



Students' Perceptions of the Importance of English in the Workplace

Devi Andreawati¹, Yeni Rahmawati², Sunarti³

¹Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan

^{2,3}Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2025-12-15 Revised: 2026-01-17 Accepted: 2026-06-19 Keywords: students' perceptions; English for the workplace; vocational high school; employability skills; English communication DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.8949 Corresponding Author: Devi Andreawati 2211102421054@umkt.ac.id Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan	<i>English proficiency is vital for workplace communication in globalized, technology-driven environments, yet few studies examine vocational high school students' perceptions, which differ from those of general secondary education students due to industry-specific needs. This study investigates eleventh-grade students' perceptions of English for workplace readiness and identifies essential skills. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data from a 22-item Likert-scale questionnaire (n=180) and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews (n=20) were analyzed via descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings reveal strong positive perceptions of English for career development and employability, with speaking as the most valued skill (mean = 3.38). However, there is a mismatch between perceptions and workplace demands, as students prioritize speaking over reading/writing. Qualitative themes highlight instructional gaps and proactive self-learning. Vocational curricula should integrate practical, industry-aligned activities to enhance readiness.</i>

1. Introduction

English has become a key language for workplace communication in an increasingly globalized and technology-driven world. As a lingua franca in international business and professional settings, English is widely used in meetings, documentation, digital communication, and cross-cultural collaboration (Poláková et al., 2023; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025). Consequently, English proficiency is often regarded as a crucial employability skill that supports career development, professional mobility, and participation in global labor markets (Yang & Chano, 2025).

Recent studies indicate that English functions not only as a communication tool but also as a form of career capital that enhances graduates' competitiveness in the workplace (Hasan, 2025; Risanti, Carolina, Fauzan, & Emerald, 2025). Many students tend to prioritize speaking skills as the most important for employment, particularly for job interviews and interpersonal communication in professional settings (Çal, Mearns, & Admiraal, 2025; Prima, 2022). However, previous research also reports a mismatch between students' skill priorities and actual workplace demands, in which reading and writing skills are often required to handle professional documents, reports, and technical instructions (Quỳnh Nhu, 2021; Syahirah, Mazlan, & Rahim, 2025).

In vocational education contexts, the role of English becomes particularly significant because vocational high school students are expected to be work-ready upon graduation. In Indonesia, vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK) are designed to equip students with both technical competencies and supporting soft skills, including English communication. Studies conducted in Indonesian vocational settings reveal that although students generally acknowledge the importance of English for their future careers, English instruction often remains theoretical and insufficiently aligned with workplace communication needs (Arisandi & Irawan, 2023; Rihatmi, Margana, Handayani, Nabila Titania, & Sharizan, 2025; Risanti et al., 2025).

Although numerous studies have examined English proficiency and workplace communication, limited studies have specifically focused on vocational high school students' perceptions of the importance of English in the workplace using recent mixed-method approaches (Risanti et al., 2025; Rosida & Sujannah, 2023). Moreover, relatively little attention has been given to how vocational students perceive the alignment between English instruction and actual workplace demands.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate vocational high school students' perceptions of the importance of English in the workplace and to identify which English skills they consider most essential for workplace communication.

2. Method

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from previous research on students' perceptions of workplace English and English skill requirements, with modifications to suit the vocational high school context (Çal et al., 2025).

Research Design

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at SMK Negeri 2 Tenggarong, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. The population consisted of 326 eleventh-grade (Grade XI) vocational high school students. Using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample of 180 students (approximately 55% of the population) was selected through simple random sampling to ensure representativeness and minimize selection bias.

For the qualitative phase, 20 students were purposively selected from the questionnaire respondents. The participants represented different study programs and levels of English achievement (higher- and lower-achieving students), as recommended by teachers. The number of interviewees was considered sufficient, as data saturation was reached, as indicated by recurring themes and the absence of new information *in later interviews*.

Instruments

The primary instrument for quantitative data collection was a Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 22 items. The items were distributed into four categories: (1) perceptions of English for career development (Items 1–6), (2) perceptions of English use in workplace tasks (Items 7–12), (3) perceptions of the importance of English language skills (Items 13–16), and (4) additional perceptions related to employability and workplace confidence (Items 17–22). The response scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on workplace English perceptions (e.g., Çal et al., 2023) and modified to suit the vocational high school context. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by two experts in English education. A pilot test was conducted with 30 students from a similar vocational school, resulting in a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency and reliability.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol that focused on students' perceptions of the importance of English, skill needs, learning experiences, and expectations for English instruction.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms over a two-week period. Prior to participation, students were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the questionnaire phase. The interviews were carried out in Bahasa Indonesia to facilitate participants' expression and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes each. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded for analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed manually following systematic coding procedures: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and theme refinement. Peer checking with a fellow researcher was conducted to enhance credibility and reduce subjective bias. Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings was applied to strengthen the validity of the interpretations.

3. Result*Overview of the Chapter*

This chapter presents the findings of the study entitled "Students' Perceptions of the Importance of English in the Workplace," conducted at SMK Negeri 2 Tenggara. The data were obtained through:

1. Quantitative data collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 22 items (Q1–Q22), which measured students' perceptions of the importance of English for career development and workplace communication; and
2. Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 Grade XI students from different study programs, representing both higher-achieving and lower-achieving students in English.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data were obtained from Grade XI students' responses to the 22 questionnaire items. All items used a four-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree).

General Perceptions of the Importance of English for Career Development

Students generally showed strong agreement on the importance of English for career preparation. The highest mean score was 3.48 for the item stating that

English helps build international professional networks. Meanwhile, the lowest score (3.01) was recorded on the item about employer valuation of English skills. This indicates that although students see English as important, they may be unaware of how recruiters assess these skills.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of General Perceptions

Item	Description	Mean	SD
Q1	English is important for improving my future career opportunities.	3.45	0.63
Q2	English proficiency is necessary to compete in the global job market.	3.18	0.46
Q3	English helps build professional networks across countries.	3.48	0.65
Q4	Employers value English skills during recruitment.	3.01	0.73
Q5	English increases my confidence in facing workplace challenges.	3.18	0.67
Q6	English is essential for adapting to Industry 4.0 and globalization.	3.28	0.62

Overall, the results indicate that students hold strongly positive perceptions of English as a key factor for career development. The high mean scores across all items suggest that English is widely perceived as essential for global competitiveness, professional networking, and confidence building. The relatively lower mean score on employers' valuation of English skills may indicate students' limited exposure to recruitment processes or workplace realities.

Perceptions of English Relevance in Workplace Tasks

Students perceived English as highly relevant for various workplace tasks, with the highest agreement on the customer service item (mean = 3.50). In contrast, the lowest mean (3.14) was observed for listening skills in workplace communication, which might reflect students' lower confidence in receptive skills.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of English in Workplace Tasks

Item	Description	Mean	SD
Q7	English is important for reading workplace documents.	3.24	0.65
Q8	English is important for writing emails, reports, and documents.	3.15	0.66
Q9	English is important for speaking in meetings or interviews.	3.18	0.71
Q10	English is important for listening to instructions and discussions.	3.14	0.68
Q11	English is important for customer service with international clients.	3.50	0.60
Q12	English is important for participating in English-based training.	3.40	0.68

Students perceived English as particularly important for customer service and participation in English-based training. This pattern reflects the service-oriented nature of many vocational programs. In contrast, listening skills received slightly lower ratings, which may reflect students' lower confidence in their ability to understand spoken English in authentic workplace situations.

Perceptions of the Most Important English Skills in the Workplace

Among the four language skills, speaking was perceived as the most critical for professional communication (mean = 3.38), followed by listening, reading, and writing. This is consistent with the practical needs in service-related vocational contexts where direct verbal interaction is central.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Skill Importance

Item Skill Focus	Mean	SD
Q13 Listening is the most important skill.	3.25	0.66
Q14 Speaking is the most important skill.	3.38	0.61
Q15 Reading is the most important skill.	3.22	0.61
Q16 Writing is the most important skill.	3.20	0.62

Among the four language skills, speaking was perceived as the most important for workplace communication. This finding suggests that students associate employability primarily with oral interaction, such as job interviews and direct communication with customers, rather than with written or receptive skills.

Additional Perceptions Related to Workplace English

Additional items indicated that students strongly associate English with technological adaptation, global competitiveness, and confidence building. Notably, the highest score in this section was for understanding international innovation (mean = 3.39), while the lowest was for internal communication with supervisors (mean = 3.09).

Table 4. Additional Workplace English Perceptions

Item Description	Mean	SD
Q17 English supports career advancement.	3.31	0.65
Q18 English increases hiring opportunities.	3.26	0.67
Q19 English helps communication with colleagues and supervisors.	3.09	0.71
Q20 English helps in understanding international technologies and innovation.	3.39	0.62
Q21 English is important for building global professional networks.	3.33	0.73
Q22 English increases workplace confidence.	3.16	0.73

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Five major themes emerged from the interview data, reflecting students' shared perceptions and experiences related to English in the workplace.

Overview of Interview Participants

The interviewees comprised 20 students across 10 study programs. Each program was represented by one higher-achieving (P) and one lower-achieving (B) student, as recommended by the teachers. This selection ensured diverse perspectives from students with varying levels of English proficiency.

Key Themes from the Interviews

Theme 1: English as Career Capital

All participants stated that English is vital for their future careers. Many mentioned its role in job interviews, overseas employment, and communication with international clients. Students recognized English as a pathway to better job prospects, particularly in hospitality, engineering, and service sectors. *"English is very important because when we apply for a job, especially in hotels or companies, English is always asked in interviews."* (Participant 3)

Theme 2: Speaking as the Most Valued Skill

Speaking emerged as the most frequently mentioned workplace skill. Students emphasized the necessity of verbal interaction for interviews, customer service, and professional communication. Listening and reading were also acknowledged but considered secondary to speaking. *"If we can speak English confidently, it makes it easier to communicate with customers and supervisors."* (Participant 8)

Theme 3: Inadequacy of School-Based English Instruction

Most students expressed dissatisfaction with the current English instruction at school. They highlighted a lack of speaking practice, limited exposure to real workplace contexts, and overly theoretical content. This gap between school lessons and workplace demands was a recurring concern. *"In class, we mostly learn grammar, but we rarely practice speaking like in real workplaces."* (Participant 12)

Theme 4: Learning Challenges and Strategies

Students identified vocabulary, grammar, and speaking confidence as significant challenges. To overcome these, they reported using online media, translation tools, reading, and practicing with peers or teachers. Some mentioned using AI tools and mobile applications. *"I often use YouTube and translation apps to practice English because I feel the class time is not enough."* (Participant 17)

Theme 5: Expectations for English Teaching Reform

Participants hoped for more practical, engaging English lessons. Suggestions included job-specific modules, simulations of workplace tasks, increased speaking opportunities, and the use of authentic materials aligned with their vocational fields. *"I hope English lessons can include job interviews or workplace simulations so we can practice more."* (Participant 6)

Overall, the qualitative findings support and enrich the quantitative results by illustrating how students' positive perceptions of English and prioritization of speaking skills are shaped by their learning experiences and expectations for workplace-oriented instruction.

4. Discussion

The strong perception of English as an employability skill reflects students' awareness of the increasing visibility of English requirements in recruitment processes and workplace communication, where English is often associated with professionalism and career advancement (Hasan, 2025; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025).

The dominance of speaking skills among students can be explained by their direct exposure to oral communication needs, such as job interviews, customer service interactions, and daily workplace communication. Similar patterns have been reported in vocational and hospitality contexts, where speaking and listening are perceived as key indicators of employability and job performance (Çal et al., 2025; Khoiriyah, Wilujeng, Iefa, & Nursetyo, 2025; Prima, 2022).

However, this emphasis on speaking also reveals a mismatch between students' perceptions and workplace realities. Previous studies indicate that employers frequently prioritize reading and writing skills for handling reports, manuals, and formal documentation, particularly in technical and administrative roles (Hidayani, Oktaviana, Heryatun, & Assapari, 2025; Quynh Nhu, 2021; Syahirah et al., 2025).

This mismatch highlights the importance of implementing English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) in vocational education, as EOP emphasizes authentic workplace tasks, contextualized language use, and alignment with industry needs to enhance students' job readiness and communicative competence (Murtafi'ah, 2025; Pohan et al., 2025; Wahyudi & Jufrizal, 2023).

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single vocational high school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other vocational contexts in Indonesia. Second, the data relied on students' self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by personal experiences and subjective judgments. Third, the study focused on

descriptive analysis and did not examine relationships between variables across different vocational programs. Future studies are encouraged to involve multiple schools, include employer perspectives, and employ more advanced statistical analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of workplace English needs.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated vocational high school students' perceptions of the importance of English in the workplace and identified the English skills they consider most essential for professional communication. The findings reveal that students hold strongly positive perceptions of English as a crucial factor for employability, career development, and workplace readiness. Among the four language skills, speaking was perceived as the most important, particularly for job interviews, customer service, and daily workplace interaction.

Despite these positive perceptions, the study also identified a mismatch between students' skill priorities and actual workplace demands. While students tend to emphasize speaking skills, workplaces often require balanced proficiency in reading and writing for handling documents, reports, and technical tasks. Furthermore, students perceive current English instruction in vocational schools as overly theoretical and insufficiently aligned with real workplace communication needs.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of aligning vocational English instruction with authentic workplace requirements to ensure that students are not only aware of the importance of English but are also adequately prepared to use it effectively in professional contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, vocational English curricula should be redesigned to emphasize English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), focusing on authentic workplace communication tasks such as job interview simulations, customer service role plays, email writing, and document comprehension. Second, vocational English teachers are encouraged to integrate task-based and technology-enhanced learning activities to support practical language use and increase student engagement. Third, school administrators and curriculum developers should collaborate with industry partners to ensure that English instruction reflects current workplace communication demands. These efforts may help bridge the gap between students' perceptions and the actual language skills required in professional settings.

Future research

Future studies are encouraged to involve multiple vocational schools and include perspectives from employers or industry practitioners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of workplace English needs. Further research may also employ experimental or longitudinal designs to examine the effectiveness of workplace-oriented English instruction in improving vocational students' communicative competence.

7. References

- Arisandi, B., & Irawan, B. (2023). *Students' Perception of English Learning toward Their Current Professions. FOREMOST JOURNAL* (Vol. 4). Retrieved from <http://ejournal.unis.ac.id/index.php/Foremost>
- Çal, A., Mearns, T., & Admiraal, W. (2025). Two Worlds Apart? Engineering Students' Perceptions of Workplace English. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 88(1), 73–99. doi:10.1177/23294906231182613
- Hasan, G. A. (2025). Students' Perceptions of English Courses for Workplace Readiness at Applied College at KFUPM. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 7(4), 404–412. doi:10.30564/fls.v7i4.8700
- Hidayani, S., Oktaviana, F., Heryatun, Y., & Assapari, M. M. (2025). Profiling Indonesian Vocational Students' English Communicative Competence: An Analysis of ELT Syllabus Implementation. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 13(3), 1211. doi:10.33394/jollt.v13i3.15037
- Khoiriyah, U., Wilujeng, R. I., Iefa, F., & Nursetyo, R. (2025). *Impact Of English Proficiency On Employee Performance: A Systematic Review Of Workplace Studies*.
- Murtafi'ah, B. (2025). Exploring the authentic needs of prospective ESP teachers in contributing to ESP teacher education: Indonesian ESP teachers' perspectives. *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, 15(1), 190–212. doi:10.23971/jefl.v15i1.9206
- Pohan, A. E., Harahap, D. A., Hasibuan, J. R., Ghani, M. F. A., Alsamiri, Y. A., Sari, H., ... Ashari, E. (2025). Updating Vocational English Textbooks to Meet Industrial Demands in Indonesia. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 13(1), 32. doi:10.33394/jollt.v13i1.13194
- Poláková, M., Suleimanová, J. H., Madzík, P., Copuš, L., Molnárová, I., & Polednová, J. (2023). Soft skills and their importance in the labour market under the conditions of Industry 5.0. *Heliyon*, 9(8), e18670. doi:10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e18670
- Prima, S. (2022). A Study of Perception of the Importance of English Language Skills among Indonesian Hotel Employees. *J-SHMIC : Journal of English for Academic*, 9(1), 73–86. doi:10.25299/jshmic.2022.vol9(1).8972
- Quỳnh Như, H. th. (2021). Analysing Industry Needs in Orientation to Developing Vocational Students' Workplace English Communicative Competence for

- Globalization. *Hue University Journal of Science: Social Sciences and Humanities*, 130(6D), 141–153. doi:10.26459/hueunijssh.v130i6D.6258
- Rihatmi, R., Margana, M., Handayani, R., Nabila Titania, F., & Sharizan, S. (2025). English Learning Outcomes Based on Indonesian Enacted Current Curriculum in the Perspective of Vocational Students' Need: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 17(1), 90–104. doi:10.35445/alishlah.v17i1.6056
- Risanti, M. G., Carolina, R. A., Fauzan, A., & Emeral, E. (2025). Vocational High School Students' Views on English Subject for Their Current Knowledge and Future Career. *Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, 8(1), 48–63. doi:10.33503/journey.v8i1.1506
- Roshid, M. M., & Kankaanranta, A. (2025). English Communication Skills in International Business: Industry Expectations Versus University Preparation. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 88(1), 100–125. doi:10.1177/23294906231184814
- Rosida, F., & Sujannah, W. D. (2023). Exploring Perceptions of Pharmaceutical Vocational High School (VHS) Students toward the Importance of English for Their Future Career. *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan*, 17(2), 19–27. doi:10.30863/didaktika.v17i2.5979
- Syahirah, N., Mazlan, M., & Rahim, M. B. (2025). Perception of Employers Regarding the Employability Skills Required by Graduates, 5(1), 22–30. doi:10.30880/ritvet.2025.05.01.003
- Wahyudi, W., & Jufrizal, J. (2023). The Need of English for Specific Purposes in Vocational High School. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15(3), 3084–3093. doi:10.35445/alishlah.v15i3.3047
- Yang, L., & Chano, J. (2025). The Impacts of Blended Learning on English Language Proficiency in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review. *Higher Education Studies*, 15(2), 83. doi:10.5539/hes.v15n2p83