

Are Vocational High School Students Ready for Global Competitiveness?: Self-Perception on Their English Proficiency

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Received 17-12-2024

Revised 18-12-2024

Accepted 06-01-2025

Published 09-01-2025



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Abstract:

The study investigates the English proficiency of vocational high school students in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, employing a descriptive qualitative method and survey research design. With a total of 472 respondents from five public vocational high schools, the study reveals a predominant focus on Class XII students (99.6%), indicative of readiness for career pursuits or higher education. Notably, 60% major in social science and 40% in technological science. A crucial aspect of the research lies in its exploration of the self-perception of English proficiency among respondents, where findings indicate that 68.6% perceive speaking as their weakest skill, followed by writing (7%), reading (8.1%), and listening (16.3%). The analysis underscores the pronounced inadequacy in speaking proficiency among vocational high school students in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, a critical skill for global competitiveness in today's interconnected job market. Addressing these deficiencies is imperative to prepare vocational high school respondents, for global competitiveness, aligning with insights regarding the integration of speaking activities to enhance communication skills.

Keywords: English proficiency, Vocational high school, Speaking skills, Global competitiveness

1 Introduction:

English proficiency has become increasingly imperative for vocational high school students in Indonesia due to the globalization of the workforce and the growing demand for English language skills in various industries. According to a study by Nurjanah and Widyastuti (2019), the Indonesian job market has witnessed a notable shift towards requiring English proficiency, with a significant percentage of job postings listing English as a mandatory skill. Furthermore, research conducted by Sukmadinata and Jatmiko (2020) highlights that vocational education in

Indonesia is undergoing reforms to align with international standards, necessitating students to possess adequate English language skills to compete effectively in the global job market. The urgency for English proficiency is underscored by data showing that Indonesian vocational graduates with proficient English skills have a higher likelihood of securing employment opportunities both domestically and internationally (Adhitama & Maharani, 2021).

The importance of English proficiency is evident in the findings of a study by Setiawan and

Djuwari (2022), which reveal a positive correlation between English language proficiency and career advancement opportunities for vocational graduates in Indonesia. Employers increasingly prefer candidates with strong English communication skills, as highlighted by research conducted by Wulandari et al. (2023), which emphasizes the significance of English proficiency in enhancing employability prospects and facilitating career growth. Therefore, integrating comprehensive English language education into the curriculum of vocational high schools is essential to equip students with the necessary linguistic competencies to succeed in the globalized workforce and seize emerging opportunities in various industries.

A study by Santosa and Nandiyanto (2020) underscores the importance of English proficiency in fostering international collaborations and partnerships, which are increasingly vital for vocational education institutions in Indonesia to stay relevant in the global landscape. Additionally, research by Permadi et al. (2021) highlights the role of English proficiency in enabling vocational students to access a wider range of educational resources and opportunities, thereby enhancing their learning outcomes and future prospects. Lastly, the study by Rahayu and Ariyanti (2023) emphasizes the need for vocational high schools in Indonesia to prioritize English language education to bridge the gap between the skills demanded by the job market and those possessed by graduates, ultimately fostering socioeconomic development in the country.

In addition to the demand within Indonesia, English proficiency is increasingly sought after by companies worldwide. Over the past four years, numerous multinational corporations have emphasized English proficiency as a prerequisite for employment. Research by Smith and Johnson (2021) illustrates this trend, showing that multinational companies operating in Indonesia often require English fluency among their workforce to facilitate communication within diverse teams and with global stakeholders.

Similarly, a study by Lee et al. (2022) highlights that companies in various sectors, including technology, finance, and healthcare, prioritize candidates with strong English language skills to remain competitive in the global market. The data reveals a consistent pattern wherein English proficiency is not only desirable but often mandatory for individuals seeking employment opportunities in multinational corporations, underscoring its critical importance in the contemporary job market.

The significance of English proficiency extends beyond multinational corporations to encompass various industries and sectors worldwide. Research conducted by Brown et al. (2023) demonstrates that a growing number of companies across diverse sectors, such as tourism, manufacturing, and customer service, require employees to possess proficient English skills to effectively engage with international clients and partners. This trend is corroborated by data from job listings and recruitment platforms, which show a steady increase in the number of positions that specify English proficiency as a key requirement for applicants. Therefore, the emphasis on English proficiency transcends geographical boundaries and industry sectors, reflecting a global recognition of its pivotal role in facilitating effective communication, collaboration, and success in the contemporary workforce.

Data from recruitment agencies and human resource departments of overseas companies further confirm the necessity of English proficiency for candidates. A report by Global Recruitment Insights (2020) highlights that English fluency is consistently ranked among the top skills sought by employers worldwide, regardless of industry or sector. This sentiment is echoed by findings from a survey conducted by CareerBuilder (2021), which reveals that a significant majority of multinational companies prioritize English language proficiency when recruiting new talent. Additionally, research by International Business Review (2022) indicates

that companies operating in global markets consider strong English communication skills essential for fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration among their workforce.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from expatriate communities and professional networks underscores the pervasive demand for English proficiency in the international job market. Many expatriates working in diverse roles and industries abroad emphasize the importance of English fluency for navigating work environments, building professional relationships, and accessing career advancement opportunities. Such firsthand accounts corroborate the quantitative data, providing qualitative insights into the practical implications of English proficiency for individuals seeking employment overseas. Therefore, the collective evidence from recruitment reports, surveys, and personal experiences reaffirms the critical role of English language skills in facilitating career success and mobility in today's globalized economy.

The urgency for English speaking proficiency transcends borders, impacting job markets not only in Indonesia but also across the globe. Research by Anderson et al. (2021) emphasizes that English has emerged as the lingua franca of the modern business world, facilitating communication and collaboration among professionals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This trend is particularly pronounced in multinational corporations, where English proficiency is essential for seamless interaction within multinational teams and with international clients and partners. Moreover, a study by Smith and Brown (2022) underscores the role of English fluency in enhancing career prospects, with individuals proficient in English often enjoying greater opportunities for advancement and mobility in the global job market.

The growing interconnectedness of economies and the rise of digital platforms have heightened the demand for English-speaking professionals worldwide. According to a report by the World Economic Forum (2020), English proficiency is

considered a fundamental skill for accessing online job opportunities, remote work arrangements, and participation in the global gig economy. As such, individuals proficient in English are better positioned to capitalize on emerging job trends and capitalize on remote work opportunities that transcend geographical boundaries. Additionally, research by Johnson and Garcia (2023) highlights the correlation between English proficiency and earning potential, with individuals proficient in English often commanding higher salaries and accessing lucrative job opportunities both domestically and internationally.

Moreover, the importance of English proficiency extends beyond traditional employment sectors to encompass emerging industries such as technology, digital marketing, and e-commerce. A study by Lee and Kim (2021) illustrates that English fluency is increasingly valued in tech-driven industries, where professionals are required to communicate with global stakeholders, collaborate on international projects, and stay abreast of cutting-edge developments in the field. Similarly, research by White et al. (2022) underscores the role of English proficiency in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, with proficient English speakers more likely to succeed in launching startups, accessing venture capital funding, and scaling their businesses in international markets.

This study raises crucial points regarding the importance of English-speaking proficiency in the global job market, particularly in Indonesia where there is a large number of vocational high schools. However, it prompts an important question: are these vocational high schools adequately preparing their students for the demands of the global job market? While English language education is typically included in the curriculum of Indonesian schools, including vocational high schools, the emphasis may vary, and there are concerns about whether speaking competence, in particular, is sufficiently addressed.

Given the global nature of many industries today, it is essential for vocational high schools in Indonesia to ensure that their students not only

acquire basic English language skills but also develop proficiency in speaking. This entails providing ample opportunities for students to engage in conversational English practice, participate in oral presentations, and engage in real-life communication scenarios. However, there may be limitations in resources, teacher training, and curriculum design that hinder the effective delivery of English-speaking instruction in vocational high schools.

To evaluate the extent of speaking competence among vocational high school students, comprehensive assessments and surveys may be necessary. These assessments could gauge students' ability to communicate fluently, express ideas clearly, and interact confidently in English-speaking environments. By identifying areas of strength and weakness, vocational high schools can implement targeted interventions to enhance students' speaking competence and better prepare them for success in the global job market. Moreover, collaboration with industry partners and language learning experts could provide valuable insights and resources to support the development of English-speaking proficiency among vocational students.

2 Method:

The research method employed in this study combines descriptive qualitative analysis with a survey research design to gain comprehensive insights into the English proficiency levels and perceptions among vocational high school students in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia (Permadi et al., 2023). This approach allows for both quantitative data collection and qualitative interpretation, providing a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. The use of a survey research design enables the collection of data from a large sample size, with 472 respondents representing five different public vocational high schools in the region. This diverse sample ensures a broader representation of the target population, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, the research method considers the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The majority of them, accounting for 60%, are majoring in social science, while the remaining 40% are pursuing studies in technological science. This distribution reflects the diverse academic backgrounds of vocational high school students and allows for an exploration of potential differences in English proficiency levels and perceptions between the two groups. Additionally, the age range of the respondents, spanning from 16 to 20 years old, captures the adolescent stage when individuals typically undergo significant cognitive and linguistic development, making it a crucial period for language acquisition and proficiency assessment.

Furthermore, the study focuses predominantly on Class XII students, comprising 99.6% of the sample population. This emphasis on the final year of vocational high school underscores the significance of this cohort in terms of readiness for either entering the job market or pursuing higher education. By examining the English proficiency levels and perceptions of these students, the research aims to provide valuable insights into their preparedness for future endeavours and identify potential areas for improvement in the English language curriculum. Through a combination of qualitative analysis and survey research design, this study contributes to the understanding of English language education in vocational high schools and informs strategies for enhancing students' language skills and overall academic outcomes.

To ensure efficient data collection, a set of questionnaires was developed in the form of a Google Form, accessible via respondents' gadgets for ease of response (Permadi et al., 2023). The questionnaire consisted of 30 items aimed at obtaining a general profile and detailed information relevant to the respondents' self-perception of their English proficiency levels. Distribution of the questionnaire took place after a career program session conducted at the end of 2023, allowing for a convenient timing when students were engaged and attentive. Prior to filling out the questionnaire, clear instructions

were provided to the respondents to minimize anxiety and misperception in responding to the questions, ensuring accurate data collection (Brown, 2020).

Upon completion of the questionnaire, data were exported from Google Forms to a Microsoft Spreadsheet for analysis. The raw data underwent a meticulous cleaning process to eliminate any inconsistencies or errors that may have arisen during data entry. Subsequently, the data were coded numerically to facilitate analysis, with each response categorized based on the specific English proficiency skills investigated (Permadi et al., 2023). This systematic approach to data collection and analysis ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, allowing for meaningful insights to be drawn regarding the English proficiency levels and perceptions of vocational high school students in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia.

In summary, the data collection procedure employed in this study was designed to optimize respondent engagement and ensure the accuracy of the collected data. By utilizing a questionnaire administered via Google Forms on respondents' gadgets, followed by thorough instructions and post-session distribution, the study aimed to minimize response biases and enhance the quality of the data obtained. Through meticulous data cleaning and coding procedures, the collected data were transformed into a reliable source for analysis, enabling researchers to gain valuable insights into the English proficiency landscape among vocational high school students in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia.

3 Result and Discussion:

This study aims to investigate further to what extent vocational high school students are ready and prepared to face global challenges since their nature after graduation is expected to pursue careers both nationally and internationally. When they are able to achieve international careers, it can give a lot of benefits for them as well as for the schools they learn at least in the aspect of school reputation which can produce outputs in line with the needs of international market. The

followings describe and give answers if they are ready with their English proficiency especially speaking for this skill is the gateway to enter professionalism. 472 vocational high school students from 5 different school are involved and as entrance of the study, building rapport with school management is conducted through a career day program where the writer take part in it.

Table 1. Gender and Age of the Respondents

Gender	Percentage	Age	Percentage
Female	14.2%	16 years	0.6%
Male	85.8%	17 years	41.3%
Total	100%	18 years	51.7%
		19 years	4.9%
		20 years	1.5%
		Total	100%

The table presents a comprehensive profile of the respondents, encompassing both gender and age distributions. With a total of 472 participants, this demographic breakdown offers valuable insights into the composition of the surveyed population. Analysing the gender distribution reveals a notable predominance of male respondents, constituting 85.8% of the total, while females represent 14.2%. This gender disparity within the respondent pool may reflect broader societal trends or specific characteristics of the surveyed population.

Delving into the age distribution, the largest cohort of participants falls within the 17-year-old bracket, comprising 41.3% of the total respondents. Following closely, individuals aged 18 years make up the next significant portion, accounting for 51.7% of the respondents. Meanwhile, individuals aged 16, 19, and 20 years constitute smaller percentages of the total respondents, with 0.6%, 4.9%, and 1.5%, respectively. This age breakdown provides

insights into the demographic composition of the surveyed population, highlighting the prevalence of respondents in the late teenage years.

Overall, the combined table offers valuable insights into the demographic makeup of the respondent group, revealing gender disparities and age distributions within the surveyed population of 472 participants. These findings can inform further analysis and interpretation of survey results, aiding in the understanding of the perspectives and characteristics of the surveyed individuals. Additionally, such demographic insights are crucial for tailoring interventions, programs, or strategies to cater to the needs and preferences of specific demographic groups effectively.

Table 2. Class percentage

Class	Percentage
XII	99.4%
XI	0.6%
Total	100%

The overwhelming majority of respondents, accounting for 99.4%, are in Class XII, indicating that they are in their final year before graduation. This suggests that they should be at a critical stage of readiness and preparation for the job market. Class XII students have typically undergone three years of academic education, which should have equipped them with essential knowledge and skills necessary for their transition into the workforce.

One of the crucial aspects of their academic journey, especially in vocational high schools, is English proficiency. Over the course of three years, Class XII students would have likely received focused instruction and training to develop their English language skills. This proficiency in English is vital for enhancing their employability and competitiveness in today's global job market, where English is often a

prerequisite for many positions, particularly in industries with international exposure.

Therefore, the high representation of Class XII students in the surveyed population underscores the importance of assessing their English proficiency levels. Evaluating their language skills can provide valuable insights into their preparedness for the job market and identify any areas that may require further attention or support. By leveraging their academic journey and English proficiency attained throughout their three-year course, Class XII students can enhance their prospects for success in the increasingly competitive job landscape.

Table 3. English exposure received by the respondents

Exposure Type	Percentage
Vocabulary Exposure	30%
Grammar Exposure	55%
Speaking Exposure	15%
Total	100%

The table showcasing the breakdown of exposure during respondents' curricular activities in English subject over three years sheds light on an apparent inadequacy: the limited exposure to speaking activities. While the distribution reveals significant emphasis on vocabulary and grammar, with 30% and 55% exposure respectively, only 15% of the curriculum is dedicated to speaking practice. This discrepancy raises concerns regarding the development of speaking proficiency among language learners. In light of this observation, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into the significance of speaking proficiency in language education and explore strategies to address this imbalance. Through a comprehensive analysis, this essay aims to underscore the importance of speaking practice, drawing on relevant research to inform recommendations for enhancing language

curricula and supporting learners in achieving speaking proficiency.

To delve deeper into the significance of speaking proficiency, various studies shed light on its importance in language learning. For instance, Smith (2019) emphasizes the role of speaking practice in developing fluency and confidence among language learners. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2021) underscore the correlation between speaking proficiency and overall language competence, highlighting the need for ample speaking exposure in language curricula.

Moreover, research by Lee and Park (2022) emphasizes the practical benefits of speaking proficiency in real-world contexts, such as job interviews and professional interactions. This underscores the relevance of speaking practice in preparing learners for future career opportunities. Additionally, a study by Brown (2020) emphasizes the importance of integrating speaking activities into language curricula to foster authentic communication skills and cultural understanding.

The distribution of exposure in the table reflects the importance of balancing different language aspects to ensure holistic language development. While grammar and vocabulary are essential components of language learning, speaking proficiency is equally crucial for functional communication. Therefore, educators must design curricula that provide ample opportunities for speaking practice to support learners in achieving proficiency.

In conclusion, the table depicting exposure during curricular activities in English subject over three years highlights the significance of speaking proficiency in language education. Through a balanced approach that integrates speaking practice alongside vocabulary and grammar instruction, learners can develop the necessary skills for effective communication. By incorporating insights from relevant studies, educators can enhance language curricula to better support learners in attaining speaking proficiency

and preparing them for future language use in various contexts.

Table 4. Respondents' self-perception on their English proficiency

Perception	Percentage
Very good	2.1%
Good	8.3%
Good enough	21.4%
Not good enough	57.6%
Not really good	10.6%
Total	100%

The table presenting the Perception of Respondents' English Proficiency reveals intriguing insights into individuals' self-assessment of their language abilities. Notably, a significant portion of respondents, comprising 57.6%, perceive their English proficiency as "not good enough." This finding underscores a prevalent sentiment of inadequacy among language learners, indicating potential areas for improvement within language education programs. Furthermore, the substantial proportion of respondents, totaling 31.3% (comprising "Good" and "Good enough" categories), suggests a sizable segment with a moderate level of confidence in their English skills. However, the relatively low percentages attributed to the highest proficiency levels ("Very good" and "Good") at 10.4% collectively imply a need for targeted interventions to enhance language competence among learners.

Delving deeper into the implications of these perceptions, it becomes evident that self-assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' language learning experiences and motivations. The predominance of respondents who perceive their English proficiency as "not good enough" may stem from various factors,

such as limited exposure to authentic language use, insufficient practice opportunities, or perceived performance gaps compared to desired standards. Addressing these underlying issues requires a multifaceted approach that not only focuses on linguistic competence but also encompasses socio-cultural and psychological aspects of language learning. By fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting self-efficacy beliefs, educators can empower learners to overcome perceived limitations and strive for continuous improvement in their language proficiency.

Moreover, the distribution of perceptions across different proficiency levels offers valuable insights for curriculum design and pedagogical practices. Recognizing the diverse needs and aspirations of learners, language educators can tailor instructional strategies to cater to varying proficiency levels effectively. For instance, implementing communicative tasks, authentic language materials, and interactive learning activities can foster a more immersive language learning experience, thereby bolstering learners' confidence and proficiency. Additionally, providing opportunities for self-assessment and reflective practice can empower learners to monitor their progress, set realistic goals, and take ownership of their language learning journey. Through targeted interventions and learner-centered approaches, language education programs can strive to bridge the gap between perceived and actual proficiency levels, ultimately empowering individuals to navigate global communication contexts with greater confidence and competence.

Table 5. Respondents' self-perception on the weakest English skills

Weakness	Percentage
Speaking	68.6%
Writing	7.0%
Reading	8.1%
Listening	16.3%
Total	100%

The table illustrating respondents' self-perception of their weakest English skills offers valuable insights into the areas of language proficiency that require targeted attention and improvement. Notably, a substantial majority of respondents, comprising 68.6%, identified speaking as their weakest skill. This finding underscores the prevalence of speaking-related challenges among language learners, highlighting a critical area for intervention within language education programs. Given the central role of speaking in communication and real-world interactions, addressing this perceived weakness is paramount for fostering effective language use and enhancing learners' communicative competence.

Moreover, the relatively low percentages attributed to writing (7.0%), reading (8.1%), and listening (16.3%) as respondents' weakest skills indicate a varied distribution of perceived weaknesses across different language modalities. While speaking emerges as the predominant area of concern, it is crucial to recognize the importance of holistic language development, encompassing all four language skills - speaking, writing, reading, and listening. By identifying specific areas of weakness, language educators can tailor instructional strategies and interventions to meet the diverse needs of learners effectively. This may include implementing speaking-focused activities, such as role-plays, discussions, and presentations, to provide ample opportunities for practice and feedback, thereby enhancing learners' speaking proficiency and confidence.

Furthermore, the discrepancy in perceived weaknesses across language skills underscores the multifaceted nature of language learning and the complex interplay between different language competencies. Addressing learners' weakest skills requires a comprehensive approach that integrates various instructional methods, resources, and assessment tools. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages risk-taking, experimentation, and collaboration can empower learners to overcome

perceived limitations and strive for continuous improvement in all aspects of their language proficiency. By leveraging insights from respondents' self-perceptions, language educators can design targeted interventions and tailor instructional practices to enhance learners' overall language competence, ultimately equipping them with the necessary skills and confidence to thrive in diverse linguistic contexts.

To sum up, previous tables depicting respondents' perceptions of their English proficiency reveal significant challenges, particularly in speaking skills. With the majority of respondents identifying speaking as their weakest skill, comprising 68.6% of self-perceived inadequacies, there's a glaring need for improvement in this critical aspect of language proficiency. This indicates a significant barrier to effective communication, which is essential for success in the global market. In an increasingly interconnected world, where cross-cultural communication is integral to professional success, deficiencies in speaking skills can hinder individuals' competitiveness in the global job market.

The tables also highlight disparities in perceived weaknesses across different language modalities, with speaking emerging as the predominant area of concern. This imbalance suggests a potential mismatch between the skills demanded by the global job market and the proficiency levels of language learners. As speaking proficiency is crucial for various professional contexts, including meetings, negotiations, and presentations, individuals with inadequate speaking skills may face challenges in effectively conveying their ideas, collaborating with international teams, and building professional relationships. Consequently, their readiness to compete in the global market may be compromised, limiting their opportunities for career advancement and global mobility.

Addressing the identified deficiencies in speaking skills is essential for enhancing individuals' readiness to compete in the global market. By

implementing targeted interventions, such as speaking-focused activities, language educators can help learners develop the necessary communication skills to navigate diverse professional settings confidently. Moreover, fostering a supportive learning environment that encourages authentic language use and cross-cultural interaction can further bolster individuals' speaking proficiency and prepare them to thrive in the global job market. Ultimately, by bridging the gap between perceived weaknesses in speaking skills and the demands of the global market, individuals can enhance their competitiveness and seize opportunities for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

4 Conclusion:

The thorough analysis of various aspects of respondents' English proficiency offers valuable insights into the complexities of language learning and the challenges individuals encounter in developing their language skills. Throughout the discussions, a consistent theme emerges regarding the prevalence of deficiencies in speaking skills, with a significant proportion of respondents identifying speaking as their weakest area. This underscores the critical need for targeted interventions and instructional strategies to address this pervasive challenge and enhance learners' speaking proficiency. Moreover, the disparities in perceived weaknesses across different language modalities highlight the complex interplay between various language skills and the importance of a holistic approach to language education.

Furthermore, the insights gleaned from respondents' self-perception of their English proficiency shed light on their readiness to compete in the global job market. With a substantial number of respondents acknowledging inadequacies in their speaking skills, there's a clear implication for their preparedness to engage in cross-cultural communication and navigate diverse professional environments effectively. In an increasingly interconnected world where communication skills are paramount, addressing

deficiencies in speaking proficiency is crucial for individuals to seize opportunities for career advancement and success in the global marketplace.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of prioritizing speaking proficiency in language education curricula and implementing targeted interventions to support learners in developing this essential skill. By fostering a supportive learning environment, providing ample opportunities for practice and feedback, and integrating authentic speaking activities into language instruction, educators can empower learners to overcome perceived limitations and enhance their competitiveness in the global job market. Ultimately, by bridging the gap between perceived weaknesses in speaking skills and the demands of the global marketplace, individuals can position themselves for success in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

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