

English Language Skills for Islamic Economic Students: Expectation Versus Reality

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Abstract

Students of Islamic economics should be taught the English language with the goal of equipping them with the abilities necessary to successfully complete duties both in the classroom and in the workplace via this instruction. This study has a dual objective: first, to investigate the perspectives of both students and lecturers regarding the types of English language skills required for a major in Islamic Economics; and second, to determine whether the current English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course being offered is pertinent to what the students really require. The participants in this qualitative descriptive study included three lecturers and 219 students who were enrolled in the third and fifth semesters of the Islamic Economics Study Program at an Indonesian State Islamic University. The study was carried out by researchers using qualitative research methods. Two different methods were used to collect the data: an online survey that was broken up into two sections (one to investigate information related to the demographics of the student participants, and the other to investigate their perceived language skill needs), and an interview with the participants of the study who were lecturers. According to the findings, the instructors and the students do not have the same notions about the necessary linguistic abilities. The majority of students believed that the ability to speak and write were more essential than any other language abilities; nevertheless, the instructors placed greater emphasis on the ability to read and use proper grammar. This study recommends that the existing ESP syllabus be redesigned to meet the students' needs.

Keywords: English for Specific Purpose, Islamic Economic, Need Analysis



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INTRODUCTION

As the most commonly spoken language in the world, with around 1.75 billion speakers (Neely, 2012), English has firmly established itself as the dominant language of global communication, notably for commerce, education, business, and tourism (Fithriani, 2018). With the continued globalization of markets over the last several decades, English proficiency has grown more important, particularly in the business sector. Studies have shown a clear association between the English language proficiency of a country's population and its economic success. In terms of salaries and job market competitiveness, those with high English proficiency also have a considerable advantage over those with poor proficiency (McCormic, 2017; Tran and Burman, 2016).

Due to its relevance as a worldwide language, English courses are widely available in official and non-formal educational settings in several nations, notably in Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia, where the language is not often used in everyday interactions. In Indonesia, only English is required to be taught as a foreign language from junior high school through higher education, whether in public or religiously connected educational institutions (Fithriani, 2017). The objective of English language instruction (ELT) in higher education is to provide students with the language abilities required in academic or professional settings. This statement is

justified by Zulfah and Mujahidah (2018) in their study which indicates the employees of Sharia Bank need to learn English as they hoped to be well prepared before entering the job market which is much exposed to English speaking community. Unfortunately, in reality many bank employees do not have sufficient English language skills which eventually hinder them to maximize their potentials (Mohammadzadeh, Barati and Fatemi, 2015). This existing gap between expectation and reality indicates that more attention is needed on the process of designing and selecting materials for such context of English language teaching and learning (ELTL). This particular purpose of ELTL is known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which emphasizes the involvement of needs analysis for an effective English course design and material development.

Despite the significance of need analysis, many studies show that in the context of Islamic economics, ESP course design for higher education students still doesn't seem to consider students' needs as the foundation for designing the courses that are offered. This is the case even though need analysis is extremely important (Fabianto, 2018; Madker, 2018; Zulfah and Mujahida, 2018). According to Madkur (2018), the English class curriculum used by the Islamic Banking department does not accurately represent the department's goals. This is due to the fact that the bulk of the syllabus places a focus on sub-skills rather than learning objectives. In addition, this mismatch might also be caused by various additional concerns, such as a lack of time and facilities, restricted resources and references, and limited availability of facilities. Therefore, in order to build an efficient English course curriculum for Islamic economic students, it is necessary to undertake an inquiry into the students' expectations about the course, which must then be contrasted to what really occurs in practice inside the class. The results of the inquiry may assist lecturers and/or those designing course syllabi in determining what topics should be included in or omitted from their respective syllabi. Based on the aforementioned objectives, this study is conducted to answer two research questions: What are the necessary English language skills according to the students and the lecturers?, and Has the applied syllabus of English course met the students' expectations?.

RESEARCH METHOD

English language skills are required to complete academic assignments in all majors including Islamic economics majors. In this study, as many as 219 students divided into 112 students in the third and 107 students in the fifth semesters of the Islamic Economics Study Program at one of the state universities in North Sumatra were recruited to become participants. Three lecturers teaching English courses in the same study program were also invited to take part in this study. The involvement of the two groups of participants aims to obtain information about the English language skill needs felt by students and teachers. This study was designed with descriptive qualitative study to explore what extent of English language skill is needed in Islamic economic major. Qualitative study could be appropriate for research methods to address specific and varied answer for research purpose. We combine content analysis with thematic analysis in this study in order to dig information in the English language skill. Descriptive content qualitative is primarily to exploring of textual information to determine trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication (Grbich, 2012) while descriptive thematic qualitative is focused on qualitative method for identifying, analysing and reporting phenomenon within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this study, we defined student and lecturer perceptions and needs on English language skill such as reading, writing, and speaking skill in Islamic economic major were as variable in this study.

The data in this study were collected through three instruments, namely: observation, online survey, and in-depth interview. The observation was conducted in the classes of all three lecturer participants for a total of six times, two times in each lecturer’s class. The online survey was distributed to all student participants through Google Form to obtain student demographic data, their needed English skills, and their perception of the current English course offered. In-depth interview was conducted with the lecturers only to collect the information related to their perception of the crucial English language skills for their students to master and their current teaching practice. With the participants’ consent, the interview was audio-recorded and the recordings were later transcribed non-verbatim prior to the analysis. The data collected from the three instruments were compiled to analyse the English language skill need in the comprehensive aspects.

A frequency count was used to analyse distribution of student answers on close-ended questions in online survey while content analysis was applied to explore the responses to open-question ones. The data were then categorized by adopting code process for data analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Thematic-content analysis was used to analyse the text-type data in both different instruments (online survey and in-depth interview) with the purpose to describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form (Neuendorf, 2019). We categorized the data into students’ and lecturers’ perception of English language skills needed. The next step of analysis was comparing the data from the students and the lecturers to addressing the research questions and mapping the root cause problem on English language skill in Islamic economic major. To ensure data trustworthiness, we used member check and peer de brief.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section begins with the results of Islamic Economics students' self-assessment of their English language skills, which are presented in two parts based on the levels of academic year. As presented in Figures 1, the results of the data analysis obtained through the online survey distributed to 219 participants from the third and the fifth semesters reveal that in general the majority reported to have speaking skill in the lowest level followed with writing, listening, and reading respectively.

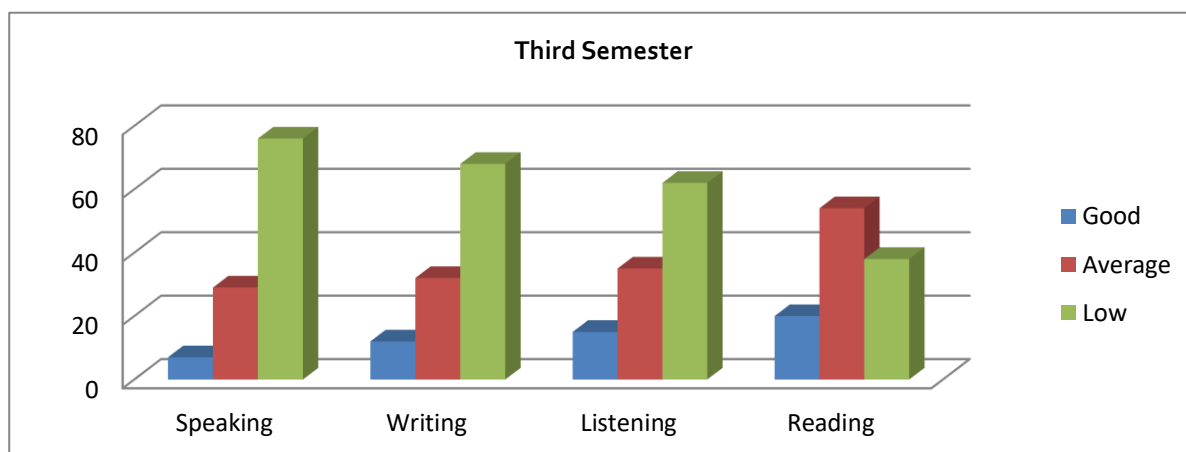


Figure 1. Distribution of English Language Skills Based on Students' self-assessment

A closer look at the numbers in Figures 1 & 2 reveal slightly different results between the two groups in terms of the second and the third language skills difficult to master. The numbers in figure 1 shows that most of the third semester students perceived their speaking skill was

the lowest ($n = 76$), followed with writing ($n = 68$), listening ($n = 62$), and reading (38). However, for the fifth semester students, despite the similarity in speaking skill which is named as the lowest skill to have ($n = 78$), listening was found to be in the second position ($n = 66$), followed with writing ($n = 63$), and reading ($n = 45$).

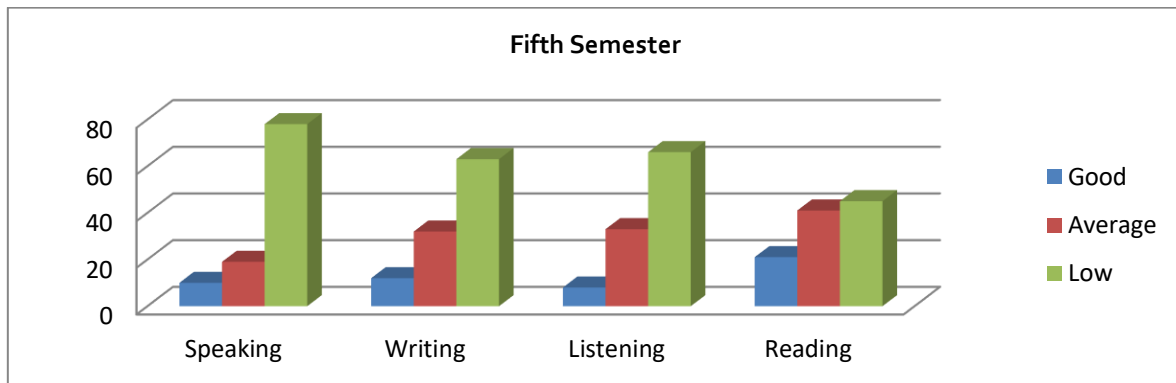


Figure 2. Distribution of English Language Skills Based on Students' self-assessment

In conclusion, these findings indicate that the students of Islamic economics study program participating in this study perceived themselves to have low English language skills. It was then probable to hypothesize that they expected to have English language courses offering them all the language skills with a special focus on those that could help them not only successfully navigate their academic years but also complete professional tasks in future. In relation to this hypothesis, the next part of the results will present what the students expect from their English courses.

Students Expectation of the Necessary English Language Skills

The preparation and development of a syllabus for ESP courses, especially that for Islamic economics students in higher education must be in accordance with what they need. In general, the ESP syllabus to design must be based on what the students need when they work in the field after graduating. However, in reality many cases of syllabus design and development were not in accordance with what economics students expect and need. For the Islamic Economics students in this study, the results of need analysis show that speaking and writing skills are the top two skills they opine to be most needed for their future careers.

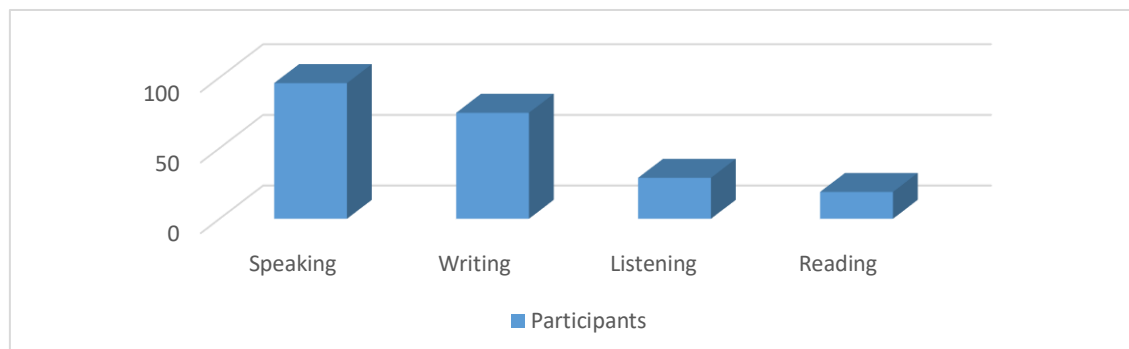


Figure 3. Distribution of English Language Skills According to Students

As seen in Figure 3, the majority of the students majoring in Islamic Economics favour speaking and writing as the top necessary English skills that they should have been proficient

in and thus become the focus of ESP courses offered (86 and 73 participants respectively) while listening and speaking are the less-favoured ones (27 and 14 participants). These findings closely relate with the first ones emphasizing the importance of speaking and writing for the students of Islamic Economics study program. Unfortunately, the reality does not meet their expectation as explored in the next section.

The English Course in Reality

Based on the observation of the English course instructed by the three lecturers, in reality they tended to focus on strengthening students' subskills such as grammar and vocabulary mastery particularly on words related to business and finance instead of teaching their students the two skills that the students favor to learn, speaking and writing skills. This initial assumption was later validated by the data collected from the interview in which two of the three lecturers claimed grammar very essential in mastering English. This assumption was supported by the following excerpt from lecturer 1;

"I believe that grammar is very important components that students have to learn, especially because understanding the word order and memorizing vocabulary is too much to be able to do in mastering language skills." Lecturer 1, interviewed.

The lecturer's statement strikingly shows that he focused on grammar as the main language skill to teach to his students compared any other language skills. This belief was also shared by another lecturer as shown in the following excerpt:

Interviewer (I): "I could see that a big portion of your teaching time was used to discuss grammatical patterns. Could you explain why?"

Lecturer 3 (L3): "Grammar is always a challenge for my student I think. I just want them to have better foundation for grammatical knowledge. That's why I always include it in my explanation."

Interviewer (I): "Does it mean Grammar is the main important skill to master?"

Lecturer 3 (L3): "I think so. Besides, reading of course since it gives students many additions to their vocabulary"

From the data above, this is inversely proportional to what is expected by students where speaking is the most preferred by students because they think that speaking is needed when they work as administration or customer service. Writing becomes the second component where students need writing as a tool to record every work they do, and listening and reading become a complementary component of the others. However, the fact is that lecturers think that reading and grammar are the most important components of speaking, writing and listening.

Discussion

From the results of teacher interviews and student online surveys, it can be seen that students' expectations when learning English are inversely related to what they get and they also have different views with teachers about which language skills are important for the Department of Islamic Economics. This finding is in line with Alhassan (2019), which shows that most teachers believe in the need to learn specific terminology for business disciplines.

The students stressed, in comparison, that it was important to nurture oral and aural skills on the MBA. These results indicate the importance of considering the views of the students in the ESP and research needs analysis since early investigation in the area carried out by Johns (1981) and Ferris and Tagg (1996a, 1996b) mostly focused on teachers' views not students' voices. In ESP, it is a needs analysis that determines the language skills the student needs the most, then the syllabus is prepared accordingly (Lorenzo, 2005).

The online survey which was involved in this research reveals that most students find speaking and writing as the most important skills students should develop well among other language skills. This results contrasts with those of Alhassan (2019), Jackson (2005) and Kim (2006) which indicate that speaking and listening skills were considered very important and were considered necessary for the successful handling of the academic and work-related literacy and learning task (Conrad and Newberry, 2011; Gray, 2010; Robles, 2012). Meanwhile, writing skills is in the second most important language skill in academic field according to students (Alhassan, 2019) and the third most demanded skill by sectors in the Economics and Business after speaking and listening (Doan and Hamid, 2019). Nevertheless, it is known that the needs analysis and EAP studies such as those carried out by Ferris (1998); Ferris and Tagg (1996a) and Kim (2006) focused mainly on academic writing and reading tasks not listening and speaking.

Apart from few students who believe that other skills benefit them in their study much more than both speaking and listening skills, the majority of students identify that speaking and writing skill help them better and contribute to their success in the study in compare to other skills. That statement is supported by the result of the survey which notes that the student's response on the relevance of certain skills to their study major. This finding is in accordance to Alhassan (2019) which reported that writing effectively on business courses is critical to learning and study progress, and more generally to helps students understand and build subject-based knowledge. The students outline the idea that most of assignments and task of the course subject give more weight on speaking and writing activity rather than any other activity. For example, students are required to spend a lot of time practicing speaking English both in class and outside the classroom and emphasize students to be able to communicate actively anywhere. This is supported by findings (Daniels, 2013) which state that in terms of competence, Nonnative English-speaking must practice speaking slowly and clearly, while listening and using techniques such as repeating and paraphrasing to allow listeners to hear the sounds and words clearly (Gahungu, 2011). Carter et al.'s (2007) and Leki's (2007) findings support the view that students could also gain and develop disciplinary knowledge by reading and engaging in disciplinary materials for the fulfilment of assigned written tasks.

Fluency in oral presentation is considered as a significant indicator of improvement in language learning (Chambers, 1997) and is one of the criteria for communication success (Gorkaltseva, Gozhin, and Nagel, 2015). A great level of ability in doing oral presentation for students could unlock opportunities for them to share their knowledgeable insight, compromise arguments, encourage curiosity, and challenge themselves to achieve more improvement.

Moreover, the well-developed English speaking skill, according to the students, will be simultaneously meaningful while it is paired to good English writing skills. Speaking and writing are complementary acts (Zamel, 1992) and closely linked skills (Kaya, 2015) as a medium for achieving an effective written communication (Sadiku, 2015). As the students noted that written tasks and assignments are central to the core of study, therefore, the considerable level of English writing comprehension is much more needed. To relate, the

participating students contend that moderate skills in writing could help them to style the synthesized information they gathered from the previous speaking activity into their writing of working assignments or written tasks. It is assumed that appropriate level of English writing skill could unlock them to demonstrate a brand new and fascinating idea or argument to their writing as the students sourced their piece of written works to a lot of speaking references.

Dealing with the facts that major references in the world of Islamic Economic are much more written in foreign languages, in this case is English, rather than in Indonesian, the survey reveals that students perception about noticeable distinction between their classmates who are skilled in English speaking and writing and who are limited to those skills. They assumed that who are good in speaking and writing in English would easily develop themselves to achieve higher course mark rather than other classmates who are less-acquired those skills. This opinion is supported by the argument that the more acquired students could refer to a great deal of information which allow them to be more highly knowledgeable about Islamic Economic.

However, the data collection through the in-depth interview to the lecturers in Islamic Economic department presents another fold of opinion. To the lecturers, grammar and reading are above many other language skills. The lecturers argued grammar and reading comprehension could easily check the students' understanding about the study materials. The arguments or opinions of students which are presented in a correct grammatical structure may depict students' level of understanding on learning inputs as it could present a clear and understandable explanation to the lecturers as well as to other students. Likewise, it could also portray a strong opinion about issues on the study in distinguished and well-structured delivery as it may pay attention to dictions and syntax. Richards and Renandya (2002) argues that grammar skills enable speakers to make correct use and comprehension of English language constructs and promote their fluency immediately.

Furthermore, the lecturers also argued that reading comprehension would benefit to students. This perception is brought by the opinion that oral presentation would reflect the communication skill in situating practical language to demonstrate reasoning, opinion, or value. Reading is seen not only as the core of education but also the royal route to knowledge (Vernon, 1971) and key to success in all academic subjects (Strange, 1967). The students who are more proficient in reading course materials written in English would show better performance than their other classmates. The students who are trained in reading skills are found in the findings by Kaya (2015) shared the view that learners trained in reading skills are better at reading comprehension than those who are not. These particular students could share more extended and intelligible idea during their study in compare to other counterparts who are less accessible to the English-written reading materials. More impressively, these typical students could present more thorough approaches to case studies and issues throughout Islamic Economic. This is made possible by profound help of those course materials which provide them valuable insights. That would be unlikely unless they develop a considerable degree of English reading proficiency to un-restrict themselves in accessing the relevant course materials written in English.

CONCLUSION

This study shows differences in perceptions between lecturers and students related to what English language skills students must have to support success in their studies. Students believe that speaking and writing skills are the most important focus to master compared to other language skills. However, the lecturer considers that grammar and reading are prioritized

than other aspects of language skills. According to students, speaking skills can make students more confident when communicating. Speaking ability also has a positive effect on writing skills, where if students gain broad knowledge of the communication they do and students are also able to express current ideas through writing. Unlike the case with the lecturers' opinion that grammar and oral reading are more needed in assessing students' language abilities. This is because the students' writing which is presented in the form of grammar which is already good shows a good level of understanding as well. In addition, for lecturers assessing students through good oral fluency shows that these students have qualified skills in language skills.

By knowing the results of the answers from the students and lecturers, the research can provide information to lecturers in determining learning strategies in improving English language skills to students. First, differences in perceptions are found between students and lecturers, so it is mandatory for lecturers to change their learning strategies by directing students' interests in the form of reading and writing. Second, lecturers are expected to focus on learning strategies that can improve students' reading and writing abilities. For researchers, it is recommended to conduct similar studies at a larger scale to provide more insight into the topics discussed. Moreover, a survey related to what English skills required by job providers in the field of Islamic Economics, especially in Indonesia, also need to be done to determine whether the designed or existing ESP syllabus meets the demands of those job providers.

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