STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN ACHIEVING ENGLISH LEARNING SKILLS EFFECTIVELY

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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 description was used in data analysis. Many different responses are found in the classroom to these problems, especially related to student attitudes in the learning process, student learning outcomes and participation in conducting activities. This study also aims to explain the causes of these difficulties. This research used questionnaire, observation, and video recording. The research data were analyzed in three ways, namely data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. The results showed that this research subjects faced many different difficulties in learning English. This study's participants had trouble learning four English language skills; listening, speaking, writing, and reading arranged from the hardest to the easiest. Passive students typically chose speaking as a tough subject to practise, whereas active students typically choose writing as a challenging skill in learning English.*

Keywords*: learning difficulties, competence, English language*

INTRODUCTION

Mastering foreign languages, especially English and Mandarin, is a skill that must be improved nowadays. As the consequence of Indonesia being a member (Kemendag, 2023) of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), so the young generation of the country needs to take a big progress in science and technology supported by the mastery of the introductory language (English). English is an important international language that connects people in the world in many aspects including education. English courses in Indonesia range from pre-primary school to college, and are compulsory courses at the secondary and high school levels. At the level of higher education, all mandatory courses offer 1 or 2 semesters of English language courses even if the major is not related to English. (Kemenristek, 2022). It shows the importance of the mastery of a foreign language, especially English, as the beginning of academic success and promoting a career in the world of work. (Cleophas, 2016).

Based on the observations made by the author at the beginning of the semester, there are indications that the quality of the students' English language proficiency is extremely low. The instructional language used by the instructors is the most basic English. Surprisingly, that kind of language is difficult to understand by most students. The difficulties are in the area of developing the ability to read, speak, and write at the elementary level. Even though they have studied English for six years in secondary school, and even some elementary schools already offered English lesson, but English is still being a difficult subject for them. Based on this phenomenon the author analyzes the difficulties of learning English among the students. This analysis is one of the basis for improving the quality of learning.

Good communication can be achieved if everyone are good at four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It occurs in the process of learning English as well, where listening and reading are receptive skills, while writing and speaking are productive skills. (Adminweb, 2020). Sometimes people consider if a person can speak English smoothly, it can be said that he is mastering English. That is not totally true, the written language is also important to master. In this digital age, graduates are expected to be able to use technology in everyday life, such as the use of e-mail applications. They are required to understand the text that appears so that they can give appropriate responses with definitely using the correct grammar.

In addition, there are three elements of proficiency that play an important role in supporting the four skills: pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. To have optimal English skills, a professional foreign language teacher is required to train qualified students. Besides, language material and practice must be carried out in a balanced approach. However, finding the ideal language course is not easy. Basically, every student has different characteristics. They may have different learning technique or ability to absorb the learning material, it refers to the concept of compact intelligence. (Alilateh & Widyantoro, 2019). Therefore, a language teacher should know the level of language proficiency of each student. Students cannot be generalized, as it will be difficult to the desired learning goals.

In the process of learning English, students will encounter learning difficulties, which causes less optimal learning outcomes. Difficulty in learning English can happen to anyone. The difficulty encountered by English learners is not only understanding English pronunciation presented at a normal speed through listening material. (Toni, Susilowati, & Sartipa, 2021). On reading skills, Princess (2021) argues that the problems faced in understanding reading text can be seen by the lack of knowledge of reading material and the inability to know how to link ideas from one sentence to another sentence. Writing skills are difficult because these activities require complex and systematic thinking processes, but English learners must master them. According to Solfiyatuzzahro, Santihastuti, & Erfan (2019), in communication, writing skills are also important to master. The benefits will clearly be felt when the written language is published and read by the general public, therefore the quality of writing must always be improved. For speaking skills, Mido (2019) on his research, found that the difficulty which

students often encounter when speaking English depend on their English vocabulary. Based on this problem, language teachers should pay more attention to the condition of students and their readiness in achieving learning goals. Without mature preparation, learning activities will not take place effectively and efficiently.

By understanding the problems faced by students, teachers can do self-reflection to see how effective learning is in the classroom and improve the quality of their students' English language skills.

The problems associated with learning English do not only arise at the primary and secondary levels, but will continue up to the university level. A lot of researches has proven this for all English skills. (Putri, 2021; Mido, 2019; Solfiyatuzzahro, Santihastuti, & Erfan, 2019; & Toni, Susilowati, & Sartipa, 2021). Every student is interested in a different field of science, but not all students are interested in English. To fulfil their obligations as a student at a university, they must take an English class and even pass the TOEFL with a fairly high score. Currently, it's hard to require a score in the range of 450-500 as a prerequisite for graduation. (Lisa, 2022). Students who do not have a solid basis in the language skills acquired from elementary to secondary school will feel very burdened by this situation. Therefore, English learners who do not have an in-depth knowledge of their field (English for special Purpose/ESP learner) tend to give varying responses during the learning process. (Seto, 2013).

Based on the problems described in the introduction, there are many difficulties that students face when learning English. Since English is not used as an introductory language in the teaching process and in everyday conversation, the students are not acquainted with the usage of English. Therefore, in this article, the researchers want to find out more about the difficulties students face in learning reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Specifically, this article will focus on observing the difficulties of students at the Yogyakarta Academy of Management (Akademi Manajemen Yogyakarta), who are categorized as ESP (English for Specific Purpose) students.

METHOD

Based on the purpose of this study, it can be described that the type of this research is qualitative research. The data are from written or oral words that can be observed. The research was conducted to the students of even semester 2023-2024 in January 2024. Students of Yogyakarta Academy of Management Administration are from some department, they are hospital administration, pharmacy and pharmaceutical management, as well as air transportation management. There were 205 students in the second semester who took English II. Previously, students had also received English I. Data collection was carried out with observation methods, distribution of questionnaire (Google forms), and recording. Questionnaires were deployed to learn student responses about English learning experience over two semesters including difficulties experienced in the learning process. The students of Yogyakarta Administrative Management Academy students have the opportunity to use the Language Laboratory

twice when they were taking English courses. The students' listening skills will be visible while they do learning activities in language laboratory since every student is required to submit a note as result of what they have successfully listened during the class. The observation was carried out by the researchers during one semester of learning activities to observe students who were active, less active, and passive.

Students are expected to be active in the learning process to show their participation by answering questions, asking to the teacher, and generally expressing their opinions through the group activities. In fact, the students are less motivated, it can be seen from the intensity of interaction between students and lecturers. They can respond to the teacher's question but they are not confident enough to express their opinion. The last mentioned type is passive, where students hardly ever give oral contributions to the teacher and perform poorly on quizzes or exams. Learning is a conscious process involving a person's memory related to information being learned, for example, saying hello, using language lines, and vocabulary. (Megawati, 2016).

Triangulation techniques are used to check the validity of research data, Sugiyono (2019) says when a researcher uses triangulation, it means researchers will collect data, and also check whether the data obtained is reliable or not by using different data collection techniques and reference sources.

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

1. Data reduction
   The data reduction and data analysis should be sequential and continuous, simple at the early stages of data collection, and more complex as the project progresses. When doing research, the researcher must maintain a critical attitude to the type and quantity of data collected, as well as the assumptions that brings the researcher to this stage. In this case is to classify answers related to difficulties encountered when learning according to the level of student activity.

2. Data analysis
   Data presentation aims at organizing the data, so that the data is easy to understand. This stage is a preliminary review of the interpretation of existing facts. Interpretation is the establishment of meaning and the connection between the acquired facts. The researchers presented the results of the research data describing detail and clear information about obstacles of students in the process of learning English.

3. Conclusions
   Making a conclusion is temporary and it changes from time to time when no supporting data sources are found. When there is a valid and consistent supporting reference, then the researcher can draw credible conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of questionnaires distributed to the students, they had different opinions about which skills are difficult to learn. Among four language skills, listening were the most difficult to master. Difficulty in learning listening skills based on the students opinion are in the area of understanding the accents and intonations of English, the way the speakers talk in audio is often faster than in the real conversation. The students are also discouraging in understanding words that have never been heard. Difficulties in mastering speaking skills come from lack of confidence when speaking English, also because the students are trying very hard to find the correct words when they have to convey the message in English. The difficult part for students to learn reading skills are finding unknown words they discover while reading the text, understanding the structure of sentences, and understanding the overall meaning of the text. To be able to master English well, the students have to pay attention to all the language skills, none can be neglected.

a. Description of data
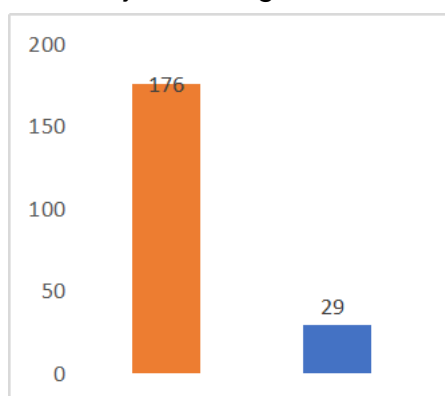1)   Students joined English course

Chart 1

In chart 1, it is explained that there were only few of the students who had ever joined English courses; 29 (14.15%) of students had ever studied English at the English course and 176 (85.85%) of the students had never joined English course.

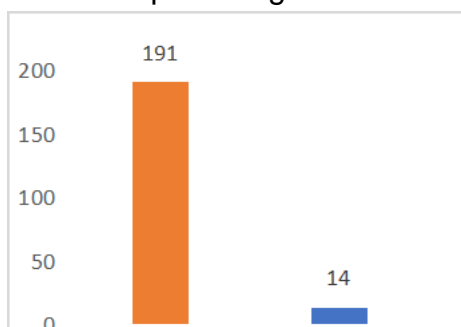2)   Students spoke English with friends/family

Chart 2

Chart 2 shows that students rarely spoke English with their friends and family to practice their speaking skill, there were only about 14 (6.83%) of students sometimes speak English and 191 (93.17%) of the students otherwise never spoke English with a friend or family.
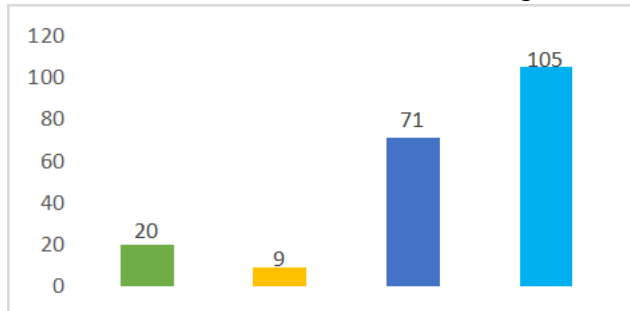
3) The reason students do not like English

Chart 3

Chart3 describes that there were 105 (51.22%) students thought English was hard to speak because they were from non-English-speaking environments, 71 (34.63%) students did not understand English, 20 (9.76%) students found it difficult, and only 9 (4.39%) students were interested in speaking English with friends or family.

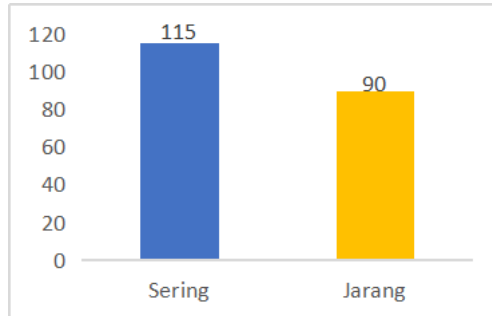4) Frequency of listening to English songs or watching English-language movies

Chart 4

Chart 4 above shows that 115 (56.10%) of students often listened to English songs or watched English-language movies, while about 90 (43.90%) of other students rarely did so.

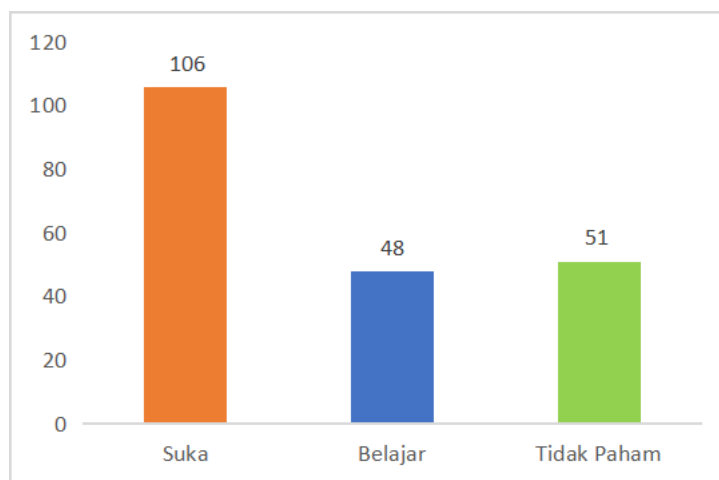5) The reason students listen to English songs or watch English-language movies

Chart 5

Chart 5 shows that there were 106 students (51.71%) said they like listening to English songs because they were good to hear and they watched English movies because it was exciting and fun. 48 (23.41%) students said they did not like to hear songs or watch English films because they did not understand and those who disliked both were 51 students (24,88%).

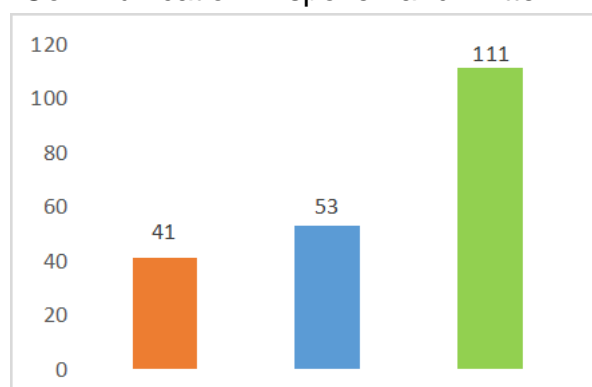6) Communication in spoken and written English

Chart 6

Chart 6 above shows that approximately 41 (20%) of the students often communicated in English either using spoken or written English, 53 (25.85%) students said they used spoken and written English rarely, and there were 111 (54.15%) students indicated that they had never communicated in spoken and written English.

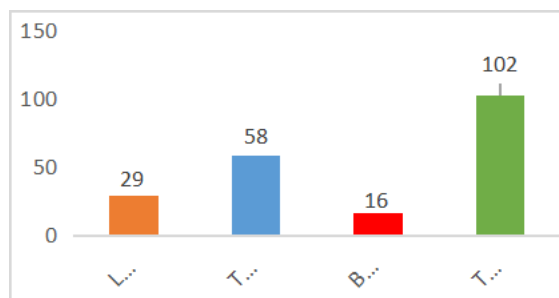7) Factors affecting students in using spoken or written English

Chart 7

The students admitted they could not communicate in spoken or written English because they did not understand English, 102 (49.76%), 16 (7.80%) students could understand both oral and written English in communication. 58 (28.29%) said they could not speak English, and 29 (14.15%) said that they were in an environment where they were not accustomed to communicate in English either orally or in writing.
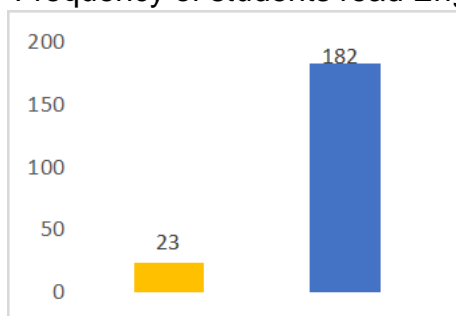
8) Frequency of students read English text

Chart 8

In chart 8 above it is explained that about 23 (11.22%) of respondents stated that they read English texts frequently, while another 182 (88.78%) students said that they rarely or almost never read English text.

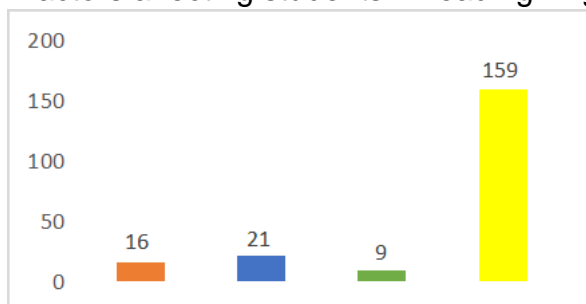9) Factors affecting students in reading English text

Chart 9

Chart 9 shows that respondents had different reasons related to their frequency in reading English texts: approximately 16 (7.80%) respondents stated that they read only while learning English. 21 (10.24%) of respondents declared they were interesting in English text, 9 (4.39%) said

they liked reading English texts, and 159 (77,56%) stated they did not understand English.
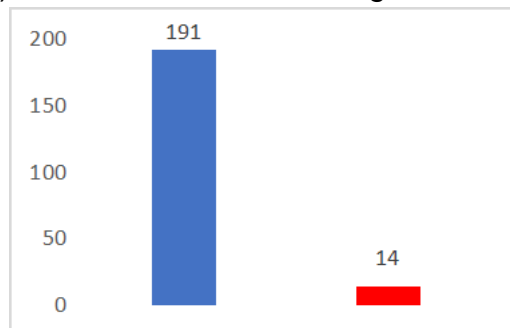
10) Students submit the assignment

Chart 10

191 (93.17%) respondents stated that they had always completed English tasks, meanwhile there were 14 (6.83%) respondents that had never collected tasks.

11) Factors affecting students in submitting English task

Chart 11

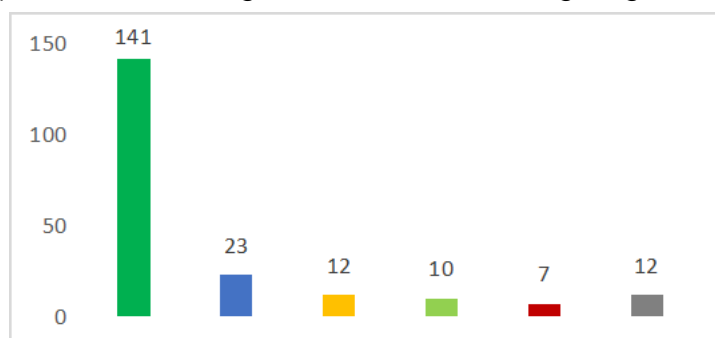There were 141 (68,78%) respondents stated that doing the assignment was a student's obligation, 23 (11.22%) students said that completing the task was for their learning need, 12 (5.86%) students said they completed the task to get a good score, 10 (4.88%) said the tasks could be very useful in learning English, 7 (3.41%) students were interested in studying English.

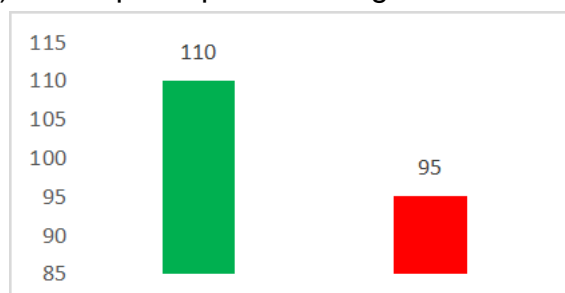## 12) Active participation in English class

Chart 12

The above chart shows that as many as 110 (53.66%) respondents stated they were active in English learning interactions and there were 95 (46.34%) of respondents said they were rarely active in learning English in classrooms.

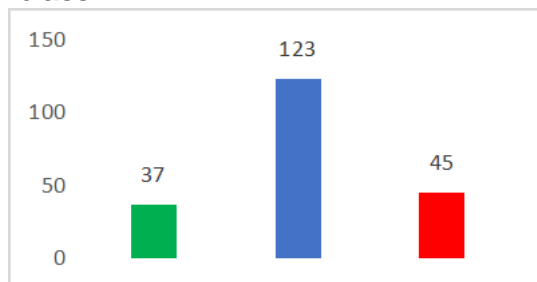13) Factors affecting students to perform active participation in English class

Chart 13

Regarding the reason for the frequency of students' active involvement in English learning, there were 37 (18.05%) respondents stated they did that in order to obtain a good score, 123 (60%) respondents stated that they were willing to be active in the class because they wanted to learn English better. 45 (21.95%) students said they were rarely involved actively in class since they did not understand English.

14) The students difficulties in learning English
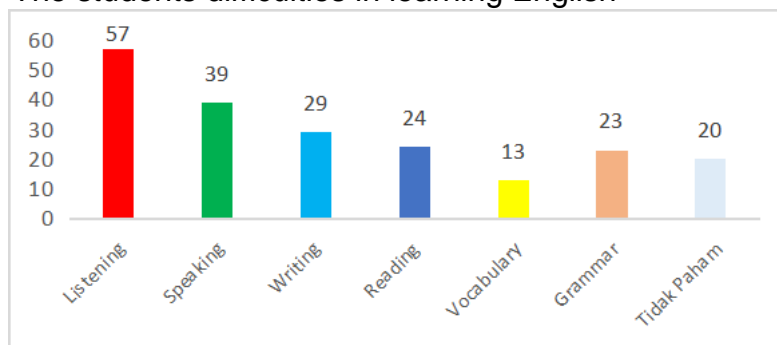
Chart 14

Figure 14 shows the difficulty of respondents in learning English: 57 (27.80%) students said they had a problem in learning listening, 39 (19.02%) said they were having difficulty in speaking English, 29 (14.15%) students found that writing English was difficult, and 24 (11.71%) respondents were having difficulty in reading. Out of 13 (6.34%) respondents admitted the biggest difficulty they found was understanding English words, 23 (11.22%) students said understanding grammar was difficult, and 20 (9.76%) said that they did not understand English.

15) Effort to overcome the difficulties in learning English

Chart 15

Figure 15 explains approximately 127 (61.95%) respondents said they would learn more, 53 (25.85%) students said they would try to ask a teacher or friend who understand English better to deal with their difficulty, and 25 (12.20%) students said they did not have any idea about how to improve their ability to speak English.

b. Discussion
1) Listening

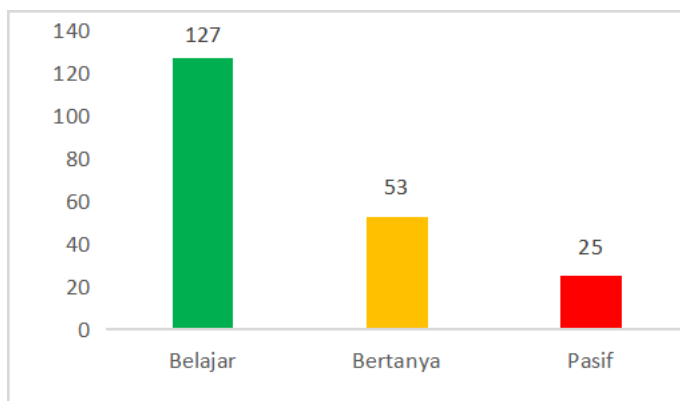The students' listening skills are tested when they are in the language laboratory. The teacher could measure the students' listening skill. Many students find themselves unable to adjust with the normal speaking speed of an English speaker. Lack of vocabulary and understanding of English accents prevents them from reaching what is being discussed in a conversation. It happened also when the speaker in played English conversation spoke with slower speed because actually they are not native speaker.

Students complain that listening skill is the highest level of difficulty. Some of the factors brought listening as the most difficult skill for the students are.

1. Lack of listening concentration

   Many students have difficulty concentrating to what they are listening. To overcome this difficulty, the students need to be more focused and avoid interference when listening to material in English.

2. Less understanding on English accent

   Pronunciation of different English accents (such as British, American, and Australian) are different. To minimize this difficulty, students can watch a movie or video with different accents to understand the difference in pronunciation.

3. Translating word by word

   Many students often attempt to translate word by word. The problem is that English has phrases and idioms with different meanings and the students must translate them in context. Students are expected to understand the whole sentence and set of words used by the native speaker.

4. Lack of vocabulary and pronunciation

Lack of the knowledge of pronunciation is contributing a big difficult in listening. To handle this problem, students are suggested to learn the word and know how to speak it correctly.

5. Unable to distinguish words and voices

    Difficulty in distinguishing words that have almost same pronunciation. A solution to overcome this problem is to practice by listening various kinds of materials in English.

6. Less stamina/tiredness

    Listening English requires stamina because students have to stay focused and active during the listening process. Practice listening to many materials in English regularly is absolutely the solution to this difficulty.

    By understanding those reasons, it is expected that students can overcome difficulties in listening skill and improve their understanding of the English language listening material. This is reinforced by the results of Diora & Rosa research (2020), it states that the factors causing difficulties in learning to speak English are the number of frequencies of listening English and psychological factors (in this context, it refers to affective aspect).

2) Speaking

Speaking is number 2 most difficult skill for the students based on the observation and questionnaire results. There are several reasons why speaking (speaking skill) is often considered difficult:

1. Lack of English speaking habits

    Many students are not used to speak English in everyday life, so the believe that their tongue feels stiff and thick when speaking English because they always speak bahasa Indonesia everyday.

2. Focus on theory

    Students are too focused on reading theory and they practice the speaking skill rarely. The students must speak English with their friends, lecturers, or through online platforms more in order to practice the language theories.

3. Afraid of speaking in public

    Students are scared and embarrassed when speaking English in public. Students have to practice talking in front of a mirror or with supportive friends to be more familiar with the usage of English.

4. Lack of consistency in learning English

    Learning consistently is crucial to improve speaking skill. To overcome this difficulty, students can set a routine schedule for practicing speaking English.

5. Too much focus on the grammatical aspect

    Students usually worry about the grammar so much, so it hinders the fluency of speech. The solution is they must remember that fluency is more important than grammatical perfection when speaking English.

    As long as the students can keep their patience, practice, and persistence, students will be able to overcome difficulties in speaking English and improve their skills. This is strengthened by the results of research by Kondo & Ratuwongo (2023); Praset Barangayrum, Fikni, & Wati

(2020) describing that to overcome the problem of speaking, one way is by practicing everyday. But the fact is, learning languages in Indonesia may be more difficult because students only learn those languages as foreign languages, in this context they only learn English in class and do not use it everyday (Sari, Humaera, & Syahriani, 2023). Rather than just considering English as a difficult course, it would be better if students thought that English is part of the development for communication purposes. (Sahara, Zulaikah, & Jelita, 2021).

3) Writing

Writing is the most complex activity that ESP students have to master in this context. However, few students consider writing to be a difficult skill to acquire. Indeed, during the course of their studies, they adopted a writing process approach in which several steps had to be completed before the results were published in English.

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

1. Vocabulary constraints and grammatical understanding
   The lack of vocabulary and grammar understanding are often being major obstacles in writing. Students are expected to read and learn new vocabularies, and learn grammar rules regularly.
2. Lack of active writing practice
   Writing skills require active training, many students just read without practicing to write independently. The solution is to set a routine schedule for writing, or making notes, essays, even short stories in English.
3. The fear of making mistakes
   The fear of making mistakes and trying to write perfectly often decrease the creativity. The teacher must highlight that the process of writing is more important, and make sure that students are not afraid to make mistakes.
4. Lack of inspiration and ideas
   Lack of ideas or lack of inspiration contribute to the trouble of writing in English. The steps students can take are to read more, observe the world around the students, and find inspiration from personal experiences.
5. Lack of organizational skills
   Weak writing order and lack of organizational skills in writing are also the reasons why writing is difficult for the students. Steps that can be done by students are to frame the content before starting to write, identify the main points and organize them well.

The students must understand all writing processes includes outlining, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing (in this context, it will be read by their friends). The importance of writing process is highly recommended to be learned because it helps students to develop the idea and organize each element properly. (Wijaya, et al., 2021).

4) Reading

The last skill is reading. Most students consider reading to be the easiest subject to learn. The underlying factor in student answers is students' interest in reading activities. The second reason is because students can directly use a text as a reference to answer questions related to the understanding of the text.

Reading can also be a challenge when learning English, so that reading skills can be achieved well if the students can take the following steps:

1. Start with the right book
   Choose a book that matches to the students level of understanding. Don't be too ambitious in choosing books that are too difficult, choose the books which are written in simple language.
2. Read regularly
   Arrange the schedule to read everyday. Students can read news articles, short stories, or books. The more often they read, the better their reading skills.
3. Expand vocabulary
   Students are guided to take notes meaning of new words they find when they are reading, they can expand the vocabularies by digging deeper about the new words discovered.
4. Use dictionary
   Do not hesitate to use dictionary, either online or dictionary application as well as printed dictionary. It will be very helpful when finding unknown words.
5. Read in context
   Try to understand the context of the text, it will help students to understand the meaning of the text entirely.
6. Read different kinds of text books, articles, blogs, and comics
   Every type of text has a different language style and it will help students in understanding English variations.
7. Discuss with others
   Students can discuss what is read with a friend or lecturer, use English to strengthen understanding.

The idea that reading is a difficult skill cannot be ignored. Students have difficulty in understanding what they read in English because of their limited vocabulary skills, so interpreting the message from the text becomes challenging. It can be used as an input for all language teachers to pay attention to the level of difficulty in choosing English readings based on their abilities. (Sachran, Munir, & Aeni, 2022).

As supporting material for the research data, the final score of the English courses is a measure of the students' ability in mastering English. The results of the analysis showed that for students who were actively participating in English class were able to listen and take notes well when they joined listening activities in the Language Laboratory. When the active students participating in class activities, students are confident and smooth in speaking. They also show relaxing facial expressions and less tension when asking questions or answering questions in class discussions.

Those who were less active in the learning process show quite good result especially in speaking, meanwhile they try to survive in reading because of the lack of vocabularies. They still want to answering question by taking notes first. Notes have been prepared to help them in collecting ideas during discussions.

Passive students shows their willingness to participate during the English learning process, but passive students never ask or answer when discussions take place in the classroom. If the lecturer asked them, they can not answer the question directly. They are not confident in answering questions even though they have prepared the note to be read. They speak English very slow and the facial expressions indicated that they are shy, anxious, and mistrustful. The structure of the language used is not good, their vocabulary pronunciation is also often interrupted and repeated.

From all the results of the study, we can conclude that the difficulties of learning the integrated skills of English are influenced by the level of language proficiency of each student. It is seen from the statement of research subjects who are categorized as the active students, they believe that speaking is the easiest skill. It is different from relatively passive students who believe that speaking is the hardest skill to learn.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

a. Conclusion
The process of learning English is not far from the emergence of various difficulties especially for students. Such difficulties can be observed at each individual language skill or overall skills. There were internal and external factors that caused student learning difficulties. Internal factors that affect student English learning in general were low levels of intelligence, low ability in English subjects, lack of interest in learning, and low learning motivation. External factors affecting students who have difficulty in learning English include lack of support for the use of English at home or in the community, limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, or the absence of a community of friends who use English in communication.

In this study, the research subjects showed difficulties in learning English for four skills sorted from the most difficult to the easiest: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. The majority of students said that the most difficult skill in learning English was listening. Factors that cause difficulties in learning English were strongly influenced by the language level of each student. Active students tend to choose writing as the most difficult skill when learning English, while passive students have a tendency to choose speaking as a difficult subject to practice.

b. Suggestion
1) Students should learn more patiently and increase their motivation to learn English in order to improve their ability to master English as an international language.
2) Teachers should improve their teaching methods so that they are more attractive and can motivate the students to study English.

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