation, but experiential exposure acts as a crucial mediating factor influencing confidence levels. When practical exposure is limited, readiness is disrupted, creating a gap between "knowing what is required" and "feeling capable of doing it".

Thus, the findings indicate that readiness to serve Chinese tourists is constructed as a process of accumulating competence and experience rather than a state achieved solely through theoretical training. This provides the basis for the following discussion, in which the results are analyzed through the lens of self-efficacy and intercultural communicative competence.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a significant gap between students' awareness of the importance of the Chinese tourist market and their actual confidence when engaging in service delivery. This result reinforces the argument presented in the theoretical framework that "readiness" is not merely awareness of professional requirements but is closely associated with self-efficacy and practical experience (Hong et al., 2023; Koc, 2021).

First, the very high level of market awareness (93%) indicates that students clearly recognize tourism development trends and career opportunities. This suggests that professional motivation is not the primary barrier. However, the low level of confidence (50% self-assessing as low confidence) demonstrates that awareness has not yet been transformed into belief in personal competence. This finding is consistent with Koc

(2021), who argues that self-efficacy in tourism environments may be constrained when individuals lack real communication experience, particularly in intercultural contexts.

Second, the findings concerning how students define "readiness" reveal a tendency to equate the concept with language competence (40%), while the proportion adopting a multidimensional perspective remains limited (30%). This indicates that students continue to approach readiness primarily from a technical skill perspective rather than as a comprehensive competence encompassing intercultural communication and situational handling. This finding aligns with Liu et al. (2022), who identified differences in how intercultural communicative competence is understood among stakeholders in tourism education.

Third, the identified barriers - particularly the lack of practical opportunities (over 80% mentioned this factor) - highlight the mediating role of experience in the perceptual model of readiness. When students lack interaction with Chinese tourists, self-efficacy is not reinforced through successful experiential learning. This observation corresponds with Hong et al. (2023), who emphasize that learning experiences directly influence career readiness levels.

Based on these findings, an expanded interpretation of the structure of "readiness to serve Chinese tourists" can be proposed, consisting of three interacting components: Awareness of market requirements; Belief in personal competence; Practical experiential exposure.

Within this framework, practical experience functions as a moderating factor between awareness and self-efficacy. When experiential exposure is limited, the gap between "knowing" and "being able to perform" becomes more pronounced.

Practical implications

The findings suggest the need for appropriate adjustments in tourism training programs to enhance students' readiness to serve Chinese tourists.

First, strengthening professional situation simulations in Chinese through methods such as role-play or case-based learning can help students develop communication skills in contexts closely resembling real service environments.

Second, professional Chinese language modules should be developed more closely aligned with specific service contexts such as hotels, restaurants, and tour guiding, in order to reduce the gap between academic language and professional language use.

Third, expanding internship opportunities in destinations with significant numbers of Chinese tourists is essential for increasing experiential exposure and reinforcing students' confidence.

Furthermore, intercultural communication content should be systematically integrated into the curriculum rather than focusing solely on language competence.

These adjustments may contribute to transforming awareness of market demands into concrete practical competence, thereby enhancing students' self-efficacy and career readiness levels.

Academic contributions

This study contributes to addressing an existing gap in the literature by approaching readiness from the learner's perspective and within the context of a specific tourist market.

Rather than measuring readiness using quantitative scales, this study clarifies the perceptual structure and formation mechanism of readiness within tourism education in Vietnam. It provides a conceptual approach that deepens understanding of the relationship between market awareness, practical experience, and belief in personal competence in career preparation processes.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore tourism students' perceptions of readiness to serve Chinese tourists through a qualitative approach. The findings indicate that students possess high awareness of the importance of the Chinese tourist market; however, their actual confidence remains limited due to insufficient practical experience and limited professional Chinese language competence.

Readiness is constructed by students as a process of accumulating competence, in which practical experience plays a key role in reinforcing belief in personal ability. The gap between awareness and confidence indicates the need for curriculum adjustments toward greater practical orientation and integration of intercultural communication competence.

The study was conducted at a single educational institution with 30 students; therefore, the findings may not fully represent the situation of all tourism students in Vietnam. Future research could expand the scope to multiple universities in order to enhance representativeness and comparative potential. Additionally, comparisons across regions with varying levels of exposure to Chinese tourists may provide deeper insights into the role of geographical context in shaping career readiness.

Future studies may also combine quantitative methods to test and generalize the perceptual model proposed in this research. Overall, this study clarifies the perceptual structure of readiness to serve Chinese tourists from the learner's perspective and provides a scientific basis for improving tourism human resource training in the context of integration and post-pandemic recovery.

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