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## A Case Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning English at Vocational High School

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### ABSTRACT

The aimed of this research was to find out students' difficulties in Learning English and the teachers' efforts to solve students' difficulties in Learning English at Vocational High School. The research used a qualitative approach with case study method. The subject of this research were six students of the Accounting and Finance Department in the twelfth class one of the vocational high schools in Karawang. The research used observation and interviews to collect the data. The result of the research showed that the ability to speak and listen is the most difficult to acquire by the students due to lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and people's perception when they speak in a wrong spelling. The solution suggested by the teacher involves quizzes with a gamification approach and do more to implement the used of English in school. Therefore, students in Vocational High Schools can further develop their abilities in English learning.

## 1. Introduction

In recent times, English language teaching in vocational schools has not yielded the expected results. This is typically due to the lack of financial and moral support from institutions or the government, as well as limitations in time and knowledge when it comes to developing materials that meet students' needs (Nurhasanah & Kurniawan, 2023). One of the main reasons for this issue is the use of traditional teaching methods, which are often uninteresting for students. This approach frequently leads to boredom and a lack of interest in learning, which hinders effective learning (Nasution et al., 2021). To address this problem, educators should consider adopting a more innovative and interactive approach. This approach can help engage students and motivate them to actively participate

in learning activities (Rofii, 2023). Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the challenges students face in the process of learning English.

Understanding the challenges students face in learning English is crucial for educators to develop effective teaching strategies. This research aims to explore the difficulties encountered by students in learning English at Vocational High Schools, as well as the efforts made by teachers to address these challenges. By identifying these obstacles and examining the strategies employed by educators, this research seeks to contribute to the development of English language education in vocational settings. Furthermore, English is regarded as an essential subject for vocational school students, as it is closely tied to the enhancement of skills that better equip them for entering the workforce (Haryudin et al, 2020). This underscores the alignment between the curriculum in vocational education and the needs of the industrial sector.

Previous research has highlighted various difficulties that students encounter while learning English. For instance, studies have indicated that students often struggle with speaking and listening skills, grammar rules, and vocabulary (Sultra & Baharudin, 2020). Next, Andriani et al. (2020) indicate that speaking in English is more difficult than writing and reading. Understanding these challenges is essential for educators to tailor their teaching methods effectively. At Vocational High Schools, where the focus is on preparing students for specific trades or industries alongside their academic education, the challenges in learning English may be distinct. Vocational students often have unique learning needs and may face additional obstacles due to the specialized nature of their training programs. Furthermore, the cultural and educational backgrounds of students can influence their learning experiences (Alharbi, 2021). However, there remains a need for further investigation into the specific difficulties encountered by students in these settings and how teachers respond to these challenges.

Moreover, several previous studies from other countries have explored the difficulties faced by secondary school students in learning English. Among these is a study from Malaysia by Yacob and Yunus (2019), which, from the students' perspective, indicates that they encounter challenges in understanding both the language and the learning materials, as well as issues related to L1 interference and motivation to learn. Next, a study by Ying et al. (2021) aimed to identify effective strategies and implement them into practice for the success of teaching and learning, in order to help ESL learners face challenges. These studies highlight the importance of addressing both linguistic and motivational factors to improve English learning outcomes for secondary school students.

Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by examining students' specific difficulties in learning English at Vocational High Schools. Additionally, it will investigate the strategies and efforts undertaken by teachers to mitigate these difficulties. By shedding light on both the challenges and the solutions implemented in vocational education, this research endeavors to provide insights that can inform and improve English language teaching practices in similar

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educational settings. In light of the above, the research aims to address the following research questions:

- a. What are the difficulties that students encounter in learning English?
- b. How do teachers effectively resolve these difficulties to making students' better in English?

## **2. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate English learning difficulties faced by students at a vocational school in Karawang, Indonesia, and how teachers address them. This approach, aligning with the goals of qualitative research, allowed for in-depth exploration of student experiences (Ary et al., 2009). Stratified random sampling was used to select six students from the accounting and finance department, ensuring diverse perspectives were included (Ghosh, 1958). Data collection outlined by Creswell (2015) involved observations, interviews, and document review to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

Based on the data gathered through classroom observation and interviews with selected students, the findings presented the outcomes of the collected data analysis. During the classroom observations conducted by the researcher, students exhibited varied reactions upon the teacher's entry. Some displayed interest, while others appeared somewhat bored and lacked enthusiasm. The teacher gave a lesson on duties, followed by a quiz in the form of a game. Figure 1 illustrated how students followed the English language learning process, showcasing their different levels of engagement and participation throughout the lesson.



Figure 1. Students pay attention to a game quiz lesson

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The students' enthusiasm notably increased upon learning about the game-based learning activity scheduled for that day, although some students maintained a neutral response. As depicted in Figure 1, the shift in student engagement was clearly visible when the activity was introduced. Throughout the teaching process, the teacher actively monitored students by moving around the classroom to ensure compliance with classroom rules. Despite occasional disruptions due to students' heightened enthusiasm during the game quiz, the lesson proceeded smoothly.

Following the observations, the researcher interviewed six selected students as directed by the English subject teacher.

**Q1: Do you use English often? Do you have a lot of practice in it?**

Vignette 1, Student H1, Interview:

*Aku jarang pake bahasa Inggris sih kak, paling aku pakenya kalau lagi ikut EC (English Club) yah sama pas dikelas pelajaran bahasa Inggris.*

I rarely use English. I only use it when I'm in the EC (English Club) or when I'm in English class.

Typically, their English usage was confined to classroom settings, although some occasionally employed English while interacting on social media platforms.

Vignette 2, Student M1, Interview:

*Dikelas aja. Kalo gak di medsos, komen-komen diposting artis gitu misalnya.*

Just in class or sometimes on social media, like commenting on celebrity posts.

On the other hand, student L2 gave reasons for rarely using English in real life.

Vignette 3, Student L2, Interview:

*Paling dikelas yah, itu pun jarang kalau lagi pelajarannya aja. Kalau aku sih jarang banget latihan bahasa inggris sendiri gitu. Terus juga kadang takut diledak gitu kak. Suka dibilang "apasih sok inggris, makan pake lauk asin juga". Sama takut diketawain kalo pengucapannya salah.*

Mostly in class, and even then, it's rare, only during lessons. As for me, I hardly ever practice English on my own. Also, sometimes I'm afraid of being teased. People often say things like, 'apasih sok inggris, makan pake lauk asin juga.' I'm also afraid of being laughed at if I make a mistake in pronunciation.

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It might have suggested that the students were hesitant to speak English due to fear of judgment or ridicule. They might have felt that speaking English was seen as pretentious or unnecessary, especially if others didn't understand or appreciate the effort.

When interviewed, the three students also confirmed that they rarely used English outside the classroom.

**Q2: In your opinion, do you think that English is a difficult language to learn? How does it feel to be learning English?**

Vignette 1, Student L1, Interview:

*Menurut aku iya susah, ini mah karena diri akunya sendiri sih kek ngerasa deg-degan aja gitu kalo udah mulai belajar Inggris tuh.*

I think it's difficult, it's because of myself, I feel nervous when I start learning English.

Student M2 had the same feeling as in the statement above. The feeling of anxiety makes students unable to follow English learning casually.

Vignette 2, Student H2, Interview:

*Bisa dibilang susah. Tapi ya biasa aja sih kak, ikutin aja sesuai yang diminta guru.*

I could say it's hard. But it's normal, just do what the teacher says.

However, other students find English a fun subject, even though it is quite difficult to learn.

**Q3: Which of the skill speaking, listening, reading and writing is the most difficult to learn? Why is this?**

Vignette 1, Student H1, Interview:

*Aku belum pernah merasa terlalu kesulitan dalam ke empat aspek tersebut. Tapi kalo harus pilih, listening kak. Apalagi yang berbicara itu native speaker.*

I have never felt too difficult in all four aspects. But if I have to choose, listening. Especially when it's a native speaker

Student H2 highlighted challenges in listening comprehension due to difficulties in understanding various accents used by speakers. In contrast, the other four students identified speaking as their least proficient skill.

Vignette 2, Student M2, Interview:

*Speaking. Entah kenapa kalo aku baca kata-kata aku suka kurang gitu. Kurang paham cara bacanya gimana. Belum lagi kalo udah ada tentang grammar, aduh itu bikin pusing sih.*

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Speaking. I don't know why, but when I read words, I feel like I don't fully understand them. I'm unsure of how to pronounce them. And when it comes to grammar, oh, that really makes my head spin.

It reflected confusion about pronouncing certain words, likely due to unfamiliarity with their correct pronunciation. Practice and exposure to native speakers could have helped improve this aspect of speaking. Writing grammar could also be overwhelming, especially when learners are unfamiliar with the rules. Moreover, with consistent practice and exposure, both areas could have improved over time

Vignette 3, Student L1, Interview:

*Jelas speaking, kak. Karena susah menurut aku. Tapi kadang dari dengerin lagu aku jadi belajar pengucapan nya, tapi tetep susah sih.*  
It's definitely speaking, because I find it difficult. But sometimes, by listening to songs, I learn the pronunciation, though it's still hard.

The student shows a positive effort to improve speaking skills through listening to songs, which can be a fun and effective way to learn pronunciation. However, the person acknowledges that it's still challenging, indicating that they might need more structured practice or additional resources, like speaking with native speakers or using language apps, to further improve their speaking ability.

In addition to what has been mentioned above, the students also stated that writing was the next skill they found difficult to learn. This was related to the use of tenses, "to be," verbs, nouns, and other grammatical elements. Although speaking and listening were more prominent in daily life, understanding writing was also considered essential.

**Q4: If you have difficulties learning English, does the teacher give you a solution? Please explain.**

Vignette 1, Student H2, Interview:

*Paling dikasih kayak vocab-vocab baru sih kak, sama katanya kita harus sering ngomong pake bahasa Inggris gapapa masih campur- campur atau salah ucap juga.*  
Teacher was given a new vocabs, and teacher was told that we have to speak English often, no matter how mixed up or misspoken it is.

This approach emphasizes the importance of practice and making mistakes as a natural part of the learning process, which can help build confidence and fluency over time.

Vignette 2, Student M2, Interview:

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*Biasanya kalau aku nanya soal yang sulit atau masih kurang mengerti dijawab sih kak. Dikasih penjelasan gitu supaya paham.*

Usually, when I ask about something difficult or something I don't fully understand, it's answered. I get an explanation to help me understand.

This shows that students have received good support in their learning process. Other students echoed similar sentiments, while student L2 elaborated slightly on their viewpoint.

Vignette 3, Student L2, Interview:

*Gurunya tuh jarang ke kelas gitu, terus kadang ya dari kitanya yang gak mau ngomong.*

The teacher rarely comes to class, and sometimes we don't want to talk

The statement implying that students are hesitant to talk about their difficulties. Without regular guidance or interaction, students may feel less engaged or hesitant to participate in discussions. To improve the learning environment, it could be helpful for the teacher to be more consistent in attending class or for students to find alternative ways to stay motivated and practice.

**Q5: Does the teacher try to encourage the students to active in the learning process? Explain.**

Vignette 1, Student M1, Interview:

*Iya, biasanya suka obral poin gitu. Jadi kita tuh lebih aktif karena pengen dapetin poin tambahan itu. Sama pas kakak datang kan guru kasih kuisnya pake modelan games gitu.*

Yes, teacher often offer incentives like extra points, which motivates us to participate more actively. For instance, when you visited, the teacher conducted the quiz using a gamified approach.

This approach appeared to be effective, as it motivated students to engage more in the learning process. The use of a gamified quiz also added an element of fun and competition, which could have further increased student involvement and enthusiasm in the class.

Vignette 2, Student H1, Interview:

*Menurut aku pas guru ngomong pake bahasa Inggris dikelas, terus nanya-nanya ke kita pake bahasa Inggris itu bisa buat kita aktif sih*

I think when the teacher speaks English in class and asks us questions in English, it helps make us more active.

It can help create an immersive learning environment, motivating students to engage more with the language and practice their speaking skills.

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The remaining four students provided responses that were consistent with each other. Their answers mirrored one another, indicating a shared perspective on the matter.

## **Investigating Students' Difficulties and Teacher Solutions in the Classroom**

### **a. Student Difficulties in Learning English**

Based on observations and interviews, the findings of this research unveiled a variety of challenges that students faced. Many students encountered significant difficulties in speaking. Limited vocabulary posed the primary obstacle to their progress in learning English. Students often felt capable of comprehending conversations but struggled to find the appropriate English words to respond to, particularly due to the varying accents used by speakers. Listening comprehension also posed a challenge, as students sometimes struggled to fully understand spoken English, especially when different accents or fast speech patterns were involved. Moreover, there is a common belief among the general public that mastering speaking is considered an indicator of proficiency in a foreign language (Susanto et al, 2020).

Besides that, writing proved to be a challenging task for some students, especially when applying grammar rules, which remained difficult to grasp. This is in line with the findings of Milania et al. (2022) the obstacles experienced by students when practising communicating using English are lack of knowledge about grammar and vocabulary, as well as difficulties in pronunciation. However, they expressed more confidence in their reading skills. This made reading a less stressful skill compared to speaking and listening, where real-time interaction and quick responses were required. As a result, students were more confident in their ability to comprehend written materials, even if they struggled with verbal communication. Furthermore, previous research also revealed that the main challenges reported by students in developing their English skills included understanding grammar, memorizing vocabulary, and difficulty pronouncing words (Safira & Azzahra, 2022). Interestingly, a lack of interest was not among the top concerns.

The research also highlighted that students' daily use of English remained limited. Apart from browsing social media and participating in extracurricular activities, the majority of students rarely used English. This limitation likely contributed to the challenges they faced in learning English. Furthermore, negative experiences such as being mocked or laughed at when mispronouncing words or attempting to speak English undermined students' confidence in actively using the language. As highlighted in Fatin (2022), students often struggle with the fear of making mistakes due to concerns about being ridiculed by others. This aligns with Rahardjo and Pertiwi (2020) who state that students who feel uncomfortable, lack motivation, and struggle with ineffective learning strategies in English are likely to become disengaged and face difficulties.

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### **b. The Solutions Implemented by The Teacher.**

In response, teacher provided guidance encouraging students to be more courageous in using English, despite imperfections in pronunciation and sentence structure. The goal was to bolster students' confidence and familiarize them with speaking in English. However, English language teachers are also expected to directly address students' recurring issues with grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and other aspects, while emphasizing the critical role of motivation in language learning (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020). In addition, teacher also implemented various strategies to support students' English learning, including innovative teaching methods such as quizzes with a gamification approach and incentivized activities to encourage students' motivation development. Moreover, the teacher's skill in improving the classroom environment plays a crucial role in motivating students (Jumrawarsih & Suhaili, 2021). Furthermore, it is possible that teachers' beliefs can shape students' perspectives and actions in teaching practices (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). By customizing these teaching approaches to align with students' vocational interests and educational needs, educators aimed to improve the effectiveness of English learning in this specialized educational setting.

Additionally, the research highlights the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable discussing their challenges openly. The insights gained from this research contribute to ongoing discussions on how best to tailor English language education to meet the unique needs of vocational high school students. Future research could delve deeper into specific pedagogical approaches and their impact on student learning outcomes in similar educational settings.

## **4. Conclusion**

The most challenging aspect for students is speaking, followed by difficulties in listening and writing. Reading is generally the skill that students find more manageable. A significant contributing factor to these challenges is the lack of vocabulary, which greatly affects students' confidence. Moreover, students often hesitate to openly discuss their learning difficulties, making it challenging for teachers to address their needs effectively. To support students, teachers have implemented solutions such as gamified quizzes, introducing new vocabulary during classes, and encouraging more frequent use of English in interactions. These strategies aim to enhance engagement and improve English language proficiency among students.

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