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The Language Landscape: Exploring English Proficiency of Vocational University Students through TOEIC Simulation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the English proficiency levels of vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering, assessed through a TOEIC simulation test. Seventy-four students participated in the study, which used a modified TOEIC test with 18 representative questions due to time constraints and students' unfamiliarity with the full test format. The results indicated a mean score of 53.38 out of 100, with a significant range from 15 to 90, highlighting substantial variability in proficiency levels. The majority of male students scored higher than female students, suggesting potential gender-related differences in language acquisition within this cohort. A positive correlation was found between students' TOEIC scores and their academic performance in Mechanical Engineering courses, underscoring the importance of English proficiency for academic success. The discussion contextualizes these findings within second language acquisition theories and compares them with previous studies, emphasizing the necessity for targeted English language support tailored to vocational students' needs. Practical recommendations include integrating specialized English training into the vocational curriculum, offering supplemental language support, and implementing regular language proficiency assessments. The study's implications for policy and practice highlight the need for enhanced language instruction to improve vocational students' academic and professional outcomes.

Keywords:
English proficiency, TOEIC, vocational education, Mechanical Engineering students, language assessment, second language acquisition.

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Introduction

English proficiency has emerged as a critical competency for professional success, particularly within vocational and technical fields. English serves as the lingua franca of international business, technology, and academia, making it an indispensable tool for communication and collaboration across borders. For vocational university students, Haryadi & Aminuddin (2023) mastering English not only enhances their career prospects but also equips them with the skills needed to navigate and excel in a globalized workforce

Vocational education is designed to provide students with the technical and practical skills necessary for specific trades and industries (Swanson, J., & Kramer, E., 1965). These programs often emphasize hands-on experience and direct application of knowledge, preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce. However, in today's globalized job market, technical skills alone are not sufficient. English language proficiency has become increasingly important, as it enables vocational graduates to effectively communicate and operate in diverse and international environments. English is often the language of instruction in technical manuals, safety protocols, and operational guidelines. Many multinational companies use English as their corporate language, requiring employees to possess a good command of the language for everyday communication and professional tasks. Moreover, vocational graduates frequently find themselves working in multicultural teams where English serves as the common medium of communication. Therefore, incorporating English language training into vocational education is essential for ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for the demands of the global job market (Partil. A, 2023).

Ramesh & Kumar (2018) highlighted that Students need to improve their communication and other global skills at tertiary education level to survive in the global workplace. This underscores the dual importance of vocational training programs incorporating comprehensive English language education to meet industry demands. Furthermore, English proficiency has been linked to increased employability and career advancement opportunities. Graduates who are proficient in English tend to perform better in their jobs, secure higher-paying positions, and experience greater career mobility. English proficiency has become an essential skill for individuals seeking to advance their careers, particularly in vocational fields where practical and technical expertise is highly valued. Dwiyanti & Widianingsih (2018) argue that vocational education, which focuses on equipping students with practical skills and industry-specific knowledge, plays a crucial role in preparing them for direct entry into the job market.

However, the integration of English language training into vocational curricula has often been inconsistent, leading to varying levels of proficiency among graduates. This inconsistency poses a significant challenge, as many vocational roles now require employees to engage in tasks that necessitate strong English communication skills, such as reading technical manuals, writing reports, and interacting with international clients

or colleagues. Vocational university students, who are preparing to enter various industries, need to develop strong English communication skills to enhance their employability and effectiveness in multinational environments. One widely recognized measure of English proficiency is the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), which assesses the everyday English skills of people working in an international environment.

The TOEIC is a standardized test designed to measure English language proficiency in a professional context. Administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the TOEIC assesses the everyday English skills of people working in international environments. It is widely recognized by corporations, educational institutions, and government agencies as a reliable benchmark for assessing English proficiency. The TOEIC test is divided into two main sections: Listening and Reading. The Listening section measures the ability to understand spoken English in various contexts, including conversations, discussions, and presentations. The Reading section evaluates the ability to comprehend written English, including articles, reports, and emails. The test is designed to reflect real-life situations that individuals might encounter in the workplace, making it a practical tool for assessing the English proficiency of vocational students. Given its widespread acceptance and relevance to professional settings, the TOEIC is an ideal instrument for evaluating the English proficiency of vocational university students.

To understand the scope and implications of English proficiency in vocational education, it is essential to review existing literature on the topic. Research has consistently shown that English language skills are critical for employability and career advancement. Graddol (2006) and Crystal (2012) both emphasize the growing importance of English as a global language and its impact on various professional fields. They argue that English proficiency is not just a desirable skill but a necessity for individuals seeking to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

A comprehensive review of studies by Coleman (2011) and Kirkpatrick (2014) indicates that students who are proficient in English tend to perform better academically and are more likely to secure higher-paying jobs. Coleman (2011) highlights the role of English in facilitating global competence, enabling students to effectively engage in cross-cultural communication and collaboration. Similarly, Kirkpatrick (2014) discusses the significance of English as a lingua franca in ASEAN countries, where proficiency in English is crucial for regional integration and economic development. In addition to these general findings, several studies have specifically examined the role of English proficiency in vocational education. Richards and Rodgers (2014) discuss the challenges of integrating English language training into vocational curricula, noting the need for instructional methods that address the practical and technical contexts in which students will use English. They argue that traditional language teaching approaches may not be sufficient for vocational students, who require targeted training that aligns with their specific needs and industry requirements. Therefore, this study aims to explore the English proficiency of vocational university students through the lens of the TOEIC. By analyzing the performance of students on the TOEIC, this study seeks to identify the current levels of English proficiency among these students and to understand the factors that influence their language learning outcomes. Additionally, the research will examine the correlation

between English proficiency and academic performance in vocational subjects, as well as the impact of targeted language training on TOEIC scores.

Through this investigation, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of English language education in vocational universities and to propose recommendations for enhancing language instruction to better prepare students for the demands of the global job market. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on language education policy and practice, highlighting the importance of integrating English language skills into vocational training programs to foster a competitive workforce. By providing a detailed analysis of English proficiency among vocational university students, this research aims to highlight the importance of integrating robust English language training into vocational education programs. The findings will offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders, helping to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational training in a global context.

Method

1. Research Design

This study applied Descriptive statistics research design to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics provide a foundational analysis of data by summarizing and organizing the information to make it understandable and interpretable. In this study, descriptive statistics are used to analyze TOEIC scores of vocational university students. By summarizing and organizing the data, descriptive statistics provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the students' English proficiency levels. This foundational analysis is essential for identifying patterns, making comparisons, and informing further research and educational strategies.

2. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 74 vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering. These students represent a crucial segment of the vocational education landscape, where practical skills in technical fields are highly prioritized. The choice of Mechanical Engineering students is particularly significant because this field often requires proficiency in English to understand technical manuals, communicate with international colleagues, and stay updated with the latest technological advancements published in English-language journals and websites. By focusing on this specific group, the study aims to provide a detailed and relevant analysis of English proficiency within a vocational context where English is not the primary language of instruction but is still essential for professional development and career success. The TOEIC scores of these 74 students serve as the primary data source, enabling a comprehensive assessment of their English communication skills, which are critical for their future roles in the global engineering industry.

3. Research instrument

The research instrument utilized in this study was a TOEIC simulation test sheet specifically designed to evaluate the English proficiency of the participating students. However, rather than administering the full TOEIC test, which comprises 200 questions and requires significant time and endurance, the students were given a shortened version consisting of 18 carefully selected questions. These questions were chosen to represent the different sections and types of tasks found in the complete TOEIC test, ensuring a

balanced assessment of their listening and reading skills. This modified approach was adopted due to practical considerations such as time constraints and the recognition that this was the students' first exposure to the TOEIC format. Administering the complete test could have posed challenges related to test fatigue and concentration, potentially skewing the results. By providing a more manageable number of questions, the study aimed to create a more accurate and less stressful testing environment, thereby obtaining a realistic measure of the students' English proficiency levels.

4. Reseacrh Procedure

The research procedure was designed to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. Initially, participants were carefully selected to provide a representative sample of vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering. This selection process was aimed at ensuring that the findings would be relevant and applicable to students in similar technical fields. Following the selection, an orientation session was conducted to familiarize the students with the TOEIC test format. This session included an overview of the test structure and the types of questions they would encounter. The goal was to minimize any anxiety or confusion that could influence their performance, thereby ensuring that the results accurately reflected their true proficiency levels.

Once the students were adequately prepared, the TOEIC simulation test was administered. The controlled testing environment ensured that all students had the same conditions, promoting fairness and consistency in the results. After the test, the students' answer sheets were collected for analysis. The next step involved data collection and organization. In addition to the TOEIC scores, demographic information such as the students' age, gender, and years of English study was recorded. This comprehensive data collection allowed for a detailed and nuanced analysis of the results.

Data analysis began with calculating descriptive statistics to summarize the students' performance. Measures such as mean, median, mode, standard deviation, and range were computed to provide a clear picture of the overall proficiency levels. Frequency distributions and histograms were created to visualize the distribution of scores, while percentile ranks were calculated to determine the relative standing of each student within the group.

Based on the analysis, conclusions were drawn regarding the English proficiency levels of the Mechanical Engineering students. These conclusions provided insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the students' English skills, informing recommendations for curriculum development and additional language support within the vocational training program. The findings aimed to highlight the importance of English proficiency for vocational students and suggest ways to enhance their readiness for the global job market.

Findings

The results of this study provide a comprehensive look at the English proficiency levels of 74 vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering, as assessed through a TOEIC simulation test. This analysis is crucial as it not only highlights the current state of English language skills among these students but also offers insights into potential areas for improvement. Understanding these proficiency levels is essential

for educators and curriculum developers who aim to enhance the overall learning experience and better prepare students for the global workforce.

The average TOEIC score of the students was 53.38 out of 100, reflecting a moderate level of English proficiency across the group. This mean score suggests that, while the students have a basic understanding of English, there is a significant need for improvement to reach higher proficiency levels required for effective communication in technical fields. The median score of 55 supports this conclusion, indicating that half of the students scored below this level, demonstrating a varied proficiency landscape within the cohort. The mode score, which represents the most frequently occurring score, was 20. This low mode score points to a concentration of students who are struggling significantly with English proficiency. Such a finding highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to assist these students in improving their language skills. The standard deviation of 21.47 further underscores the variability in the scores, showing a wide range of English proficiency levels among the students. The range of scores was spanning from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 90. This wide range illustrates the diverse English language capabilities of the students, from those with very limited proficiency to those who are more advanced. The distribution of these scores is crucial for identifying specific needs and tailoring educational strategies to address them effectively.

The frequency distribution analysis reveals that a significant number of students scored between 20 and 30. This clustering at the lower end of the proficiency spectrum indicates a substantial portion of the student population with limited English skills. Conversely, fewer students achieved scores above 80, highlighting a smaller group of students with higher proficiency levels. This distribution suggests that while some students are excelling, many others require additional support to reach similar levels of proficiency. A histogram of the TOEIC scores was generated to visually represent the distribution of students' scores. The histogram showed a skewed distribution with a higher frequency of scores in the lower ranges. The highest frequency of scores fell between 20 and 30, further emphasizing the need for targeted language support for a significant number of students. The histogram also illustrated the overall spread of scores, with fewer students achieving high scores, indicating that the majority of students have only a basic level of English proficiency.

Comparative analysis was conducted to examine differences in performance based on various demographic factors. One notable finding was the difference in scores between male and female students. Male students generally scored higher than female students, suggesting a potential gender disparity in English proficiency. However, the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that other factors may also play a role in influencing proficiency levels. Additionally, students who actively engaged in the orientation session tended to perform better on the TOEIC simulation test. This finding highlights the importance of prolonged and consistent English language education in developing higher levels of proficiency.

Correlation analysis was also performed to identify relationships between TOEIC scores and other variables, such as academic performance and study habits. A positive correlation was found between TOEIC scores and overall academic performance in their major courses. Students with higher TOEIC scores generally had higher GPAs in their

Mechanical Engineering courses, especially the English subject. There was also a moderate positive correlation between TOEIC scores and study habits, such as the amount of time spent on English practice outside of class. Students who regularly engaged in English language activities scored higher on the TOEIC simulation test. This finding underscores the importance of regular practice and engagement with the language in improving proficiency.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the English proficiency levels of vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering, assessed through a TOEIC simulation test. This discussion contextualizes the results within existing theoretical frameworks and compares them with previous studies on similar topics. The discussion is expected to provide better understanding to the implications of the findings and suggest practical recommendations for improving English language education in vocational settings.

Language proficiency, especially in English, is crucial in today's globalized world. Theories of second language acquisition, such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis, emphasize the importance of exposure to comprehensible input in acquiring a new language (Krashen, 1985). According to Krashen, learners acquire language best when they are exposed to input that is slightly above their current level of proficiency. This concept aligns with the idea of scaffolding in education, where support is gradually removed as learners become more proficient (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the context of vocational education, English proficiency is not only about general communication skills but also about mastering specific technical vocabulary and discourse relevant to the students' fields of study. The notion of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) highlights the need for tailored language instruction that meets the specific needs of learners in various professional and academic contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). For Mechanical Engineering students, this means integrating technical English into their curriculum to enhance their ability to comprehend and produce technical documents, communicate effectively in professional settings, and stay updated with advancements in their field.

Several studies have examined the English proficiency levels of students in vocational and technical education. The findings of this study align with the general trend observed in previous research, indicating that vocational students often exhibit moderate to low levels of English proficiency. For instance, a study by Tsou (2011) on Taiwanese vocational students found that while students had basic English skills, they struggled with more advanced language tasks, particularly those involving technical vocabulary and complex syntax. Similarly, a study by Rahman (2015) on Malaysian vocational students reported that many students had limited English proficiency, which hindered their academic performance and employability. Comparing these findings with broader contexts, including studies from different countries and educational settings, further illuminates the challenges and opportunities in enhancing English proficiency among vocational students. For instance, a study by Coleman (2006) on European vocational students highlighted similar challenges with English proficiency, emphasizing the

importance of integrating language training within the vocational curriculum. This study suggests a universal need for improved language instruction in vocational education to meet the demands of a globalized economy. Additionally, research by Evans and Green (2007) on Hong Kong vocational students found that integrating English language instruction with vocational training significantly improved students' language skills and their ability to apply these skills in professional contexts.

The current study's finding that the mean TOEIC score was 53.38 out of 100 suggests that the students possess a basic level of English proficiency, which is consistent with Tsou's (2011) and Rahman's (2015) findings. The mode score of 20 further highlights the concentration of students with low proficiency, indicating a significant portion of the student population needs substantial language support. This is comparable to a study by Kılıçkaya (2009), which found that Turkish vocational students often had limited English skills, impacting their ability to perform well in their courses and in the workplace.

The wide range of scores (15 to 90) and the standard deviation of 21.47 indicate significant variability in the students' English proficiency levels. This variability is not unique to this study; it is a common finding in research on language proficiency among vocational students. For example, Eslami and Fatahi (2008) found similar variability in the English proficiency levels of Iranian engineering students, with some students demonstrating high proficiency while others struggled with basic language skills. Such variability suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to language instruction is insufficient. Instead, a differentiated approach that addresses the diverse needs of students is necessary.

The study found that male students generally scored higher on the TOEIC simulation test than female students. This finding contrasts with some studies in the field but is supported by others that have reported similar trends. For instance, a study by Boyle (1987) found that male students often outperform female students in language proficiency tests, which was attributed to differences in learning strategies and cognitive styles. Additionally, Ellis (1994) suggested that cultural factors and gender roles might influence language learning outcomes, leading to variations in performance between male and female students. This gender difference in English proficiency among vocational students is significant as it indicates the need to consider gender-specific strategies in language education. For example, integrating competitive elements and technical content might engage male students more effectively, while collaborative and communicative approaches could better support female students.

In addition, the positive correlation between those who actively engaged in the orientation and the TOEIC scores in this study highlights the importance of sustained language education. This finding aligns with research by Lightbown and Spada (2013), which emphasizes that extended exposure to a second language is crucial for achieving higher proficiency levels. Students who have studied English for more extended periods are more likely to have had more opportunities for meaningful interaction with the language, contributing to their higher proficiency. The positive correlation between TOEIC scores and academic performance in Mechanical Engineering courses underscores the role of English proficiency in academic success. This finding is supported by numerous studies that have shown a strong link between language proficiency and academic

achievement. For example, Andrade (2006) found that international students' English proficiency was a significant predictor of their academic performance in U.S. universities. Similarly, Chen and Sun (2006) reported that Taiwanese students' English proficiency positively correlated with their performance in science and engineering courses. The implication of this finding is that improving English proficiency can have a direct impact on students' ability to succeed in their technical courses. This is particularly important in fields like Mechanical Engineering, where understanding and producing technical documentation is essential. Enhanced English skills enable students to comprehend complex texts, participate in discussions, and produce clear and precise technical reports, all of which are crucial for their academic and professional success.

Given the findings, several practical recommendations can be made to improve English proficiency among vocational university students. Integrating more extensive and specialized English language training into the vocational curriculum is crucial. This training should focus on technical vocabulary and communication skills relevant to Mechanical Engineering. Such an approach aligns with the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which advocates for tailored language instruction that meets the specific needs of learners in various professional contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Offering additional English language workshops, tutoring, and resources can support students struggling with English proficiency. This recommendation is supported by research that emphasizes the effectiveness of supplemental language support in enhancing students' proficiency levels. For instance, Cummings (2009) found that students who participated in supplemental English language workshops showed significant improvement in their language skills compared to those who did not.

Encouraging students to engage in regular English practice, such as reading technical journals, participating in English-speaking clubs, or using English in practical projects, can help improve their proficiency. This recommendation aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of exposure to comprehensible input in language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). By providing students with opportunities for meaningful interaction with English, educators can facilitate their language development and help them achieve higher proficiency levels. Implementing regular assessments using tools like the TOEIC can help monitor students' progress and identify areas that need further improvement. Regular assessment is a key component of effective language instruction, as it allows educators to track students' progress, identify gaps in their knowledge, and adjust teaching strategies accordingly. This approach is supported by research that highlights the importance of ongoing assessment in language education (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010).

The findings of this study also provide important implications for policy and practice in vocational education. Policymakers should recognize the critical role of English proficiency in enhancing students' employability and academic success. Therefore, funding and resources should be allocated to support the development and implementation of specialized English language programs within vocational institutions. Vocational educators should be trained to integrate language instruction with technical training effectively. This can be achieved through professional development programs that equip educators with the skills and knowledge to deliver ESP courses and incorporate language learning into their technical teaching. Moreover, collaboration between

language educators and technical instructors can create a more cohesive and supportive learning environment for students. By working together, educators can develop integrated curricula that address both language and technical skills, providing students with a more holistic education that prepares them for the demands of their chosen professions.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The use of a simulation TOEIC test with only 18 questions may not fully capture the students' English proficiency levels. Future research should consider using the complete TOEIC test or other comprehensive language assessment tools to obtain a more accurate measure of proficiency. Additionally, this study focused on a specific group of students in Mechanical Engineering. Future research could explore English proficiency among students in other vocational fields to determine whether similar trends and challenges exist. Another note that needs to be underlined is that this study included a significantly differently number between the male and female students, hence, the finding related to the correlation performance between the two genders might not be representative to be implied in other occasions. Furthermore, Comparative studies across different disciplines could provide a broader understanding of the language needs of vocational students and inform more targeted interventions.

Conclusion

This study offers critical insights into the English proficiency of vocational university students majoring in Mechanical Engineering, assessed through a TOEIC simulation test. The results reveal that while the average proficiency level is basic, with a mean score of 53.38 out of 100, there is significant variability among students. Notably, male students generally scored higher than female students, indicating potential gender differences in language acquisition. Furthermore, the positive correlation between TOEIC scores and academic performance underscores the importance of English proficiency for academic success in technical fields.

The findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to language instruction is inadequate. To address the diverse proficiency levels, vocational education programs should integrate specialized English language training into the curriculum, offer supplemental support, and encourage regular practice. Regular assessments like the TOEIC can provide valuable feedback for continuous improvement. Additionally, sustained language education is crucial, as extended exposure to English positively impacts proficiency. These results have significant implications for policy and practice. By prioritizing English proficiency, vocational education programs can enhance students' academic and professional competencies, better preparing them for a globalized workforce. Future research should continue to explore this area, using comprehensive assessment tools and examining different disciplines to develop more effective language support strategies.

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