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Exploring the Relationship Between English Proficiency and Internship Performance of Hospitality Vocational Students in Indonesia

Wirda Ningsih

Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, Palembang, Indonesia

wirda.ningsih@polsri.ac.id

Abstract

The growing significance of English in the service industry requires vocational graduates to have not only hospitality technical competence but also English communication skill. Grounded in the needs of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), this study investigates the relationship between English proficiency which is measured using TOEIC score and students' internship performance especially those working in the hospitality industry. It involves students in the English department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya who have taken their internship in several hospitality industries including hotels, airport, and train stations. English proficiency was measured using TOEIC placement test prior to the internship. Moreover, students' performance during the internship program was evaluated by their direct supervisors using standardized assessment provided by English Department. The result of data analysis shows that there is a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0,54$, $p < 0,01$) between students' English proficiency and their internship performance. These findings suggest that TOEIC scores can serve as a reference for providing targeted language support and making internship placement decisions. They also highlight the importance of incorporating task-based and role-specific English instruction in vocational education to better prepare students for real-world workplace communication demands.

Keywords: English proficiency, internship performance, TOEIC, vocational students

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1. Introduction

English is a global language spoken all around the world and is an important part of the service business. For this industry, to provide good service, workers must be able to communicate well in English (Prabhu & Wani, 2015). In Indonesia especially, tourism and hospitality sectors have shown a significant contribution to the economic development. This development has made the need for English language skills increasingly urgent. Vocational students who are preparing to develop careers in these industries are required to possess technical competence as well as strong English communication skills. Employees in the hotel industry believe that having a strong command of the English language is crucial for interacting with guests and coworkers at all levels of management (Arun A & Alalmal Ali A, 2019).

In response to this demand, vocational education must ensure that students are well-prepared not only with technical skills but also with workplace English communication abilities. This study aims to examine the relationship between vocational students' English proficiency and their internship performance in the hospitality sector, focusing on students from the English Department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. It also explores whether this relationship differs between front-line and back-end roles during internship placements.

Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya is one institution of vocational education in Indonesia that is tailoring its programs to align with the industry. English department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya offers programs that combine English language learning with practical

experiences for its students. With its emphasis on the hospitality industry, the English department is working to help students become accustomed to using English in working context and eventually be able to apply it in real world. One of the mandatory programs that final-year students in the English Department must take is an internship. The students are mostly placed in service industries such as hotels, airports, or train stations. During the internship program, students occupy various roles. Front-line jobs mostly include front office staff and receptionists who have direct interaction with customers. They may need to give service like answering customers' questions, providing information, or even dealing with complains. In the meanwhile, workers in the back line are primarily focused on the support system. Their tasks include documentation, reservation, and other administrative works. In all these positions, to help the workers perform well, it is essential for them to possess strong English skills to communicate effectively and give high-quality service for the customers.

The importance of English in hospitality industry has been widely supported by prior research. English is important for communication in the tourism industry. This includes interactions between tourists and hosts, as well as business and economic exchanges (Damayanti, 2019). The hospitality sector places a strong emphasis on courteous, culturally aware, and unambiguous communication (Blue & Harun, 2003). Being able to communicate in another language is essential in the hospitality sector. Immediate problems like dissatisfied clients or subpar service might result from poor communication (Richards, 2017). In customer-facing environments, such as hospitality, English proficiency is essential for managing unpredictable interactions, solving problems, and ensuring customer satisfaction (Bhatia, 2010).

Despite this knowledge, nothing is known regarding the relationship between students' English proficiency and their actual performance during internships. Few researches have examined how English skills apply in the workplace, particularly in vocational education systems in non-English speaking countries like Indonesia, despite the fact that studies on second language learning have extensively addressed academic performance (Ridge, 2013). This gap makes it important to explore how well students' English skills support their success in actual hospitality roles.

It is common practice to use the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) to assess language proficiency in professional contexts. The reading and listening comprehension skills in business and service contexts are the main focus of this test. It's a common tool used by organizations and employers to assess employees' English proficiency. The TOEIC is a reliable indicator of job performance, according to research by Prasetya (2023). Additionally, evidence shows that students who get higher TOEIC scores are frequently more self-assured, have stronger communication skills, and are better at finishing tasks in English speaking context (Prasetya, 2023). TOEIC scores can also be an indicator of a student's workforce preparedness in vocational education. This is particularly true for sectors that rely significantly on English, like the hospitality industry.

However, depending on the profession, there may be a different link between English proficiency and job performance. Front-line and back-end roles require quite different communication skills. As direct representations of the business, front-line staff members need to have faith in their capacity to react promptly to consumer inquiries. They must have excellent listening skills in addition to great speaking abilities. These exchanges frequently entail handling complaints, providing directions, clarifying processes, and resolving problems. On the other hand, back-end positions tend to emphasize reading and writing skills. Workers in these roles must follow instructions, prepare reports, manage schedules, and use English in writing. The significance of language instruction catered to these particular occupational requirements is highlighted by (Yamin, 2021). To better

prepare students for the communication issues they will encounter in their future careers, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction must therefore emphasize specific roles and practical activities.

Internships offer a practical context to observe how students apply their English skills in real work situations. This study examines the relationship between the internship performance of English Department students at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya and English competence as demonstrated by TOEIC results. It also explores whether this relationship differs for students in front-line and back-end roles. By focusing on vocational students completing internships in the hospitality sector, the study advances our knowledge of language training, job readiness, and vocational training success. Curriculum designers, educators, and business partners that want to improve the relationship between English instruction and workplace communication needs in Indonesia's growing service sector might also find the results useful.

2. Methodology

This research used a quantitative correlational design to explore the relationship between English proficiency and internship performance among vocational students. The participants included 40 English Department students from Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, all of whom completed internships in hospitality-related industries, such as hotels, airports, and train stations. These students held various internship roles categorized into front-liner (customer-facing) and back-liner (administrative/support) positions.

The results of the TOEIC placement test, which were acquired before to the internship, were used to gauge English competence. With listening and reading components, the TOEIC test is widely accepted for evaluating workplace English proficiency (Educational Testing Service, 2020). Each section of the TOEIC is scored on a scale of 5–495, with a total score range of 10–990. The test is a standardized international instrument developed by ETS, widely validated for workplace English. The utilization of TOEIC scores is consistent with earlier research that employed standardized examinations to assess language skill in an impartial and trustworthy manner.

Internship performance data were gathered from supervisors' evaluations at the end of the internship period, which lasted from 8 to 12 weeks. Supervisors from the workplace (e.g., hotels, airports, train stations) served as evaluators, not the lecturers, to ensure objectivity. They were given a standardized rubric developed by the English Department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, which uses a Likert scale from 10 (very good) to 3 (poor). The evaluation parameters included ethics, discipline, self-confidence, cooperation, motivation, working initiative, loyalty, work responsibility, understanding and ability in performing and completing tasks, and occupational health and safety. Each parameter was scored by circling the appropriate rating number, and the total score represented the student's overall internship performance. Evaluation criteria included teamwork, communication effectiveness, problem-solving skills, punctuality, and general professionalism. This rubric was developed by the English Department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya and has been continuously used for several years. As an established institutional tool, it has undergone internal validation through regular use and review, ensuring its consistency and relevance to workplace expectations.

The participants' assessments of their internship performance and TOEIC scores were compiled using descriptive statistics in the data analysis. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationship between internship performance and English proficiency. Before conducting the Pearson correlation and independent sample t-test, relevant assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance were examined to ensure the appropriateness of the statistical procedures. The performance scores of front-line and back-line students were also compared using

independent sample t-tests to look for any differences related to their internship responsibilities. The study's ethical considerations included getting each participant's informed consent and anonymizing data to preserve participant anonymity.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

The study involved forty vocational students from the English Department of Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. Most of their internships were in the hospitality industry, which includes train stations, hotels, and airports. A wide range of linguistic skills was demonstrated by the participants' TOEIC placement exam English proficiency scores, which ranged from 310 to 865. Data analysis includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and a comparison study based on internship placements.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of TOEIC Scores and Internship Performance

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TOEIC Score	40	310	865	592.4	134.2
Internship Performance	40	60	95	78.3	9.1

The mean TOEIC score was 592.4, suggesting an intermediate level of English proficiency suitable for general workplace communication. The mean internship performance score of 78.3 indicated satisfactory performance.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between TOEIC Scores and Internship Performance

Variables	r	p-value
TOEIC vs Performance	0.54**	0.0004

The results show a moderate positive correlation between TOEIC scores and internship performance ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$).

Comparison by Internship Role

Table 3. Comparison of Internship Performance by Role Type (Front-liner vs. Back-liner)

Role Type	N	Mean Performance Score	Std. Deviation	t	df	p-value
Front-liner	22	82.6	7.2	2.89	38	0.006
Back-liner	18	73.2	9.8			

Front-liners had significantly higher performance scores ($M = 82.6$) than back-liners ($M = 73.2$), $p = 0.006$.

3.2. Discussion

The significant correlation between internship success and English competence validates other studies that highlight the value of language proficiency in service-oriented businesses (Rido, 2020). This suggests that English competence is not just an academic skill, but a key component of job performance, especially in industries that require frequent interaction with international clients. Stronger English proficiency was

associated with higher internship success rates, especially for positions requiring face-to-face communication with clients. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as Yamin (2021) and Rido (2020), which emphasized the functional role of English in enhancing vocational effectiveness and customer satisfaction. This shows how important communicative competence is to workplace performance, particularly speaking and listening abilities.

TOEIC scores are a useful indicator of vocational preparedness in this regard. According to the recommendations of Brown H. D. & Abeywickrama P. (2019) and the Educational Testing Service (2020), they can guide targeted language support throughout a study program after placement. Vocational programs should prioritize intelligibility and efficient communication above native-like fluency, since Jenkins (2014) notes that these skills are essential in foreign service settings. The present study supports Jenkins' position by showing that even students with intermediate-level proficiency were able to perform well in internships, provided their communication was clear and effective. As is the case with many students in customer-facing positions, this is particularly pertinent in circumstances when intermediate skill levels are enough for successful performance.

The disparities in internship results between front-line and back-line positions demonstrate how the necessity of English proficiency is impacted by the communication requirements of a profession. This is relevant with Nunan (2004)'s claim that task-based learning can raise learner motivation and performance since it aligns with actual business demands. The results reinforce the idea that English learning should be closely connected with job-specific tasks. For example, front-line roles demand real-time conversational English, while back-line roles may rely more on reading comprehension and writing skills. When students are able to use their English in pertinent, career-specific situations, such as conversing with guests or answering inquiries from clients, they are more likely to enjoy their studies and do well during internships.

Additionally, vocational training can be more successful if language education is in line with job-role expectations. Particularly in the hotel industry, it is critical to customize English training in vocational education. According to Yamin (2021), when students' academic preparation aligns with the requirements of their internships, they perform better and express more happiness. This alignment may be attained through customized courses. For instance, students training for front-line professions could find that role-playing simulations and customer service interactions are beneficial, while those in back-office roles can concentrate on document understanding and email writing. This differentiation has practical implications: it suggests that one-size-fits-all English courses may not be sufficient, and curriculum developers should collaborate with industry partners to identify key communication tasks for each job role.

In conclusion, the findings of this study have practical significance for vocational education. These results show that English teaching at vocational schools needs to be more advanced and focused on roles. Teachers can prepare their students better for professional communication by adding standardized tests, like the TOEIC, into the program's evaluation and development stages. By doing so, institutions can track language progress more systematically and adjust instruction to better meet workplace needs. Classroom education must match real-world performance standards to improve student success and employer satisfaction.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between English proficiency and internship performance for vocational hospitality students. The findings indicated a pretty substantial positive relationship, indicating that increased English proficiency enhances productivity at work, particularly in front-line roles where efficient communication is

essential. These results support combining English language instruction that is specific to roles and based on tasks. The TOEIC test is a helpful tool for checking how ready students are and guiding internship placements. Additionally, the performance gap between front-liner and back-liner roles shows the need for tailoring English programs to the distinct communication demands of different workplace functions. This emphasizes the necessity for vocational educators to provide English language curricula that mimic real-world job duties. This research contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of English language skills in vocational training, especially within the hospitality sector in Indonesia. It highlights the practical role of standardized English assessments and context-specific instruction in improving student readiness for professional environments. This study was limited to one university and only looked at students studying hospitality. Future research should consider involving a larger and more diverse sample of vocational students across multiple institutions and fields of study to improve generalizability. Moreover, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how English proficiency influences not only internship performance but also long-term career development after graduation.

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