

## **THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON A TEST OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AS GRADUATION REQUIREMENT**

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### **Abstract**

TEP, Test of English Proficiency, is a type of English test which is held regularly by Language Center (LC) of Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati (UGJ) Cirebon based on the Rector's decree as policy. It becomes one of the requirements for the students who are going to graduate from higher education. This research intends to 1) explore the students' perception on a Test of English Proficiency and 2) find out about how is the implementation of TEP. The writers conducted a case study with 288 students as the respondents. They come from different majors and faculties. There are four techniques of collecting data: 1) interviews, 2) observation, 3) questionnaires, and 4) documents. To get the valid data, the writers used triangulation of sources to cross check and compare data. An interactive model (data collection, data display, data reduction, and conclusion) is used to analyze data. The research findings reveal that the students' perceptions on TEP can be classified into three aspects: TEP activity, test instrument, and preparation while the implementation of TEP such as a registration system, information system, proctoring, and facilities get satisfactory responses from the students.

**Keywords:** students' perceptions, a test of English proficiency, graduation requirement

### **Introduction**

English as a means of communication is widely used around the world. People use it for many purposes such as economic, culture, social, tourism, education etc. It has a fundamental role to connect people to all over the world. It proves how important it is. Moreover, today we are in the industrial revolution 4.0 era. Mastering English is a must especially in the field of education. One of the most frequent topics discussed in learning English is proficiency. Language proficiency is as an endless discussion because it has a broad aspect to cover. Proficiency deals with what the students can do with language in speaking, writing, listening, and reading skill (ACTFL, 2012). The recent study conducted by English First on English Proficiency Index 2018 showed that Indonesia stands in 51 ranks of 58 countries in the world or 13 ranks of 21 Asian countries. Moreover, it said that Indonesia is categorized as low proficiency (EF EPI, 2018). It's ironic when Indonesia is facing the ASEAN economic community and the industrial revolution

4.0 era. Especially Indonesia is also predicted as the world's 10th-largest economy in 2030. English proficiency is one of the tools to reach it.

In some places, many educational institutions issued the policy on language proficiency either in Indonesian higher education or in other countries such as in Thailand (Jaturapitakkul, 2013), Taiwan (Pan and Newfields, 2012), and Hongkong (Qian, 2007). Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati (UGJ) as one of private universities in Cirebon-Indonesia also issued the policy on a test of English proficiency as graduation requirement to improve the quality of students' learning outcome, especially in language proficiency. Commonly, the policy has set the minimum score for graduates depending on the scoring system used for the test. The students must pass the minimum score or passing grade, so they will get a certificate as proof that they've passed the test. Pan (2009) argued that a test of English proficiency as graduation requirement has both positive and negative impacts. For positive impact, it is as an evaluation for educators to make effective curricula and a lesson plan to meet students' needs while the negative impact is that the students are under pressure because they must pass the test.

Generally, policy makers, educators, stakeholders used a test as an assessment to find out or measure the result of an agenda or program after it has been implemented. Brown (2003) briefly explained a test as a system to measure students' ability, knowledge, or performance in a given area. Meaning that a test is a powerful tool to measure the students' ability in such language for instance, English. In addition, Bachman and Palmer (1996) argued that language tests can be an important instrument to provide advice that focuses on language teaching. Furthermore, they explained that tests can give a proof of the result of teaching and learning process, and hence response to the usefulness of teaching and learning process itself. The test effect on teaching and learning is known as washback (Hughes, 1989).

On the other hands, many researches have been conducted in language testing and assessment, touching upon a spacious range of important issues such as washback of English test (Li et al, 2012), the contribution of language proficiency on students' academic success (Yan and Cheng, 2015), validity, reliability, practicality, and washback of the test (Kirkpatrick and Hlaing, 2013), and EFL examination boards (Fan and Jin, 2013), however the writers found a few studies conducted in Indonesia focusing language testing, such as a study conducted by Susanti (2014). She concerned the washback after the students faced the test of English proficiency. Another study is conducted by Yuyun et al (2018). This study investigated the students' main problems during a test of English proficiency, then it was followed by strategies. None of those studies discuss the students' perceptions toward language testing as graduation requirement. For that reason, this research is proposed to fill in the gap by addressing the following two research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on a test of English proficiency as graduation requirement?
2. How is the implementation of test of English proficiency?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Perception***

Perception deals with psychology study, which relates to the study of behaviour and mental processes. All human beings are given five senses such as eyes as a sense of sight, nose as a sense of smell, ears as sense of hearing, skin as sense of touch, and tongue as sense of tasting. Those five senses, according to Belch (2004), provide impressions of the world, which psychologists call perception.

To give better understanding of perception, some experts gave the definition. Schacter, et al (2009) defined perception as the organization, identification, and interpretation of a sensation in order to form a mental representation. In other sides, Kasschau (2003) said that perception is the organization and interpretation of information from the senses into meaningful experiences. In addition, Wittig (2001) explained that perception is the interpretation of the information received.

Considering the previous definitions given by experts, the writers can conclude that perception is the organization and interpretation of the information received from the senses in order to form meaningful experiences.

### ***Test of English Proficiency***

When we discuss the test, it cannot be separated from the assessment because the test is one of the assessment forms. Dorobat (2007) explained that assessment is ways to get students' information on their ability or achievement. It can be assumed that the way to assess the students' ability or achievement can be in the form of an interview, observation, a questionnaire, reviewing students' work, test, etc.

According to Brown (2003), a test as a system to measure students' ability, knowledge, or performance in a given area. The test is also questions that have the attribute of right and wrong. In the field of education, testing is fundamental since it gives a greatly powerful influence in society. Therefore, McNamara and Roever (2006) said that testing in education is an attempt to measure a person's knowledge, intelligence, or other characteristics in a systematic way. In line with previous definitions, Zainal and Mulyana (2007) defined a test as a question, an assignment, or a set of assignment which is planned to obtain information of certain education. From those definitions, it can be summarized that a test is a method of measuring students' ability, knowledge, intelligence, or performance in a systematic way which is planned to obtain the information of certain education.

There are many types of test as it is explained by Harris and McCann (1994), Brown (2003), and Alderson, et al (1995) such as language aptitude test, progress test, summative test, entry/placement test, diagnostic test, proficiency test. In this research, the type of the test is the proficiency test or test of English proficiency. It is used to test students' ability with different language backgrounds or to show whether or not the students have reached a given level of general language ability.

Basically a test of English proficiency is not a new phenomenon in the education institution, especially in higher education. Many education institutions issued the policy to maintain or control students' language proficiency by using the standardized test such as TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC etc, but many others use their own English test product such as General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) developed by the Language Training and Testing Center in Taiwan (Shih: 2008) or

TEP ENTRY and TEP EXIT developed by Language Center of UGJ. In general, there are two main functions when such institution used a test of English proficiency. First, it is used for an entry requirement for new students and second, it is used for exit requirement.

According to Shih (2010), the implementation of English test based on policy with graduation benchmark has the effects for the students in both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are: 1) the policy could prod the students to study; 2) there was competition among universities; 3) the school authorities could claim that students' proficiency has reached a certain level; and 4) certificates were critical for students to get a job, while the disadvantages are: 1) students needed to pay for taking the test; and the requirement might defer the students' graduation. The same findings are also revealed by Pan's study (2009). It reported that there are both positive and negative washback in the English certification exit requirement. For positive washback, the government has a significant impact on college English education by allocating a considerable amount of funding to increase the pass rate of college students who earn certificates; students scores reveal what skills must be improved so that educators can design more effective curricula or lesson plans to meet students' need; and students are encouraged to take English study more seriously because they might not be able to graduate if they do not pass the test. For negative washback, teachers are concerned that the requirement might lead to teaching to the test; the requirement put the students under pressure because they won't graduate if they don't pass the test; and the students focus on the materials tested although the materials are not applicable in real-world situations.

In addition, the proficiency test also affects other things such as the relationship between language proficiency and students' academic success. Yan and Cheng (2015) said that language proficiency had a moderate effect on the students' academic success. The same view is also proposed by Martirosyan et al (2015). They reported that there were significant differences in the academic performances of students with different English language proficiency levels and students who speak multiple languages. Furthermore, Wilson and Komba (2012) said the more proficient in English the students are, the better they are in academics. In other sides, Xiao (2015) argued that students' language proficiency will effect on their pragmatic competence.

## **Method**

The writers use case study as the method of this research. According to Ary et al (2010), case study is a kind of ethnographic research study that concerns on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization, or one program. In addition, they also explained that the goal of this method is to get a detailed description and to understand the entity (the "case"). In other sides, Young in Singh (2006) explained that case study is an exploration and analyzing of the life of a social unit. It can be a person, a family, an institution, culture group, or even an entire community. In short, it can be said that case study is in depth investigation into a certain phenomenon that happens in individual, group, organization, and/or

program. A case study is considered as an appropriate method because the writers want to explore the students' perception and find out about the implementation of TEP.

This research was conducted from January to March 2019. The subjects of research are fourth grade students of UGJ. There are 288 students coming from different faculties as the subjects of research. They are chosen because they are the object of the policy or, in other words, they have an obligation to take a test as graduation requirement. The writers use purposive sampling as the method of the sample in this research. Ary et al (2006) argued that researchers who conducted qualitative research are purposeful in selecting the subject of research and setting. Furthermore, they stated that researchers decide on purposive samples which are thought to be to be satisfactory to present maximum comprehension and to understand what they are studying.

There are four techniques of collecting data used in this research. First, interviews. The writers interviewed some respondents such as the first vice of rector as policy maker, staff of language center as implementor of policy, and the students as the object of the policy. Second, observation. The writers observed the implementation of TEP when it is done regularly. Third, questionnaire. The writers gave a questionnaire to test takers or students after they have done TEP. And fourth, documents. The writers analyze the document that related to a test of English proficiency.

After the writers got data, then they analyzed them using an interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994). It consists of data collection, data display, data reduction, and conclusion. To ensure the trustworthiness of this research, triangulation is used to confirm the truthfulness or the validity of research findings as it is proposed by Creswell (2007). According to Patton (2002), there are four types of triangulation: a) methods triangulation; b) triangulation of sources; c) analyst triangulation; and d) theory/perspective triangulation. In this research, the writers used triangulation of sources.

### Findings and Discussion

This section provides the findings related to research questions as follows:

#### *Research Question 1*

What are the students' perceptions on a test of English proficiency as graduation requirement?

The first research question reports on how the students perceive a test of English proficiency as graduation requirement. The following table is the result of questionnaires given to test takers that illustrates the students' perception in percentage.

**Table 1. The Students' Perceptions on a Test of English Proficiency**

No	Students' Perceptions	Responses				
		(SA)	(A)	(N)	(D)	(SD)
1	Test of English proficiency motivates you to study English.	38,19 %	52,08 %	8,33 %	1,38 %	0 %

No	Students' Perceptions	Responses				
		(SA)	(A)	(N)	(D)	(SD)
2	Test of English proficiency is beneficial.	39,72 %	53,31 %	6,96 %	0 %	0 %
3	Test of English proficiency isn't obstacle to follow academic activities.	28,12 %	48,61 %	18,05 %	4,16 %	1,04 %
4	Test of English proficiency is easy to do	6,09 %	17,56 %	64,15 %	10,75 %	1,43 %
5	The passing grade of test of English proficiency is 450 for English Educational Department and 400 for Non-English Educational Department.	17,07 %	47,03 %	29,61 %	5,57 %	0,69 %
6	The important of special treatment such as training or course before doing test of English proficiency	34,49 %	42,85 %	20,90 %	1,39 %	0,34 %

\*Note: (SA): Strongly Agree, (A): Agree, (N): Neutral, (D): Disagree, (SD): Strongly Disagree

From table 1, the writers classify the result of questionnaires into three main aspects; (1) TEP activity which is represented by statements number 1, 2, and 3, (2) test instrument used in TEP which is represented by statement number 4, and (3) the preparation which is represented by statement number 5 and 6. The discussions of each aspect are as follows:

Test of English proficiency is an activity held regularly by Language Center based on the policy that obligates the students to take it as graduation requirement. This policy has been implemented for more than two years since it was issued in 2015. Based on the result of questionnaires in number 1, 2, and 3, they reveal that in general the implementation of TEP gets positive responses from the students. For example: TEP motivates the students to study English. The students' responses are (SA): 38, 19 %, (A): 52,08 %, (N): 8.33 %, (D) 1,38 %, and (SD): 0 %. The same finding has ever drawn by Li et al (2012). They said that Collage English Test motivated the students to make a great effort to learn English. In addition they explained that many students seem to have motivation to put more effort on the language skills in the test. The result of questionnaires is in line with the following interview transcript:

*“It can motivate students because we need English. Moreover it becomes our soft skill”*

In addition to TEP as a motivation for the students, TEP is also beneficial for the students. The students' responses are (SA): 39,72 %, (A): 53,31 %, (N): 6,96 %, (D) 0 %, and (SD): 0 %. According to Shahomy (2001), the results of the test

have harmful effects on the students as they can create winners and losers, successes and failures, rejections and acceptances. The test score is one of indicators to place the students in class levels, for granting certificates and prizes, for determining whether or not the students will be allowed to continue in future studies, for deciding on professions, for entering special education classes, for participating in honor classes, for getting accepted to higher education and for obtaining jobs. The result of the interview also shows the same idea with the questionnaire.

*“It is beneficial because it will be attached with the graduation certificate and English test certificate”*

The last is that test of English proficiency isn't obstacle to follow academic activities. The students' responses are (SA): 28,12 %, (A): 48,61 %, (N): 18,05 %, (D) 4,16 %, and (SD): 1,04 %. It proves that TEP isn't obstacles for the students, although they have to take TEP before they graduate from higher education. From these students' responses, it can be drawn that TEP is beneficial activity because it motivates them to study English in order to pass the passing grade needed. The interviewee argued that the implementation of English test is not an obstacle for the students whereas it can be a starting point for them to study English although they aren't from English education department.

*“actually, it isn't an obstacle for us. It depends on the students' motive. This test is not only the obligation but also it is a must to do because if we look from our educational background, we all are not from English education department but there is a time for us to study English, motivates us to study”*

The second discussion deals with the test instrument. Based on the statement “test of English proficiency is easy to do”, The students' responses are (SA): 6,09 %, (A): 17,56 %, (N): 64,15 %, (D) 10,75 %, and (SD): 1,43 %. Neutral is the most dominant response from the students. Since the test instrument for TEP is used regularly to test the student, the validity and reliability must be kept. Hsu (2009) argued that it is crucial to guarantee the validity and reliability of the tests employed. Furthermore, she explained that Validity refers to the extent to which a test measures what it is intended to measure and not what it is not designed to measure and reliability is basically concerned on how consistently the test does what it is supposed to do.

The last discussion focuses on treatment. The students' responses toward the important of preparation before doing the test of English proficiency are (SA): 34,49 %, (A): 42,85 %, (N): 20,90 %, (D) 1,39 %, and (SD): 0,34 %. Based on this result, it shows that preparation such as training or course is important for the students before they take TEP. The policy also has set the passing grade for the English Educational Department (450) and Non-English Educational Department (400). The students' responses toward this passing grade are (SA): 17,07 %, (A): 47,03 %, (N): 29,61 %, (D) 5,57 %, and (SD): 0,69 %.

From the three aspects discussed above, it can be summarized that the students perceive the test of English proficiency as a beneficial activity because it motivates

and attracts the students to study English in relation to materials or skills tested in TEP. Moreover, the policy also has set the passing grade for each department and the students are encouraged to have a good preparation before they take the TEP. Besides, the validity and reliability of test instruments must be kept because they are used regularly to test the students.

**Research Question 2**

How is the implementation of test of English proficiency?

This research question deals with how a test of English proficiency is implemented regularly by Language Center of UGJ. In this research, the writers explore four aspects that relate to the implementation of TEP. Those aspects are 1) registration system, 2) information system, 3) proctoring, and 4) facilities. The following table is the result of questionnaires which reveals students' satisfaction toward the implementation of TEP.

**Table 2. The Implementation of a Test of English Proficiency**

No	The Implementation of Test of English Proficiency	Responses			
		(VS)	(S)	(U)	(VU)
1	The registration system of test of English proficiency in Language Center	51,39 %	47,55 %	1,04 %	0 %
2	The information system (test schedule and publishing score) done by Language Center on test of English proficiency	43,55 %	50,52 %	5,92 %	0 %
3	Proctoring during test of English proficiency	55,20 %	44,09 %	0,34 %	0,34 %
4	The facilities of test of English proficiency (class, speaker, timer, etc)	49,30 %	44,09 %	5,90 %	0,69 %

\*Note: (VS): Very Satisfied, (S): Satisfied, (U): Unsatisfied, (VU): Very Unsatisfied

Registration system is one of the important parts in TEP. Since Language Center as the operator of TEP used offline or on the desk system, the students have to register TEP to the office. Based on the result of the questionnaires, the students' responses toward registration system are (VS): 51,39 %, (S): 47,55 %, (U): 1,04 %, (VU): 0 %. Another aspect of the implementation of TEP is an information system. This information system deals with how Language Center informs the students about test schedule and score. Language Center has three ways to informs the students using FP: PusatBahasaUGJ, IG: pusatbahasa.ugj, and WA. The students' responses toward information system are (VS): 43,55 %, (S): 50,52 %, (U): 5,92 %, (VU): 0%.

The third aspect of the implementation of TEP is proctoring. The job of proctor during the implementation of TEP is to distribute the test and answer sheet, to set timer, to keep the process of TEP. The results of the questionnaires are (VS): 55,20 %, (S): 44,09 %, (U): 0,34 %, (VU): 0,34 %. The last aspect is facilities. Language Center provides many facilities to support the implementation of TEP such as class, speaker, times, pencil, eraser. These facilities are provided to make the

implementation of TEP run well. It can be seen from students' response toward facilities: (VS): 49,30 %, (S): 44,09 %, (U): 5,90 %, (VU): 0,69 %.

The successful implementation of TEP can be drawn into four aspects: the registration system, information system, proctoring, and facilities. From the explanation above, VS and S are the dominant responses coming from students. It indicates that the implementation of TEP done by Language Center can run well.

### Conclusion

This study is intended to explore and investigate the students' perceptions on TEP and the implementation of TEP. The research findings reveal that the students' perceptions can be classified into three aspects: 1) TEP activity; 2) test instrument; and 3) preparation. TEP activity based on the students' perceptions is a meaningful and beneficial activity that motivates the students to learn English. Since a test instrument is used to test the students regularly, the validity and reliability must be kept. Furthermore, to pass the passing grade or minimum score, the students needs a preparation such as training or course that concerns on materials tested by TEP.

Another research finding on how a test of English proficiency is implemented reveals that most of the students perceive satisfaction toward the implementation of TEP in several aspects such as: a registration system, information system, proctoring, and facilities.

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