

UNDERSTANDING FRESHMEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BASIC ENGLISH SKILLS, LEARNING BARRIERS, AND STRATEGIES IN AN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study investigates freshmen students' self-perceived basic English abilities in a non-English department at an Indonesian university. It employed descriptive quantitative survey design, data were collected from 101 participants through multiple-choice questionnaire administered using survey apps. The findings showed that that most students feel their overall English proficiency as poor and also have low confidence of using English. Speaking and listening became as the most frequently identified weak skills, while grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and reading were also seen as major challenges. On the learning strategy part, most of them choose on self-study and reading, few of them attending formal courses, and some reported no strategy at all. The study highlights the need for universities to provide early support focusing on communicative competence, foundational language skills, and confidence-building activities. The limitations is on the use of self-reported data, small numbers of survey items, and using only single location. For the recommendation, for future research should use larger samples and varied location of research.

Keywords: Basic English, Freshmen students, Language learning challenges, Self-perception

INTRODUCTION

English is recognized as the most used language for global communication and interaction, it used in some fields such as education, business, technology, and science. As the demand for communication, the ability to use English effectively has become a fundamental competence for students in university. Crystal (2003) mention that English used as a lingua franca (ELF) used by millions of speakers on varied contexts. Graddol (2006) states that English proficiency influences students' opportunities for academic life, accessing information, and interaction globally. In higher education context, students are expected to have proper English skills, active in discussions, and complete assignments that require proper basic English skills.

The language learning in Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject which is taught from primary school to higher education. Some studies have reported that some Indonesian students still consider English as a challenging subject with some difficulties (Hamied, 2012; Lie, 2007; Panggabean, 2015; Angraeni, Rosmiaty, Chuzaimah, Yuriatson, & Nur, 2024). Even though the curriculum still focus on developing skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening. Their mastery varies widely depend on their previous learning experiences and personal confidence (Uswatunnisa, Mursyid, & Rahmat, 2025). This showed that Indonesian learners often lack self-confidence in using English in real context, even after years of learning. This lack is not only on secondary school but also at the university level, especially in non-English departments.

The concept of self-belief is crucial in understanding students' engagement with language learning. Bandura (1997) expresses self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capability to perform a specific task. In higher educational contexts, self-efficacy are linked to greater motivation and performance (Pajares, 2002). The learners' beliefs about their own English abilities also influence their willingness to communicate, anxiety levels, and overall learning strategies (Horwitz, 1986; Lee & Lee,

2020; Lee & Hsieh, 2019). Some research exposed that self-beliefs strongly affect how students approach language learning tasks especially in foreign language where opportunities for authentic use are limited (Ghonsooly & Elahi, 2010; Mercer & Ryan, 2010).

For university students, their self-belief serves as an important indicator of how effectively they may engage with course materials and classroom activities (Cai & Xing, 2023; Anam & Stracke, 2020). Most studies also examining English proficiency in Indonesian higher education have focused on English majors, pre-service teachers, or advanced learners (Resyadi, Safitri, Fitriansyah, 2020; Rahman & Wahid, 2022). There is relatively limited research that explores how freshmen from non-English major perceive their basic English skill. Understanding these students' self-beliefs is crucial because it reflects level of preparedness for higher academic English tasks, and may also influence how they perform in English courses. Rosdiana & Taufiquilloh (2025) and Ferreira & Fox (2007) argue that students' perceptions of their English ability shape their engagement and persistence in general English classes.

In a short words, Self-belief itself refers to learners' confidence in their ability to understand, use, and improve a language. Students with strong self-belief tend to approach learning tasks with more motivation and resilience, while those with weak self-belief often feel hesitant, anxious, or easily discouraged. However, research specifically targeting first-year students' self-beliefs across multiple basic English skills remains limited.

Hence, it is important to examine how freshmen students from non-English majors perceive their basic English abilities, as these perceptions reveal not only their confidence levels but also the specific areas where they feel they require more support. Understanding students' self-beliefs helps identify early gaps in essential skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary which is areas that often determine their readiness to engage in university-level English tasks. In addition, exploring students' perceived learning barriers and the strategies they use to cope with English demands provides deeper insight into the challenges they encounter during the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

The findings of this study will be valuable for English teachers, program coordinators, and curriculum developers in designing more targeted and responsive General English courses for non-English departments. Therefore, this study aims to explore first-year university students' self-beliefs, perceived barriers, and learning strategies related to their basic English skills. The results are also expected to contribute to a broader understanding of students' English readiness and inform future improvements in English instruction for non-English students in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative method with survey design. Creswell (2012) states that survey design allows researchers to collect numerical data from participants to describe trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population. Its objective is not to establish and provide an accurate description of participants' beliefs regarding a particular issue. This approach is considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to gather a general understanding of freshmen students' beliefs.

In thus study, 101 first-year university students from non-English departments involved as the participants. The institution name is not mentioned for confidentiality purposes. The participants were selected using a random sampling technique to give equal chance of being chosen (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). All participants had completed at least one semester of English-related coursework as part of their general education requirements.

All the data were collected using a questionnaire. The instrument consisted of several items designed to measure students' beliefs about their basic English skills. Each question asked respondents to select the statement that best described their perceived level of ability or confidence in using English in general communication and academic contexts. The items were developed based on general concepts of language proficiency (Richards & Schmidt, 2010) and students' self-efficacy beliefs in language learning (Bandura, 1997). It was reviewed by two English lecturers to ensure clarity and content validity.

For the data collection, the data were collected through an online survey application, which allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. The link was distributed through classroom group. They were also informed about the purpose of the research, assured of anonymity, and gave consent before participating. The data collection process was conducted over a period of two weeks.

All the data then analyzed using descriptive statistics using percentage distribution. Its objective is to provide a clear and straightforward representation of the frequency and proportion of students' responses to each item (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The results were displayed in percentage form to highlight the students' self-beliefs on their basic English skill.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study presented several points about the self-perception and other data related to the data findings.

Students' Self-Perception of Their Basic English Ability

Table 1. Self-Perception of Basic English Ability

Percentage	Category
5.1%	Very Poor
47.5%	Poor
20.2%	Fair
23.2%	Good

Based on the data on table 1, most students perceive their basic English ability still developing. There is 52.6% of students (47.5% poor, 5.1% very poor) perceive that their basic English are not enough for academic or daily communication needs. The data reported 20.2% students' ability as fair, showing partial confidence but still with limitations. There is also 23.2% of students considered their basic English as good, this indicate that their confidence exist but represent a much smaller portion of the group. Their perception on the Table 1 suggests that the majority of students feeling underprepared for their English competencies. Some of them mentioned that their basic English was limited, which made them feel unready when facing real.

Nevertheless, a few students rated themselves in the good in basic English expressed that they have confidence and adequate English ability. This contrast highlights that students' perceived proficiency may be influenced not only by school instruction but also by individual learning experiences.

Shortly, this finding reveals that students generally have low self-perception of their basic English ability, with only a small numbers feeling good. This shows that early university English courses may need to emphasize confidence-building, foundational skill reinforcement, and increased exposure to meaningful English use to help students gradually improve their basic English.

Students' Previous Learning Experiences in High School English Classes

Table 2. Learning Experience in High School

Percentage	Category
3.1%	Very Poor
37.1%	Poor
33%	Fair
23.7%	Good

The second finding on the table 2 reports on how students evaluate their English learning experiences during senior high school. The data showed that 40.2% of students (37.1% poor, 3.1% very poor) had negative experiences, this indicates that students did not feel supported or engaged in their previous English learning in high school. There is 33.0% reported their experience as neutral, this means their learning situation neither strongly facilitated nor hindered their English development. The data also revealed 23.7% of learning experience as good, which is the smallest data on the table.

These results can be interpreted that many of them exposure to English in senior high school may have lacked meaningful practice or simply negative experience in learning English. The small numbers of participants who experienced good learning experience may have better basic English proficiency. These contrasting data highlight that teaching quality, instructional strategies, and classroom atmosphere in high school play substantial roles in shaping students' attitudes toward English.

In summary, this finding shows that most of the students had less good English learning experiences in high school, which may contribute to their current low confidence in using the language. These early learning backgrounds suggest the need for more supportive and engaging university-level English instruction that can bridge gaps and rebuild students' motivation.

Students' Perceived Weakest Areas in English Skills

Table 3. Weakest English Skills

Percentage	Category
54.1%	Listening
82.7%	Speaking
38.8%	Reading
33.7%	Writing

The third finding on table 3 concerns on which English skills students consider their weakest. In this finding, the item allowed multiple responses, the percentages reflect how many students selected each skill. The data showed speaking as the most challenging skill, with 82.7% of students indicating as their weakest area. The data followed by listening with 54.1%, more than half of the participants struggle to understand in listening English. Reading is 38.8% and writing 33.7%, they are still considered difficult by a substantial portion of students, although not as much as speaking and listening.

These results from table 3 indicates that students have difficulties in productive communication skills, they are listening and speaking. Several students confirm during the questionnaire that they feel anxious to practice speaking English in high school. Others mentioned that listening activities were limited, which did not prepare them for natural, fast-paced spoken English. This lack of exposure seems to have shaped their perception of listening and speaking as the most demanding skills. In contrast, fewer students identified reading and writing as their weakest skills, this probably because these areas are more commonly emphasized in school-based English instruction. This indicate that these challenges are still present but less widespread compared to the issues with speaking and listening.

Hence, this finding implies that students perceive speaking and listening as their most significant weaknesses while reading and writing remains challenge but not much. This pattern highlights the need for English programs to provide more meaningful and supportive opportunities for real communication practice, helping students build confidence and competence in interactive language use.

Students' Confidence in Using English in Daily Life

Table 4. Students' Confidence

Percentage	Category
19.4%	Not confident
54.1%	Less confident
13.3%	Moderately confident
10.2%	Confident

The table 4 presents the students' level of confidence in using English in daily communication. It is reported that majority of respondents report low confidence. There is 54.1% of students stated they are less confident, and 19.4% are not confident at all. This simply means three-quarters of the participants feel hesitant when using English in daily communication. The data also reported 13.3% feeling moderately confident, and 10.2% expressed that they are confident using English in everyday contexts.

These results suggest that English use outside the classroom remains a considerable challenge for many students. During informal discussions, they seldom use English in real-life communication because they fear making mistakes or being judged by others. A few students also explained that they rarely encounter situations that require English use, causing them to feel unsure about their abilities. This limited exposure of using English appears to directly influence the low confidence levels reported in the survey.

The data can also be interpreted that students who indicated moderate confidence generally mentioned having more frequent interactions with English, such as consuming English-language media or practicing with friends, or interaction with English text. However, their proportion is noticeably small compared to the large group that experiences insecurity when speaking English out of academic setting. Shortly, the finding indicate that most students feel insecurity in using English for daily communication. This highlights the importance of providing supportive exercise to use English in daily context such as daily conversation or English interaction.

Key Challenges in Mastering Basic English

Table 5. Challenges in Basic English

Percentage	Category
61.2%	Difficulty understanding grammar
50%	Limited vocabulary
61.2%	Difficulty speaking fluently
62.2%	Difficulty understanding text
17.3%	Not enough time to study

Table 5 shows that students experience multiple overlapping difficulties when learning basic English, with several skills such as; grammar, speaking fluency, and reading comprehension emerging as the most noticeable challenges. There is 61.2% students reported struggle with English grammar, indicating that English rules, structures, and sentence patterns become challenge to them. It is also reported 61.2% found it difficult to speak English fluently, this is similar context on finding 4 which they may still feel uncomfortable producing language in real time or daily communication.

On the table 5, reading comprehension is also a significant challenge, it is reported 62.2% students have difficulty understanding English texts. This result shows that reading comprehension like identifying main ideas, vocabulary meanings, or sentence relationships becomes a challenge for most students. There is also 50% of students reported lack of vocabulary, which likely contributes to difficulties in reading, speaking, and even grammar understanding.

A smaller numbers of 17.3% stated that they lack of time to study, this is probably is the external factors such as workload, schedules, or motivation might limit English practice. Even though this data is lower compared to others, it still can be highlighted that mastering English is influenced not only by cognitive demands but also by daily routines and learning environments. These findings indicate that the majority of students face interconnected challenges across language skills. All the problems with grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and reading do not stand alone but they reinforce one another.

Strategies Used to Improve Basic English Skills

Table 6. Strategy to improve English

Percentage	Category
44.9%	Self-study
33.7%	Attending English courses
48%	Reading English books or articles
21.4%	None

The last finding on table 6 reported that students rely on a variety strategies to improve their basic English skills. There is 44.9% of students stated that they do self-study, this shows that many of them have initiative to learn English through individual practice outside formal classroom. Additionally, there is 48.0% of students reported reading English books or articles as part of their effort to improve

basic English. This strategy means that they recognize the importance of exposure to English text, which can enrich vocabulary or other English skills. The table 6 also reported 33.7% of students join English courses. This suggests that while students involve in formal classroom, they also still need supporting learning environment like attending on English courses.

The smallest data of 21.4% students reported that they do not have any specific strategy to improve their English. This finding shows low motivation, limited awareness of English, or external barriers such as time constraints or lack of support. These findings illustrate that most students combine personal initiative with structured learning opportunities, with reading and self-study being the dominant strategies. However, the presence of students who employ no strategy suggests the need for additional guidance, support, and encouragement to help them adopt consistent and effective English-learning habits.

Discussion

As this study set out to find out the freshmen students' self-perceived basic English abilities in a non-English department at an Indonesian university. The results of reveal that a large majority of freshmen students from non-English departments enter university with low competence in basic English, especially in oral communication like speaking and listening. They also face overlapping challenges in several English skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and reading. These findings of perceptions and reported difficulties indicates that students' English learning experience in high school and their individual learning habits have produced uneven readiness for basic English usage.

First, the findings reports that the high proportion of students rate their English as poor or very poor and there is also report of low confidence in daily use English, this demonstrates a pervasive lack of self-assuredness at the start of tertiary education. This is significant due to self-beliefs shape engagement to communicate, students who feel their competence negatively are less likely to take communicative, participate in class, or seek opportunities to practice (Jia, 2022; Sepyanda, Mutiya, Elviza, & Oktaviani, 2025). This findings therefore more explain why many students have low confidence in speaking English and why speaking considered as the skill most frequently identified as weak.

Second, the large number data of speaking 82.7% and listening 54.1% as most weaknesses similar with findings that links foreign-language anxiety and limited communicative practice to poorer oral performance (Wang, Wang, & Shi, 2022). The present data where reading and writing are less often selected as weakest skills also imply that high school experiences may have privileged literacy and discrete-point grammar practice, leaving interactive oral skills neglected. Third, data that reported grammar 61.2%, vocabulary 50.0%, and understanding text 62.2% highlight the interdependence of linguistic sub-skills.

The restricted vocabulary and unstable grammatical control reduce the efficiency of reading and speaking. The students who struggle to access vocabulary meaning or construct sentences naturally will understandably report low comprehension and fluency. This data is supported by meta-analytic research stated that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension and that vocabulary deficits cascade into broader text understanding (Dong et al., 2020). In similar findings, several research also found that vocabulary collectively contribute to the reading comprehension (Ma & Lin, 2015; Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Ibrahim, Sarudin, & Muhamad, 2016). This shows that vocabulary and reading comprehension have strong bond to each other.

Lastly, the strategies students report using self-study and reading English text or article indicate students' initiative but also reveal uneven access to guided interventions. Nearly half rely on independent study and reading, while a third join courses and one-fifth of the students have no strategy at all. This mixed pattern suggests that institutional support and scaffolded opportunities for communicative practice are uneven; where structured, interactive, and technology options exist, learners can develop speaking self-regulation and skill more rapidly (Qiao et al., 2023; Ramasari & Ardayanti, 2025; Azizah, Syahrul, Eliza, & Kardenana, 2023). Simply, students who engage with self-regulated reading with targeted, have feedback speaking practice are better positioned to translate passive knowledge into active competence.

Taken together, all the findings point to three pedagogical implications. Firstly, University should design early and low communicative tasks that build speaking confidence and reduce speaking anxiety. Secondly, integrate explicit vocabulary and grammar instruction within meaning-focused activities to supports fluent use of English. Thirdly, using technology based that promote self-regulation and autonomous learning to enhance meaningful learning. These steps are supported by recent research the role of affective factors like self-efficacy, anxiety, grit and technology-supported interventions in improving willingness to communicate and speaking outcomes (Wang et al., 2022; Jia, 2022; Qiao et al., 2023). Because students' self-perceptions at entry are a strong predictor of their engagement, early interventions that combine incremental speaking tasks, vocabulary-in-context, and formative feedback will likely produce larger gains than further test-focused instruction alone.

CONCLUSION

As this study investigated the self-perceived basic English abilities of freshmen students basic English skills, learning barriers, and strategies. The findings reveal that many students enter higher education with low confidence in their English competence, particularly in speaking, listening, grammar, and vocabulary. Although some students reported adequate or good proficiency, the majority rated their skills as poor and felt unprepared to use English in practical, everyday contexts. The data also showed that students rely heavily on independent learning strategies, such as self-study and reading, with fewer participating in formal courses or structured learning environments.

Here, the findings highlight the gap between high-school English experiences and the linguistic demands of university level of learning English. They indicate the need for early, targeted support that strengthens students' communicative skills, reinforces foundational grammar and vocabulary, and builds confidence in using English both inside and outside the classroom. By focusing on these areas, universities can improve students' readiness for academic tasks and enhance their overall language development during their undergraduate years.

The limitation of this study stated that the findings relied exclusively on self-reported perceptions, which may not fully reflect students' actual proficiency levels. Students might overestimate or underestimate their skills due to confidence, prior experiences, or personal expectations. Future research is highly suggested to measure actual English proficiency and self-perceptions to investigate the alignment between how they view their abilities and their English performance. This hopefully would help identify whether confidence, skill, or both contribute to academic difficulty

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