Student Difficulties in Achieving Effective English Learning Skills

Andhina Ika Sunardi[1], Rofiatun Nafiah[2], Nafisatul Lutfi[3], Agnes Nora Eko Wahyu Utami[4]
[1] Akademi Manajemen Administrasi Yogyakarta,
Jl. Brawijaya (Ringroad Selatan) No.101, Yogyakarta 55183, Indonesia
[2]Politeknik ATK Yogyakarta,
Jl. Prof. DR. Wirjono Projodikoro (Ringroad Selatan), Sewon, Bantul, Yogyakarta 55188, Indonesia
[3-4]Universitas Teknologi Digital Indonesia,
Jl. Raya Janti, Bantul, Yogyakarta 55198, Indonesia
Corresponding email: rofi@atk.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the learning difficulties of Yogyakarta Administrative Management Academy students in acquiring English language skills. The survey targeted 205 students enrolled in the even semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. Qualitative descriptions are used in data analysis, with this method the researcher does not manipulate the conditions but tries to understand reality as it is. From the results of this study, two factors of difficulty were found, namely internal and external. The causes of students' learning difficulties from internal factors such as low level of intelligence, low aptitude in English subjects, lack of interest in learning, and low motivation to learn. Students attend only out of obligation and to get good grades and complete assignments, not to learn English as an international language that is so important today. The external factors that affect students who have difficulty learning English include a lack of support for the use of English at home or in the community, as well as limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Students have difficulty learning English due to internal and external factors, with listening skills being the most challenging, influenced by differences in ability levels and learning motivations.

Keywords: *learning difficulties, competence, English language*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mastering foreign languages, especially English and Mandarin, is something that needs to be improved at this time. Indonesia as one of the members (Kansong, 2023) AEC (ASEAN

Economic Community), it is fitting that the nation's generation is more advanced in terms of science and technology supported by good and correct mastery of the language of instruction (English). English is an important international language that can connect people with the world in various aspects including educational aspects. English lessons in Indonesia are given from pre-kindergarten to university level, with it being a compulsory subject and course at the junior and senior high school level. At the higher education level, all study programs are required to offer English courses for 1 or 2 semesters even though the major is not related to English. (Kemenritek, 2022). This shows the importance of mastering foreign languages, especially English, as the beginning of academic success and supporting careers in the world of work (Cleophas, 2016).

Based on observations made by the author at the beginning of the semester, there are indications that the quality of students' mastery of English is very low. Instructors' instructions using the most basic English are difficult for most students to understand, including difficulties in developing language skills in reading, listening, speaking, and writing at the elementary level. In fact, they have studied English for six semesters in high school, even some elementary schools already have English lessons. Based on this phenomenon, the author analyzes students' English learning difficulties, which can then be used as a basis for improving the quality of learning.

Communication can be realized if a person masters four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This also applies to the English learning process, where listening and reading are receptive skills, while reading and speaking are productive skills (Adminweb, 2020). Often people say that only by speaking fluently can one be said to have mastered the language. This is not entirely true, written language is also important to master. In this digital era, graduates are expected to be able to utilize technology in everyday life, for example the use of electronic mail applications (email), of course, reading skills are needed in order to understand the text that appears and writing so that they can give appropriate replies using proper grammar.

In addition, there are three linguistic elements that play an important role in supporting the four skills: pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. To have optimal English proficiency, professional foreign language teachers are needed to train qualified students. In addition, mastery of the material and its practice must be done in a balanced manner. However, finding the ideal language course is not easy. Basically, each student has different characteristics, both their learning techniques and their ability to absorb learning materials, such as the concept of multiple intelligences (Alilateh & Widyantoro, 2019). Therefore, a language teacher must know the level of language mastery of each learner. Learners cannot be generalized, because it will make it difficult to achieve the expected learning objectives.

In the process of learning English, students will inevitably encounter learning difficulties, these difficulties cause less than optimal learning outcomes. English learning difficulties can happen to anyone, including students who study programs in English or languages other than English. The difficulty faced by English language learners is not understanding English pronunciation presented at normal speed through listening material. (Toni, Susilowati, & Sartipa, 2021). In reading skills, Putri (2021) argues that the problems faced in understanding reading texts lie in the lack of knowledge of reading material and the inability to know how to connect ideas from one sentence to another. Writing skills are difficult because this activity requires a complex and systematic thinking process, but English learners must master it. According to Solfiyatuzzahro, Santihastuti, & Erfan (2019), in communication, writing skills are also important to master. The benefits will be clearly felt when written language is published and read by a wide audience, therefore the quality of writing must always be improved. For speaking skills, Mido (2019) in his research, he found that the difficulty students often face when speaking English lies in the lack of English vocabulary. Based on these problems, language lecturers should pay more attention to the condition of students and their readiness in achieving learning objectives. Without careful preparation, learning activities will not take place effectively and efficiently. By understanding the problems faced by students, lecturers can do self-reflection to find out how effective classroom learning is and improve the quality of students' English language skills.

Problems related to English language learning do not only arise at the elementary, or secondary level, but continue to the university/college level. Many studies have proven this for all English language abilities (Putri, 2021; Mido, 2019; Solfiyatuzzahro, Santihastuti, & Erfan, 2019; & Toni, Susilowati, & Sartipa, 2021). Every student is interested in different fields of science, but not all students are interested in English. To fulfill their obligations as students at a university, they must take English classes and even pass the TOEFL test with a high enough score. Currently, university output requires a TOEFL score in the range of 450-500 as a graduation requirement (Lisa, 2022). Students who do not have a solid foundation in language knowledge acquired from primary to secondary school will feel very burdened by this circumstance. Therefore, English learners who do not have in-depth knowledge in their field (English for special purpose/ESP learner) tend to give diverse responses during the learning process (Seto, 2013)

Based on the problems described in the introduction, there are many difficulties faced by students when learning English. This is because English is not used as a language of instruction in the teaching and learning process or in daily conversation. Therefore, in this article the researcher wants to learn more about the difficulties faced by students in 4 language skills, including: reading,

speaking, writing, and listening Specifically, this article focuses on observing the difficulties of students at the Yogyakarta Administrative Management Academy, who are categorized as ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learners.

2. METHOD

Based on the purpose of this study to identify students' difficulties in learning English, this type of research is a quantitative – qualitative research that takes data from respondents using questionnaires and produces written or spoken words that can be observed. The main objective of this study is to identify students' difficulties in learning English, which are subjective and contextual. To understand students experiencing difficulties in learning English, including perceptions, barriers, motivations, and strategies of students. Things like this cannot be measured numerically, but rather need to be explored through words, expressions, and interactions. The research was conducted on even semester students 2023-2024 in January 2024. The research subjects were students of the Yogyakarta Academy of Administrative Management concentrating in hospital administration, pharmaceutical and drug management, and air transportation management in the second semester as many as 205 students who took English II. Previously, students had also received English I lecture material.

Data collection was done by observation, questionnaire (Google form), and recording. Questionnaires were distributed to find out student responses about the English learning experience for two semesters including the difficulties experienced in the learning process. Observation is carried out by directly observing students' real behavior during the learning process, such as verbal participation, body language, and responses to instruction in English. The Google Form questionnaire was used to collect students' responses online about the difficulties of learning English over two semesters using the Likert scale. Record-keeping is used to document contexts and technical aspects that are not captured by observations or questionnaires in the learning process. At the Yogyakarta Academy of Administrative Management when taking English courses, each class has the opportunity to use the Language Laboratory 2 (two) times. When using this laboratory, students' skills in listening will be seen, because each student is required to submit a listening note. Observations were made by researchers during one semester of learning activities to observe students who were classified as active, less active, and passive.

Students are active if they show their participation in the learning process by answering questions, asking questions, and generally expressing their opinions during group activities. Students are less motivated, as evidenced by the intensity of interaction between students and

lecturers. They are only positive when asked/assigned by the teacher to express their opinions. The last type is passive, where students almost never contribute verbally to the professor and perform poorly on quizzes or midterm exams (< 50). Learning is a conscious process that involves a person's memory related to the information being learned, for example saying greetings, using language rules, and vocabulary (Megawati, 2016).

The triangulation technique is used to check the validity of research data, Sugiyono (2019) says when a researcher uses triangulation, the researcher collects data, and also checks whether the data obtained is reliable or not by using different data collection techniques and reference sources.

In this study, the data analysis used consisted of three stages (Walliman, 2011; Moleong, 2014), namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification.

Data Reduction

The process of data reduction and analysis should be a sequential and continuous procedure, simple in the early stages of data collection, and becoming more complex as the project progresses. When conducting research, it is important to maintain a critical attitude towards the type and amount of data collected, as well as the assumptions and thinking that brought the researcher to this stage. In this case, it is classifying answers related to difficulties encountered when learning according to the level of student activeness.

Presentation of Data

This data presentation has a purpose, in the form of data obtained organized, arranged in a relationship pattern, so that the data is easy to understand. At this stage is the beginning of reviewing the interpretation of existing facts. *Interpretation* is determining the meaning and connecting the facts obtained. Researchers present the results of research data that has been summarized by describing in detail and clearly the things related to student obstacles in the English language learning process.

Drawing Conclusions

Conclusions have a temporary nature, conclusions can change at any time if no supporting data sources are found. When there are valid and consistent supporting references, then this researcher can draw credible conclusions.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaire distributed to students, they have different opinions about which skills between reading, speaking, writing, and listening are the most difficult to master. Students' difficulties in mastering listening skills, due to the difficulty of understanding English

accents and intonation, audio is often faster than what is usually heard in conversation, and difficulty understanding words that have never been heard daily. Students' difficulties in mastering speaking skills, due to lack of confidence when speaking in English, difficulty finding the right words, and there is access, and variation in English. Students' difficulties in mastering reading skills, due to finding unknown words in the text, not understanding the sentence structure, and not understanding the meaning of the whole text. Students' difficulties in writing skills are due to not mastering correct grammar, finding appropriate words to convey messages, and composing sentences in a good and coherent flow. To be able to master English well, then between reading, speaking, writing, and listening must be mastered, none of which are ignored.
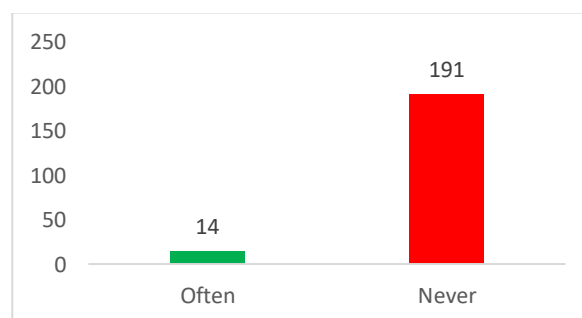
a. Data description

    1) Attend courses
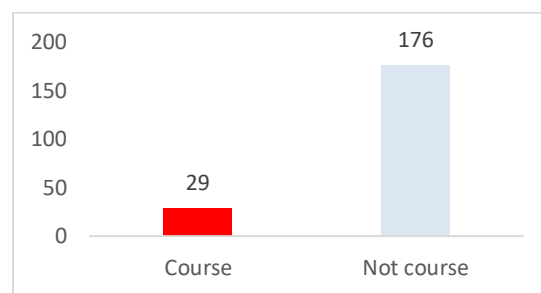
Graph 1. Take an English course

        Graph 1 explains that not all respondents had participated in English language courses: 29 (14.15%) had studied English at a course and 176 (85.85%) had never studied English at a course.
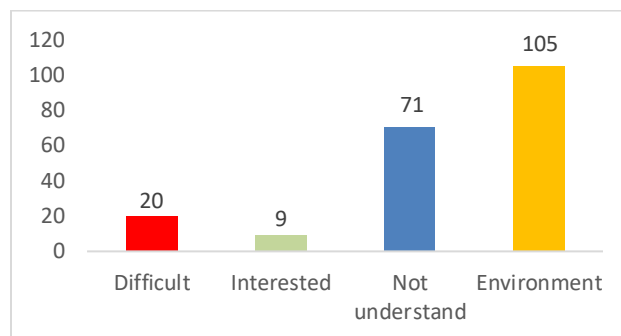
    2) Communicate in English with friends/family

Graph 2. Communication in English

        Respondents rarely and almost never communicate with friends or family using English as shown in graph 2, with 14 (6.83%) sometimes communicating in English and 191 (93.17%) never communicating in English with friends or family.

    3) Reasons for communication in English

Graph 3. Communication does not use English

Graph 3 describes that the reasons why respondents rarely or never communicate in English are due to 105 (51.22%) non-English speaking environments, 71 (34.63%) not understanding English, 20 (9.76%) finding it difficult, and only 9 (4.39%) who feel interested in speaking English with friends or family.
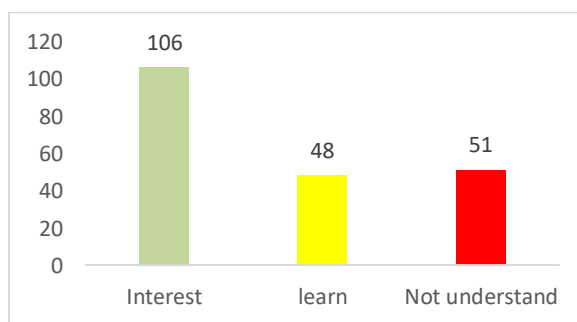
4) Frequency of listening to songs or watching movies in English
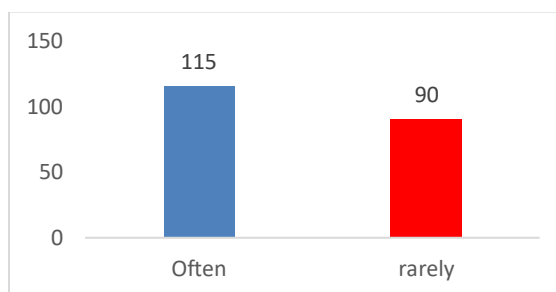
Graph 4. listening to a song or watching an English-language movie

Graph 4 above shows that 115 (56.10%) students often listen to songs or watch movies in English, while around 90 (43.90%) students rarely do so.

5) Reasons for listening to songs or watching movies in English

Graph 5. Listen to songs or watch movies in English

As shown in graph 5, 106 (51.71%) students stated that they like listening to English songs because they are fun to listen to and watching English movies because they are exciting and fun. Listening to songs or watching movies to learn English as many as 48

(23.41%) students. While students rarely listen to songs or watch movies in English because they do not understand / do not like as many as 51 (24.88).
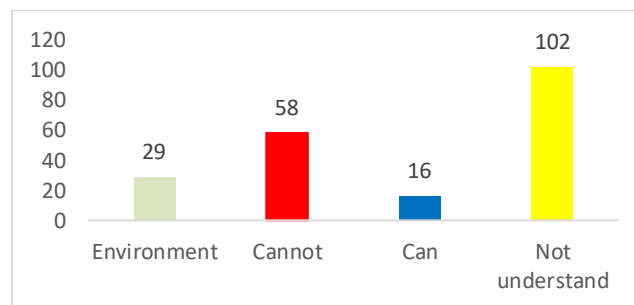
6) Communication in English orally or in writing
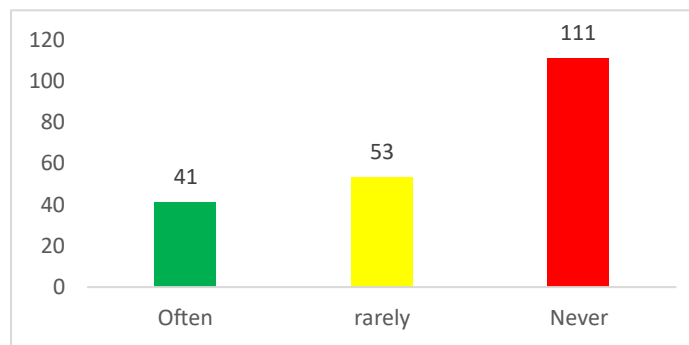
Graph 6. Speak English orally or in writing

Graph 6 above illustrates that around 41 (20%) students often communicate in English orally and in writing, 53 (25.85%) students stated that they rarely do so, and 111 (54.15%) students stated that they never communicate in English orally or in writing.

7) Reasons for communicating in English orally or in writing

Graph 7. Communicating in English orally or in writing

As for the reasons respondents never or rarely communicate in English orally / in writing because they do not understand English as many as 102 (49.76%), 16 (7.80%) students can and understand communicating orally and in writing. 58 (28.29%) stated that they could not speak English, and as many as 29 (14.15%) were due to the environment so that respondents were not accustomed to communicating in English either orally or in writing.
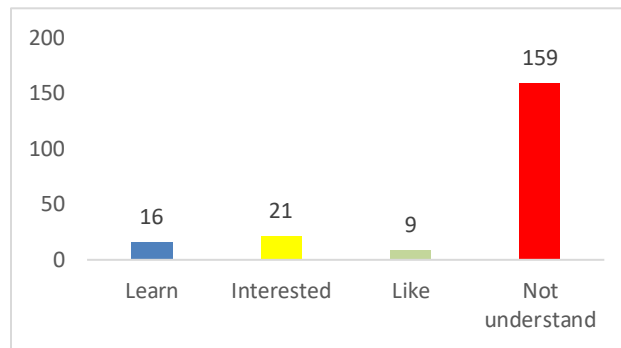
8) Frequency of reading English texts
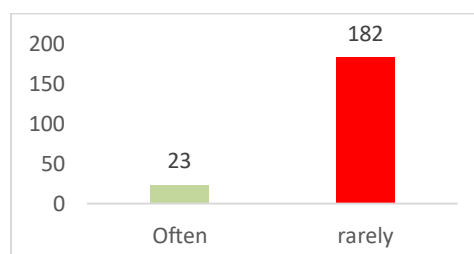
Graph 8. Frequency of reading English texts

Graph 8 above explains that about 23 (11.22%) respondents said they often read English texts, while 182 (88.78%) said they rarely or almost never read English texts.

9) Reasons for reading English texts

Graph 9. Reading English texts

Graph 9 above explains that respondents have different reasons for their frequency in reading English texts, namely around 16 (7.80%) respondents stated that they read only when learning English. As many as 21 (10.24%) respondents stated that they were interested in English, 9 (4.39%) respondents stated that they enjoyed reading English texts, and as many as 159 (77.56%) respondents stated that they did not understand English.
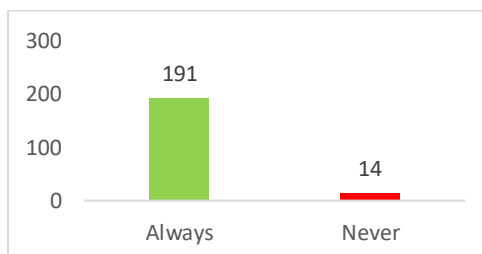
10) Frequency of attendance in English courses
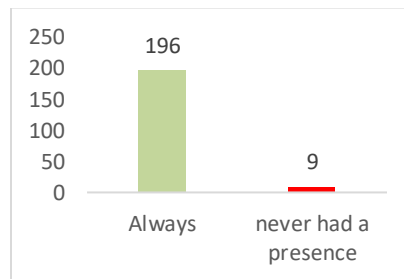
Graph 10. Frequency of attendance in English courses

The frequency of respondents' attendance in English courses is 196 (95.61%) of the total respondents are always present during English lectures, while 9 (4.39%) have missed English lectures as presented in graph 10 above.
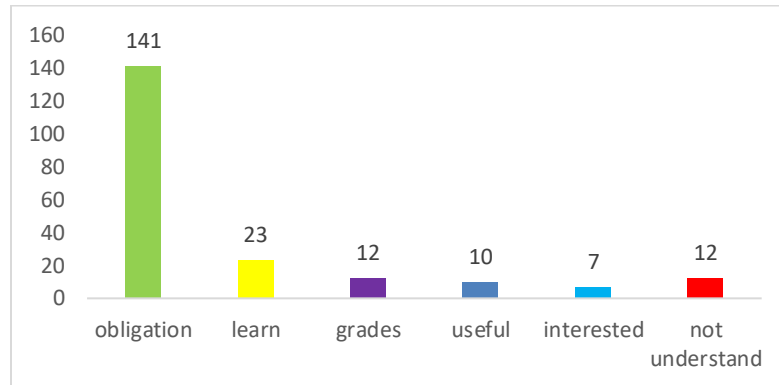
11) Frequency of completing tasks

Graph 11 above explains that 191 (93.17%) respondents stated that they always complete English assignments, while 14 (6.83%) respondents stated that they never submit assignments.

12) Reasons for completing English assignments

Graph 12. Completing English assignments

As for the reasons the respondents completed English course assignments, 141 (68.78%) stated that doing assignments was a student obligation, 23 (11.22%) respondents stated that they completed assignments to learn, 12 (5.86%) respondents stated that they completed assignments to get good grades, 10 (4.88%) respondents stated that assignments were very useful in learning English, 7 (3.41%) felt interested in learning English. A total of 12 (5.85%) respondents stated that they did not really understand English learning.
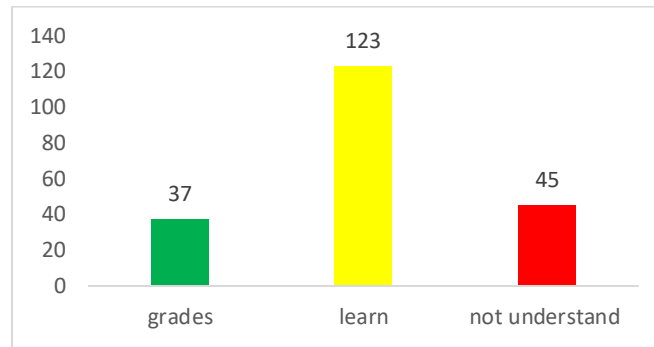
13) Activeness in English learning
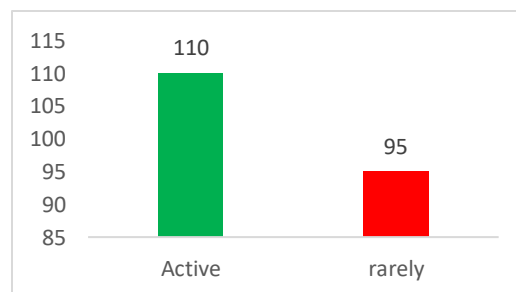
Graph 13. Activeness in English learning

Chart 13 above illustrates that 110 (53.66%) respondents were active in English learning interactions and 95 (46.34%) respondents were rarely active in English learning in the classroom.

14) Reasons for being active in English learning

Graph 14. Reasons for being active in English learning

As for the reasons for the frequency of activeness in English learning, 37 (18.05%) respondents stated that they wanted to get good grades, 123 (60%) respondents stated that they were active in class because they wanted to learn English better. A total of 45 (21.95%) stated that they were active in class because they did not understand English.

15) Difficulties in learning English
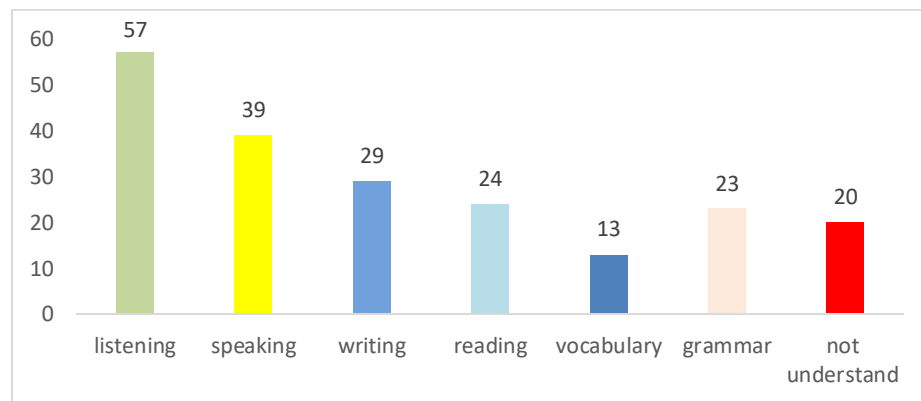
Graph 15. Difficulties in learning English

Graph 15 shows the respondents' difficulties in learning English, namely 57 (27.80%) stated that they had difficulty in learning *listening*, 39 (19.02%) had difficulty in *speaking* English, 29 (14.15%) had difficulty *writing* in English, and 24 (11.71%) respondents stated difficulties in *reading*. A total of 13 (6.34%) respondents stated that they had difficulty in *vocabulary*, 23 (11.22%) had difficulty in *grammar*, and 20 (9.76%) respondents stated that they did not understand English.

16) Efforts to overcome English learning difficulties
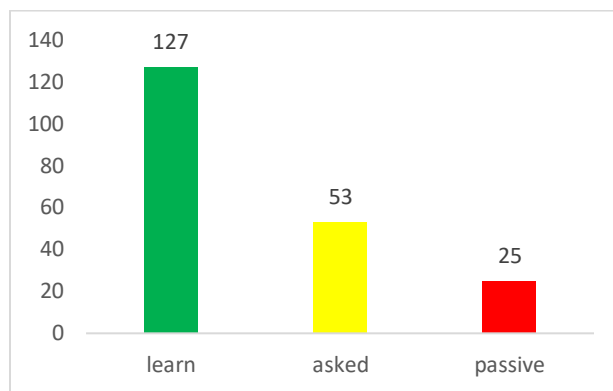
Graph 16. Overcoming English learning difficulties

As for the efforts and efforts that will be made by respondents in overcoming their difficulties around 127 (61.95%) respondents stated that they would study harder, as many as 53 (25.85%) stated that they asked teachers or friends who understood English better to overcome their difficulties, and as many as 25 (12.20%) respondents stated that they were passive in their English language skills.

b. Discussion

1) Listening

While in the Language Laboratory AMAYO students were tested on their listening skills, the laboratory showed the level of listening skills. Many students complained that they were unable to keep up with the normal speaking speed of an English speaker's recorded voice. This difficulty is due to a lack of vocabulary and understanding of English accents, so they find it difficult to understand what is being discussed in conversation. Even when the speakers were face-to-face with the students and spoke slower than the recorded voice, the students still struggled.

Students complain that listening skills are the highest level of difficulty. Some factors that become the reason why students state that listening skills are the most difficult, are caused as follows.

a) Lack of concentration listening

Many students have difficulty in concentrating their attention while listening. To overcome this difficulty, students should be more focused and avoid distractions when listening to material in English.

b) Lack of understanding of English accent

The pronunciation in various English accents (such as *British*, *American* and *Australian*) is different. To get around this difficulty watch movies or videos with various accents to understand the differences in pronunciation.

c) Interpreting word by word

Many students tend to interpret word for word when listening. The problem is that English has phrases and idioms that have different meanings when translated literally. To get around this difficulty understand the whole sentence and the string of words used by the native speaker.

d) Lack of vocabulary and pronunciation

Lack of vocabulary is a difficulty in listening. To overcome this, learn the vocabulary and how to pronounce it correctly.

e) Unable to distinguish words and sounds

Difficulty distinguishing between spoken words and other sounds. For this difficulty, the solution is to train your hearing by listening to different types of material in English.

f) Lack of stamina/tired

English listening requires stamina because you have to stay focused and active during the listening process. Steps to overcome this difficulty by practicing regularly listening to material in English

By understanding the reasons above, it is hoped that students can overcome difficulties in listening skills and improve their understanding of English material. This is reinforced by the results of Diora & Rosa's research (2020) which states that the factors causing difficulties in learning to speak English are the number of English listening frequencies and psychological factors (in this case it can be said to be affective factors). Although students initially have difficulty understanding English conversations due to the speed at which native speakers speak, repeated listening tasks have proven to be effective in improving their comprehension and expanding vocabulary.

2) Speaking

Speaking is at the second level of difficulty for students to master English. There are several reasons why speaking in English is often considered difficult:

a) Lack of English speaking habits

Many students are not used to speaking English in their daily lives, so their tongues feel stiff and thick when speaking English because they are used to using Indonesian on a daily basis.

b) Too much theory without practice

Students focus too much on reading theory without practicing speaking. To overcome this difficulty always speak in English with friends, lecturers, or through online platforms.

c) Fear and embarrassment of public speaking

Students feel scared and embarrassed when speaking English in front of people. To overcome this, practice speaking in front of a mirror or with supportive friends.

d) Lack of consistency in learning English

Consistent learning is essential to mastering speaking skills. To overcome this difficulty set a regular schedule to practice speaking English

e) Too much focus on grammatical aspects

Worrying too much about grammar hinders fluency. The solution is to remember that fluency is more important than grammatical perfection when speaking.

With patience, practice, and perseverance, it will be able to overcome difficulties in speaking English and improve skills. This is reinforced by the results of research by Kondo & Ratuwongo (2023); Prasetyaningrum, Fikni, & Wati (2020) mentioned that to overcome *speaking* problems, one way is to practice every day. But in fact, language learning in Indonesia may be a little difficult because students only learn as a foreign language, they only learn in class and do not use English every day (Sari, Humaera, & Syahriani, 2023). Instead of just thinking of English as a subject that is considered difficult, it would be better if students think that English is part of development for communication purposes (Sahara, Zulaikah, & Jelita, 2021).

3) Writing

Writing is the most complex activity that ESP students must master in this context. However, very few students consider writing to be a difficult skill to acquire. Indeed, during their studies, they adopt a process approach to writing in which several steps must be completed before their writing is published in English.

English writing skills are often considered difficult by many students. Here are some reasons why this happens and some solutions to overcome difficulties in writing:

a) Limited vocabulary and understanding of grammar

Lack of vocabulary and understanding of grammar are often obstacles in writing. To overcome this, read more and learn new vocabulary. Also learn grammar well.

b) Lack of active writing practice

Writing skills require active practice, many students only read without writing much. The solution is to set a regular schedule for writing, making notes, essays, or short stories in English.

c) Fear of mistakes and perfectionism

Fear of making mistakes and wanting to *write* perfectly often inhibit creativity. Steps to overcome this difficulty Writing is a process, don't be afraid to make mistakes

d) Lack of inspiration and ideas

Lack of ideas or lack of inspiration can make writing difficult. Steps you can take include reading more, observing the world around you, and finding inspiration from personal experiences.

e) Lack of organizational skills

Disorganized writing and lack of organizational skills in writing. You can create an outline before you start writing, determine the main points and organize them well.

Students face difficulties in initiating writing in English due to limited vocabulary and sentence structure, fear of making grammatical errors, a lack of habit in reading English texts, and structural differences between Indonesian and English. Therefore, intensive practice is required to overcome these challenges (Aminah & Supriadi, 2023). The writing process includes outlining (preparing a paragraph outline), drafting (creating the first draft of a paragraph), editing (checking the accuracy of the text), revising (checking the accuracy of the content) and publishing (publishing the results of the text to be read by friends). The importance of the writing process is highly appreciated because to convey an idea requires a process that can develop the idea and perfect the elements contained in it. (Wijaya, et al., 2021)

4) Reading

The least difficulty in learning English lies in reading. Most students consider reading to be the easiest subject to learn. The underlying factor for students' answers is interest in reading activities. The second reason is that through reading, students can directly use a text as a reference to answer questions related to understanding the text.

Reading can be a challenge when learning English, so that reading skills can be mastered well, do the following methods.

a) Start with an appropriate book

Choose books that are appropriate for your level of understanding, don't be too ambitious by choosing books that are too difficult, books that are written in simpler language.

b) Read regularly

Schedule time to read every day, read news articles, short stories, or books. The more you read, the better your reading skills will be.

c) Expand vocabulary

When reading and finding new words note down the meaning of the word, expand your vocabulary by digging deeper into the new words you find.

d) Use a dictionary

Don't hesitate to use a dictionary, whether it's an online or app dictionary or a printed dictionary in this way it will be very helpful when finding an unfamiliar word.

e) Reas with context

Try to understand the context of the text you are reading, this will help you understand the overall meaning.

f) Read different types of text

Read books, articles, blogs and even comics; each type of text has a different language style and this will help in understanding English variations.

g) Discuss with others

Discuss what you read with friends or lecturers, using English to reinforce understanding.

The notion that reading is a difficult skill cannot be ignored. Students have difficulty in understanding what they read in English due to their limited vocabulary, so interpreting the message of the text becomes a challenge. This can be used as input for all language teachers to pay attention to the level of difficulty in choosing English reading based on ability (Sachran, Munir, & Aeni, 2022).

As a supporting material for research data, the final grade of the English course becomes a benchmark for students' skills in mastering English. The results of the analysis show that students who actively participate in English classes, when listening in the laboratory are able to take notes well. When participating in class students are confident and fluent in speaking which is almost correct. This can be seen from their facial expressions that do not show tension and their fluency when asking questions or answering questions in class discussions

For students who are less proactive in the learning process, their learning results are quite good, especially in pronouncing English vocabulary, although when reading they still stutter because they have not memorized it. When asking questions or responding to less active students, read the text as handwritten notes. Notes have been prepared to help provide ideas to be communicated when asking or answering questions during discussions.

Passive students participate in class during the English learning process. They never ask questions or answer when discussions take place in class. Passive students will answer when appointed by the lecturer and do not answer immediately. When reading notes to answer questions from their faces, they did not seem confident in answering even though they had prepared notes to read. When speaking, the voice sounded very low and the facial expressions showed embarrassment, anxiety, and lack of confidence. The language structure used was not good, when trying to pronounce English vocabulary it was disjointed and repeated

From all of these studies, it can be concluded that the difficulty of learning English to achieve complete language proficiency is influenced by the level of language proficiency of each student. There are differences in individual abilities, learning environments and experiences, and methods of learning English that have been obtained before. This can be seen from the statements of research subjects who are classified as active, believing that *speaking* is the easiest skill. This is different from the relatively passive students who believe that *speaking* is the most difficult to master

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

a. Conclusions

The process of learning English cannot be separated from the emergence of various difficulties, especially for students. These difficulties can be observed at the level of individual language skills or at an overall level. In class conditions with different skills, the difficulties encountered also have different results. There are internal and external factors that cause student learning difficulties. Internal factors that affect students' English learning include low intelligence, lack of talent, interest, and motivation in learning. Students attend classes only out of obligation and to get good grades and complete assignments, not to learn English as an international language that is so important today. External factors that influence students who have difficulty learning English include a lack of support for the use of English at home or in the community, limited opportunities to use English outside of class, or the reason that there is no community of friends who use English in social settings.

In this study, the research subjects indicated difficulties in learning English in four skills ordered from the most difficult to the easiest: *listening, speaking, writing,* and *reading.* The majority of students said that the most difficult element when learning English was *listening.* The factors causing difficulties in learning English are strongly influenced by the language level of each student. Active students tend to choose *writing* as the level of difficulty when learning English, while passive students tend to choose *speaking* as a difficult subject to practice.

b. Suggestions

1) Students should study harder and increase their motivation to learn English in order to improve their ability to master English as an international language.

2) Lecturers need to improve their teaching methods to make them more interesting and encourage students' desire to learn English.

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