

Vocational High School Students' Learning Difficulty in ESP

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Abstract: As part of English for Specific Purposes, English for nursing presents challenges and obstacles that cannot be overlooked. The difficulties experienced by students in learning English in the classroom significantly affect the success of their mastery of the language. This study aims to identify the difficulties faced by Vocational High School students in learning English for Specific Purposes, particularly in the nursing major. This research is a qualitative descriptive study using research instruments obtained from questionnaires and interviews. The respondents of this study are 26 students from the 12th grade of vocational high school, specializing in nursing. The research instruments include questionnaires and structured interviews. Out of the 26 students, two students participated in follow-up interviews to support the data from the questionnaires. The findings indicate that the students' difficulties are in both internal and external factors. The internal factors include difficulties in linguistic aspects such as pronunciation, reading, vocabulary, speaking, grammar, translation, as well as psychological aspects such as anxiety. External factors include difficulties related to teaching methods and materials.

Keywords: *English, learning difficulty, ESP*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, English language mastery has become both a necessity and a challenge for students. In healthcare, English has become an urgent need due to the medical resources written in English. English is also essential for communication in the medical field, both among medical staff and with patients. For vocational high school students, proficiency in the English language is important as part of their preparation for the professional world and for further education in the health field. However, some obstacles hinder the achievement of vocational students' English proficiency goals, particularly in health-related English, especially in the field of nursing. These difficulties involve several aspects that impact both their academic achievement and their communication related to English.

Nursing English is part of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) where the learning of English is more focused on learners' needs and goals, and the material provided in ESP is specifically designed to address the particular needs of these learners (Esmail Zare-bethas Zaidi & Al Jadaan, 2022). An example of this is the learning of terminology and expressions of medicine and nursing. ESP itself is divided into EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) (Hanh, 2023). The objective of ESP learning, particularly in English for nursing, is not only to support the academic achievements related to the nursing study program but also to serve to prepare prospective nurses to face the job opportunity in the health field, whether in hospitals or other health services. ESP English for nursing is not only taught at the college but has also been introduced at the high school, although the learning portion at these two educational levels varies.

As part of English language learning, the teaching and learning of ESP also face a series of challenges, one of which is the lack of mastery of adequate terminology and vocabulary, particularly in the context of health and nursing. Vocabulary development is an important area in ESP learning (Zaidi & Al Jadaan, 2022). Many students experience difficulties in understanding and using both simple and complex medical terminology. Difficulties in learning English are related not only to the specific terminology but also to the general vocabulary. Generally, Hamdani stated two factors associated with the difficulties in learning English, namely internal factors and external factors (Rahayuningmas et al., 2024). Internal factors include linguistic factors such as low vocabulary knowledge, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, as well as psychological factors such as shame or fear and anxiety when speaking in English, lack of motivation, and lack of self-confidence (Anggrisia & Robah, 2023; Prasongko, 2023; Thao & Thao, 2022). Meanwhile, external factors relate to the learning environment and the teaching methods employed by the teacher (Prasongko, 2023).

In addition, Ur in (Wardani & Atin, 2024) highlights several challenges related to English language skills. In speaking skills, there are difficulties such as inhibition, where students feel fearful and anxious (Čepon, 2022; Liu et al., 2011; Marlina & Marlisa, 2023) about making mistakes, leading them to be passive in speaking. Furthermore, students may struggle with having no ideas to express, face challenges related to low participation in learning English due to the limited opportunities provided for them to practice the language, and experience difficulties related to their mother tongue, as English remains a foreign language not used in daily communication, making it unfamiliar to students. Due to English being taught as a foreign language, English learning does not seem urgent to study, but rather becomes a mandatory requirement for certain interests (Muammalah & Misnadin, 2023). English, which is not a mother tongue, poses difficulties for students in pronunciation, including the articulation of vowels and consonants (Ha & Bao, 2023), listening skills, writing skills, as well as reading skills (Simaremare et al., 2023; Suryanto & Sari, 2021).

Regarding vocabulary mastery and lack of grammar, students who are deficient in both will also experience difficulties in reading and writing skills. In reading skills, limited knowledge or misreading becomes a challenge faced by students (Sari, 2023). Reading ability depends on the capacity for vocabulary or terminology recognition, morphology, syntax, background knowledge, and memory. Without sufficient vocabulary, students will face difficulties in reading skills. Ideally, reading texts should limit difficult or potentially unfamiliar vocabulary of 2% to 5% of the overall text (Hartshorn & McMurphy, 2023). Meanwhile, in writing skills, students will struggle to connect one sentence with another due to limited knowledge of specific topics, understanding of sentence structures, and vocabulary (Suryanto & Sari, 2021).

There are several previous studies that discuss the difficulties in learning English, particularly in the context of English for Specific Purposes, such as study about difficulty of learning English by ESP students as part of needs analysis research (Simaremare et al., 2023), study of ESP students' difficulty on grammar rules (Ahsan et al., 2020), vocabulary (Wang et al., 2023), and polysemy (Mićović & Beko, 2022) and speaking (Arifiana & Suryati, 2024).

Based on the previous background, this study was conducted to answer the research question of "What are students' difficulties in learning English?" This research aims to explain the perceptions of vocational high school students in the nursing program regarding the difficulties they face during English language learning. By understanding the challenges they experience, it is hoped that the results of this study can provide insights on how to address these difficulties. The findings of this study are also expected to be beneficial not only for the researcher but also to serve as evaluation materials for English teachers more broadly, in order to provide appropriate materials and teaching methods that meet the students' needs.

2. METHOD

This research is a qualitative descriptive study. The instruments used in this study are the responses to questionnaires and the results of interviews. The research was conducted at one of vocational high school involving 12th-grade students of nursing. The ages of the respondents range from 17 to 19 years. There are a total of 28 students in the 12th grade, divided into two classes: class A and class B. The researcher requested the students provide answers to the questionnaire with open-ended questions regarding difficulties in learning English. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms. Out of the 28 students who filled out the open-ended questionnaire, only 26 responses could be utilized in this research. The researcher then analyzed the answers given by the students through coding and given an interpretation. To support the research findings, the researcher also conducted follow up interviews with two students via WhatsApp platform. The selection of the interviewed students was done randomly. The results of these interviews serve as data to support the findings from the open-ended questionnaire.

The researchers distributed several questions regarding the difficulties the students' faced in learning English, and the students sent their answers via WhatsApp. All of the respondents preferred to respond in text format due to their discomfort with answering through voice recordings. The reason for using WhatsApp is that this platform is easy to use and is actively used by both the researchers and the respondents. Some questions of the interview include: (1) What have you learned in the English subject? (2) What difficulties do you face related to Speaking in English? (3) What challenges do you encounter when reading English texts? (4) What difficulties do you face related to listening in English? (5) Do you experience difficulties in memorizing English vocabulary and using tenses? Why do you find it challenging? (6) Have you ever felt anxious or lacking confidence in learning/practicing English? Explain why. (7) Are there other factors related to the difficulties of learning English in school that you would like to share?

The responses from the open-ended questionnaire answered by 26 students were then coded and categorized. The results obtained were subsequently interpreted. Meanwhile, the answers submitted by the respondents in interview were rewritten to facilitate the interpretation of the responses. Any typographical errors or incorrect punctuation were corrected without altering the content. The revised responses from the

respondents were then used as the source of data. All of these responses were analyzed using codes and categorized accordingly.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Questionnaire results

3.1.1 Age range of the respondents

Table1.AgeRangeof therespondents

Age	
17	2
18	2
19	
Total respondents	6

There were 26 respondents who participated in this study, with an age range of 17 to 19 years. Only two respondents were 19 years old.

3.1.2 Length of learning English

Table2.Lengthof learningEnglish

Age	n
3to7years	12
8to12years	13
Morethan12years	1
Total respondents	26

There is a variation in the duration of studying English among the 26 respondents. Some of the respondents (13 respondents) have been studying English for 8 to 12 years, since they were in elementary school, while others have studied English for between 3 to 7 years, from after elementary school to after junior high school. There is one respondent who has studied English for more than 12 years, specifically 14 years, which means that this respondent has been studying English since kindergarten.

3.1.3 Students' difficulty in Learning English

Table3.Students'DifficultyinLearningEnglish

Category	Frequency	Percentage(100%)
Vocabulary	7	27
Pronunciation	15	58
Speaking	7	27
Reading	9	35
Listening	1	4
Translation	2	8
Teaching method	2	8

3.1.3.1 Difficulty in vocabulary

In Table 3, out of 26 respondents, 7 of them experienced difficulties related to vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is one of the linguistic aspects of internal factor.

“(I experience difficulties) related to English **vocabulary**.” (R2).

“I cannot read complex **vocabulary**.” (R12).

“(I experience) difficulties in pronunciation, **memorizing verbs**, word arrangement, translation, and the vocabulary differs from real life.” (R22).

“(In my opinion) it's difficult to **memorize vocabulary** and to arrange words into an English sentence.” (R26).

The respondents' answers indicate that they experience difficulties in memorizing English vocabulary including complex vocabulary.

3.1.3.2 Difficulty in pronunciation

A total of 58% or 15 respondents out of 26 reported experiencing difficulties related to pronunciation.

“(In my opinion) the sentence is different from how it is **pronounced**; if one letter is different, the meaning also changes.” (R3).

“(I experience) difficulties in reading texts (in English) because the **pronunciation** is different from the writing.” (R8).

“(I experience) difficulties in understanding the meaning and **pronunciation** of English.” (R23).

“(In my opinion) many words in English are similar in their **pronunciation**.” (R25).

It can be seen that the differences in spelling and pronunciation can cause difficulties for students. Some words in English also have similar pronunciations to each other. This is what causes respondents to experience challenges in pronunciation.

3.1.3.3 Difficulty in speaking skill

In table 3, there are 7 respondents who stated that they experienced difficulties related to Speaking skills. Speaking is a skill that is not only related to how to pronounce English vocabulary but more about how to express ideas structured in English in spoken form.

“(I) find it hard to understand sentences and **speak**, I can read but when there are questions, I have **difficulty answering**.” (R5)

“(In my opinion) it's difficult when **speaking English**.” (R13)

“(I experience) difficulties **speaking** English and pronouncing English words.” (R16)

“(I experience) difficulties in pronunciation, memorizing verbs, **word arrangement**, translation, and real life has different vocabulary.” (R22)

From the respondents' answers, it is clear that they have difficulty in word arrangement and expressing what is in their minds in English verbally.

3.1.3.4 Difficulty in reading skill

Table 3 shows that there are 9 respondents (35%) who experience difficulties related to reading skills.

“(I experience difficulties) in **reading** English texts” (R9)

“(I experience) difficulties in understanding **reading** texts, pronunciation, as well as meaning” (R15)

3.1.3.5 The difficulty in listening skill

One of the difficulties experienced by the respondents is related to listening skills. Out of 26 respondents, there is 1 respondent who emphasized the difficulty in listening in their English language learning.

“(I experience difficulty) with pronunciation and **listening**.” (R24)

3.1.3.6 Difficulty in translation

In Table 3, there are 2 respondents who experienced difficulties related to translation. This is primarily associated with challenges in providing the meanings of English vocabulary.

“(I) have difficulty understanding the **meaning** and pronunciation.” (R23)

It can be seen that the respondent faces difficulties not only concerning the meaning of English vocabulary but also in the pronunciation of those words.

3.1.3.7 Difficulty in teaching method

The difficulties experienced by the respondents are not only related to internal factors, but also related to external factors such as the teaching method.

“(I experience) almost all skill. I also dislike English lessons because the **teacher** does not inspire a passion for learning.” (R1)

“(I experience difficulties) related to the **lack of nursing materials** being provided (by the teacher).” (R17)

It is showed that one of the respondent' experiences difficulties not only related to linguistic factors but also related to the methods provided by their teacher which did not build enthusiasm for learning English. Another respondent also stated that the lack of exposure to nursing materials has caused challenges in learning English.

3.2 Interview results

Table 4. Interview results

List of questions	Respondents' answer
(1) What have you learned in the English subject?	R1Q11. What I learned in the English subject includes various aspects such as writing job applications in English and communicating with patients using the English language. R2Q11. In English subject, I study various materials such as learning how to communicate in English with patients in hospitals, learning to write job application letters in correct and appropriate English, and practicing correct English speaking skills.
(2) What difficulties do you face related to Speaking in English?	R1Q12. Vocabulary is difficult to memorize. R2Q12. In my opinion, there are several words that are easy to read yet complicated when spoken.

(3) What challenges do you encounter when reading English texts?	R1Q13. I find it difficult to comprehend English vocabulary. R2Q13. There are several words that are difficult to comprehend (in terms of meaning).
(4) What difficulties do you face related to listening in English?	R1Q14. In my opinion, listening is not that difficult. R2Q14. In my opinion, listening is not that difficult.
(5) Do you experience difficulties in memorizing English vocabulary and using tenses? Why do you find it challenging?	R1Q15. I have encountered difficulties in memorizing vocabulary and the tenses in the English language due to the unfamiliar and challenging nature of the vocabulary. R1Q15. Sometimes, certain vocabulary is difficult to comprehend.
(6) Have you ever felt anxious or lacking confidence in learning/practicing English? Explain why.	R1Q16. I have experienced anxiety or a lack of confidence in practicing English, as I fear misreading. R2Q16. No, I always feel confident in learning English because I believe that one day I will be able to speak English easily.
(7) Are there other factors related to the difficulties of learning English in school that you would like to share?	R1Q17. There are no other factors. R2Q17. There are no other factors.

The research findings indicate that the respondents experience difficulties in learning English, consisting of internal factors related to linguistic factors such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, speaking, reading, listening, and translation, as well as psychological factors such as anxiety when making mistakes. In addition, there are also respondents who encounter challenges from external factors, such as the teaching methods used by the teacher and the learning materials. These difficulties in learning correspond to what has been stated by (Anggrisia & Robah, 2023; Prasongko, 2023; Rahayuningmas et al., 2024; Thao & Thao, 2022).

The largest percentage of difficulties experienced by respondents is related to pronunciation (58%), reading (35%), as well as speaking and vocabulary (each at 27%). Furthermore, difficulties related to translation and teaching methods are each at 8%. This means that for most of the students, pronunciation is the most significant factor affecting their learning of the English. Pronunciation is how consonants and vowels are pronounced accurately, as well as how a word or a sentence is pronounced with correct tone and stress (Ha & Bao, 2023). In pronunciation, the different articulation from the mother tongue, the presence of tone and stress at both the word and sentence levels, as well as the pronunciation of consonants and vowels in English words that resemble one another, makes it challenging for respondents to learn. However, this can hinder the mastery of the English. This aligns with what (Suryanto & Sari, 2021) conveyed.

Vocabulary difficulties rank second, as mastery of vocabulary determines the mastery of other skills, both oral and written. Difficulties in mastering English vocabulary can hinder overall English proficiency, as noted by Zaidi. Similarly, regarding speaking skills, respondents struggle to form words into sentences and express themselves verbally. This may occur due to the status of English as a foreign language, where students do not frequently communicate in English in their daily lives, as mentioned by (Muammalah & Misnadin, 2023). Related to vocabulary mastery, this also caused students to encounter obstacles in mastering reading. Interview results indicate that difficulties in reading English texts are primarily due to lack of English vocabulary. Limitations in understanding English texts are one of the difficulties in learning English, as stated by Sari.

Related to grammar, the difficulty of learning grammar is shown from the results of interview where the respondent found it difficult when learning tenses. However, it was due to the lack of vocabulary. Meanwhile, the responses provided by the respondents indicated that only one respondent experienced difficulties in listening. This is also supported by interview results where all respondents stated that they did not encounter significant difficulties in listening. Although only a few respondents identified grammar and listening as a difficulty in learning English, this aligns with what has been stated by (Marliana & Marlisa, 2023; Sari, 2023; Simaremare et al., 2023). Meanwhile, regarding the psychological factor, in the questionnaire provided to 26 respondents, none of them indicated any responses related to this factor; however, the results of the interviews revealed that one respondent also experienced difficulties, namely anxiety when making mistakes in English practice. It is in line with (Liu et al., 2011; Thao & Thao, 2022). In contrast, another did not experience any anxiety at all during English practice, which was based on her confidence in their English language abilities.

Concerning the external factors, there are respondents who experienced difficulties due to the teaching methods provided by the teachers in the classroom. Although only one respondent addressed this issue through the questionnaire, supported by interview results that did not discuss the impact of the teaching method on the difficulties in learning English, this factor also serves as an obstacle to mastering the English language. Unsuitable methods can cause students to feel uncomfortable and unmotivated in English language learning. This is consistent with what has been conveyed by (Prasongko, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the difficulties encountered in learning English for Specific Purposes, experienced by vocational high school students of nursing program are in both internal and external factors. The most dominant internal factor is the difficulty in the aspect of pronunciation, followed by reading, vocabulary, and speaking. The challenge in pronunciation arises from the differences in systems of sound between English and their mother tongue, especially in accurately articulating consonants, vowels, tones, and stress. Limited vocabulary mastery also affects proficiency in other skills such as speaking, reading, and even listening. Although only a few respondents mentioned external factors such as teaching methods and materials, this finding still indicates that all factors contribute to students' English learning. Psychological aspects such as anxiety were also highlighted in this study, although it is not dominant. Therefore, it can be concluded that this research clearly demonstrates the various types of difficulties faced by vocational high school students in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in the nursing program.

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