TWIST

English with Uneven Foundations: A Qualitative Study on the Diversity of English Proficiency Among University Students

Nurteteng*
English Education Program, Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong,
Jl. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan No.1, Sorong Regency, 98457, Indonesia
[*Corresponding author]

Agus Setiawan
English Education Program, Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong,
Jl. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan No.1, Sorong Regency, 98457, Indonesia

Tustia Wulan Dewi
English Education Program, Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong,
Jl. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan No.1, Sorong Regency, 98457, Indonesia

Abstract
This qualitative study explores the diversity of English language proficiency among university students enrolled in the English Education Program in Sorong, Southwest Papua Indonesia. The research aims to investigate the extent of proficiency variation, identify its root causes, examine its impact on classroom dynamics, and document coping strategies used by both students and lecturers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. Findings reveal a wide range of English skills among students, from those with minimal ability to those at advanced levels. The diversity is largely attributed to inconsistent English learning backgrounds, particularly between students from rural and urban areas, with rural students often having limited access to qualified teachers and meaningful language practice. The variation in proficiency levels has led to instructional challenges, including disengagement among less-proficient students and dominance by more advanced peers. Both students and lecturers employed adaptive strategies such as the use of digital tools, informal peer learning, and modified teaching methods. However, these efforts were mostly unstructured and reactive. The study highlights the urgent need for institutional support, such as foundation classes and differentiated instruction, to ensure equitable learning opportunities. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of language learning disparities and offer practical implications for English teaching in diverse classroom settings.

Keywords
English Proficiency, University Students, Educational Disparity

INTRODUCTION

English has increasingly become a vital global language, serving as a key tool for academic advancement, employment opportunities, and international communication. In Indonesia, the role of English is recognized as essential for students' competitiveness in the global market (Hidayat, 2024). For university students, especially those majoring in English education, proficiency in the language is not only a requirement but a foundation for academic success and future teaching roles. However, this proficiency does not develop uniformly across regions, especially in the eastern parts of Indonesia such as Sorong, where educational resources and support may vary significantly (Usoh et al., 2024).

The importance of this issue lies in the fact that a student's foundation in English greatly influences their academic trajectory. Research has shown that students with a strong English base tend to perform better in higher education settings, particularly in English-related programs (Ismajli, 2024). Yet, in Sorong and other similar regions, students often enter university with vastly different levels of English ability ranging from complete beginners to

intermediate and even advanced speakers. This disparity creates challenges not only for learners but also for educators who must navigate a wide spectrum of proficiency within a single classroom (Hossain, 2024)

The urgency of this issue is amplified by the lack of standardized entry-level assessments for English proficiency in many universities across Papua and West Papua. Unlike in other regions of Indonesia where placement tests or standardized assessments are used, students in Sorong are often admitted without prior evaluation of their English skills. As a result, English language lecturers are frequently tasked with teaching students with zero exposure to the language alongside peers who have received extensive training, creating pedagogical complications and hindering overall class effectiveness.

Additionally, the discrepancy in English proficiency is often rooted in the unequal quality of English instruction during primary and secondary education. In many remote areas of Papua and West Papua, English teachers face limitations in training, teaching materials, and classroom resources (Nurteteng et al., 2024).This results in inconsistent learning outcomes that follow students into higher education. The situation reflects broader educational inequality in Indonesia and points to the urgent need for contextualized educational strategies that consider local challenges.

What makes this study novel is its specific focus on Sorong, a region that has received limited academic attention compared to more developed areas like Java or Sumatra. While several studies have explored general English proficiency issues in Indonesia(Winnie et al., 2023), few have examined the internal diversity of English skills among university students within an underrepresented area like Sorong. This qualitative research aims to fill that gap by providing an in-depth look at how uneven English foundations affect students' academic experiences and performance.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of differentiated instruction and localized curriculum adaptation. In contexts where English proficiency is uneven, a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching is ineffective (Pappachan, 2020). Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, this research explores how university instructors cope with mixed-ability classes and what strategies they implement to support all learners. These findings can guide universities in similar regions toward more equitable and effective English education practices.

The visibility of this research lies in its relevance to national education policies and teacher training programs. As Indonesia continues to strive for equitable education across all its regions, understanding the specific challenges faced in areas like Sorong becomes critical. The insights from this study can contribute to policy discussions about curriculum development, teacher deployment, and educational infrastructure, particularly in Southwest Papua provinces.

This study also has implications for the long-term development of English education in Eastern Indonesia. If left unaddressed, disparities in foundational English skills may lead to further marginalization of students from remote regions, limiting their access to academic and professional opportunities. By identifying the root causes and practical solutions, this study supports broader efforts to close the education gap between the western and eastern parts of the country.

Another critical aspect is how language learning affects student confidence and identity. Students with poor English foundations often experience feelings of inferiority and disengagement in class, which in turn affects their participation and academic achievement (Waluyo & Panmei, 2021). Through a qualitative lens, this study will explore the psychological and emotional experiences of students who struggle with English in an academic environment that expects them to be proficient.

Moreover, the study seeks to amplify the voices of both students and educators in Sorong. By documenting their experiences and perspectives, the research contributes to a more inclusive narrative about language education in Indonesia. It acknowledges that solutions must be context-sensitive and grounded in the realities faced by those on the ground.

The study also encourages critical reflection on the role of higher education institutions in addressing these challenges. Universities have a responsibility to provide additional support, such as remedial programs, language labs, or mentoring systems, to ensure that all students have a fair chance at success regardless of their background. Highlighting current gaps in support systems will provide actionable insights for institutional development.

Finally, this research offers recommendations for improving English instruction at both the secondary and tertiary levels. These include better teacher training, curriculum differentiation, and the integration of technology to support self-paced learning. The findings will not only benefit stakeholders in Sorong but can also inform broader initiatives to strengthen English language education in under-resourced regions throughout Indonesia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at exploring the factors contributing to the diverse levels of English proficiency among university students in Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong, particularly those enrolled in English education programs. The goal is to gain a deep understanding of how this diversity affects their learning experiences and classroom participation. The descriptive method is used to systematically present the range of students' English skills, their prior learning backgrounds, and both internal and external factors that influence their proficiency. This includes differences in motivation, learning environments, access to qualified teachers, and exposure to English in daily life. The subject of this study is first semester of English education students which consist of 25 students at Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong. The researcher also observed and interviewed some lecturers who taught English skills at first semester class.

Research Instrument

The research instruments used in this study include interview guidelines, classroom observation sheets, and field notes. The interview guidelines are designed to explore students' and lecturers' perspectives on the diversity of English proficiency levels, focusing on their learning experiences, teaching strategies, and the challenges they face in the classroom. These questions aim to uncover both internal and external factors affecting English proficiency. The classroom observation sheets are used to systematically document how proficiency gaps manifest during teaching and learning activities. This includes student participation, engagement, and the instructional adjustments made by lecturers. Field notes complement these instruments by capturing contextual insights and spontaneous interactions that occur during classroom sessions or informal discussions.
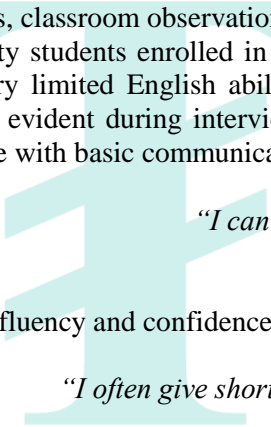
Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study follows a qualitative descriptive approach using thematic analysis. After collecting data through interviews, classroom observations, and field notes, all responses and notes are transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions are then read repeatedly to become familiar with the content and to identify meaningful patterns. Next, the data are coded manually by grouping similar statements, behaviors, or experiences into categories. These codes are then organized into broader themes, such as "Diverse English Proficiency Levels," "Inconsistent Learning Backgrounds," "Internal and External Influences," "Classroom Challenges," and "Coping Strategies." Each theme is supported with direct quotations from participants and relevant field observations to ensure richness and authenticity. The thematic analysis allows the researcher to interpret how various factors contribute to students' English proficiency diversity and how this affects their learning experiences. Triangulation is applied by comparing data from different sources (students, lecturers, observations) to ensure validity and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS

Diverse English Proficiency Levels Among Students

Data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes revealed a significant diversity in English language proficiency among university students enrolled in the English Education Program in Sorong. This diversity ranged from students with zero or very limited English ability to those performing at intermediate or even advanced levels. This variation was particularly evident during interview sessions, where students openly reflected on their skill levels. One student shared their struggle with basic communication:

> *"I can't even introduce myself in English without help."*
> Student 1, Interview Transcript, Question No.2

In contrast, another student demonstrated greater fluency and confidence:

> *"I often give short speeches in English during class presentations."*
> Student 4, Interview Transcript, Question No.2

These contrasting responses were further corroborated by field observations, which revealed significant variation in students' performance during classroom activities. For instance, in a first-year speaking class, some students hesitated to respond even to simple yes/no questions, while others actively initiated group discussions and volunteered to present in front of the class. This pattern of diversity was consistently evident across the four core English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In terms of listening skills, several students found it difficult to comprehend basic classroom instructions delivered in English and frequently relied on peer assistance or translation for clarification. Conversely, a smaller group of students demonstrated the ability to follow short academic videos and lectures with minimal support, indicating stronger auditory comprehension.

Speaking emerged as the skill with the most noticeable proficiency gap. Lower-level students typically remained silent or responded with one-word answers, showing a lack of confidence and fluency. In stark contrast, more proficient students expressed their ideas comfortably, delivered short speeches, and even supported their peers during collaborative tasks.

Similarly, in reading, some students struggled to understand basic texts, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. Meanwhile, others read fluently and were able to summarize the content of academic articles with little difficulty.

The gap extended to writing as well. Students with limited proficiency often produced brief and grammatically inaccurate sentences. On the other hand, those with stronger skills constructed coherent and well-organized paragraphs, demonstrating clarity of thought and a broader vocabulary range.

The field notes further emphasized these disparities. For instance, in one observed classroom activity, when students were asked to write a short self-introduction, one student wrote only two words *("My name"),* while another submitted a coherent five-sentence paragraph describing their background, hobbies, and goals in English.

This wide range of ability highlights the heterogeneous nature of the student body and underscores the need for differentiated instructional strategies to address the varied proficiency levels within the same classroom.

Inconsistent English Learning Backgrounds

A significant contributor to the diversity in English proficiency among university students was the variation in their prior English learning environments. Data obtained from student interviews revealed that those from rural areas often faced limited exposure to English, instruction from underqualified teachers, and inconsistent or grammar-focused teaching methods. In contrast, students from urban schools typically had greater access to qualified English educators, more consistent instruction, and enhanced learning resources such as textbooks, multimedia tools, and extracurricular programs.

This disparity is evident in the students' own words. One participant from a remote village described their experience, stating:

"We had English twice a week, but our teacher didn't speak English well."
Student 2, Interview Transcript, Question No.3

This response highlights both the minimal instructional time and lack of teacher competence, factors commonly associated with rural schooling contexts. Conversely, a student from an urban setting reported a significantly different experience:

"We used English as a medium for some subjects in junior high school."
Student 3, Interview Transcript, Question No.3

This quote reflects a more immersive and structured language learning environment, suggesting that students in urban schools often benefit from greater exposure and practice in using English for communication. Furthermore, regardless of location, many students reported that their previous English education lacked sufficient opportunities for developing oral communication skills. The majority noted that classes heavily emphasized textbook-based learning, focusing predominantly on grammar rules and vocabulary memorization, with limited or no practice in speaking or listening. This traditional and passive approach to language instruction has contributed to significant gaps in students' functional English abilities, as reflected in their current levels of proficiency.

Classroom Challenges Arising from Proficiency Gaps

Interviews conducted with four lecturers—each responsible for teaching one of the core English skills (speaking, reading, listening, and writing)—revealed substantial challenges in managing classrooms with diverse English proficiency levels. The lecturers consistently reported that these gaps created significant instructional difficulties and affected the overall learning environment.

One lecturer expressed frustration with the disparity in students' writing abilities, stating:

"Some students can write essays, while others don't understand the assignment at all."
Lecturer 1 (Writing), Interview Transcript, Question No.4

Such discrepancies often led to imbalanced classroom participation. Students with lower proficiency tended to remain passive, hesitant, or disengaged during learning activities, while more advanced students frequently dominated discussions, group tasks, and presentations. This imbalance not only hindered the learning progress of less-proficient students but also disrupted peer collaboration.

Another lecturer noted the strain this placed on instructional strategies:

"I have to slow down for some students and speed up for others. It's hard to find a rhythm that works for everyone."
Lecturer 2 (Listening), Interview Transcript, Question No.5

The need to constantly adjust the teaching pace and differentiate materials made it difficult to ensure that all students received equitable learning support. In reading and speaking classes, lecturers observed that weaker students were often reluctant to read aloud or participate in discussions, fearing judgment or failure. Meanwhile, stronger students, while more active, sometimes grew impatient with peers who could not keep up. As one lecturer teaching speaking shared:

"The confident ones always raise their hands. The others just sit quietly. Some don't even try to speak unless I ask directly."
Lecturer 3 (Speaking), Interview Transcript, Question No.5

This environment made peer learning less effective and placed additional pressure on lecturers to meet diverse needs within limited instructional time. Despite their efforts to scaffold learning and provide support, the wide range of proficiency levels continued to pose a serious challenge to equitable and effective English instruction.

Coping Strategies by Students and Lecturers

In response to the challenges posed by the diverse levels of English proficiency, both students and lecturers implemented a variety of coping strategies to bridge the gaps and support learning progress. Data collected from student and lecturer interviews revealed an adaptive, albeit uneven, approach to managing these differences.

On the students' side, many took the initiative to engage in independent learning using digital platforms. Popular tools included YouTube, AI tools which students used to practice pronunciation, vocabulary, and listening comprehension outside the classroom. Additionally, some students formed informal study groups with peers to review material and practice speaking in a more supportive environment.

"I learn a lot from watching English vlogs and copying how they speak."
Student 5, Interview Transcript, Question No.6

Lecturers, meanwhile, adjusted their instructional methods to accommodate the wide proficiency range. Common strategies included assigning mixed-ability group work, selecting simplified or visually supported reading materials, and incorporating multimedia elements to aid comprehension. These modifications aimed to maintain student engagement while ensuring that lower-proficiency students could still access the core content.

However, lecturers acknowledged that such efforts were often implemented on a case-by-case basis rather than through a consistent, structured remedial framework. As a result, students with limited foundational skills continued to struggle with more advanced material. Some students explicitly voiced the need for tiered instruction or additional foundational support prior to entering standard coursework.

"We need a foundation class before joining advanced lessons, so we don't feel left behind."
Student 8, Interview Transcript, Question No.7

These findings highlight the importance of institutional support for differentiated instruction and the development of structured bridging programs to better address the varying levels of English proficiency in university classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study clearly show that English proficiency diversity among university students in Sorong stems from a complex combination of internal and external factors, such as inconsistent English learning backgrounds, varied classroom experiences, and unequal access to resources. This result proves that disparities in early English education particularly between rural and urban contexts play a significant role in shaping students' later language abilities. It confirms what (Gerfanova et al., 2025) observed that access to qualified English teachers and adequate materials contributes significantly to language development. In this study, students from rural areas often had minimal exposure to English, lacked speaking or listening practice, and were taught by underqualified teachers, while their urban counterparts enjoyed more immersive and structured learning environments.

A new contribution this study makes is its in-depth account of how diverse proficiency levels affect classroom dynamics and engagement. Lecturers reported challenges in balancing instruction to accommodate both low- and high-proficiency students. This imbalance created passive participation among weaker students and domination by more advanced ones during class activities. These findings support observations made by Li & Li, (2022) who noted that wide skill gaps in language classrooms often lead to disengagement among struggling learners and frustration for instructors who must frequently adjust materials without formal support systems.

This study also highlights how students and lecturers coped with these challenges. Students utilized various digital tools such as YouTube, AI tools for self-learning. Informal peer collaboration, especially in speaking practice, also played a crucial role. These strategies align with findings by Co et al., (2023) who found that learners who used independent learning apps developed better listening and pronunciation skills over time. However, what makes this study unique is its emphasis on how these tools were not part of a planned curriculum but rather used spontaneously by students trying to catch up or bridge learning gaps.

Lecturers, on the other hand, responded by modifying classroom tasks using visual aids, simpler materials, and group work. While these adaptations helped to some extent, they were mostly reactive and lacked consistent pedagogical planning. This aligns with the argument by Bobi & Ahiavi (2023) who stressed that effective differentiated instruction requires not only teacher creativity but also institutional support and training to be sustainable.

The study further reveals that students' emotional responses such as anxiety, low confidence, or fear of being left behind are often the result of sudden exposure to English-speaking tasks without foundational preparation. This confirms earlier findings by Thao et al., (2023) who showed that emotional readiness is crucial in language learning, especially in diverse classrooms. Interestingly, one of the clearest suggestions made by students was the need for foundation or bridging classes before joining more advanced courses. This insight is vital and should be considered in curriculum planning and placement testing.

Despite these valuable findings, this study has certain limitations. First, it only involved a small number of lecturers and students from one university in Sorong, so the results may not reflect experiences in other regions or institutions. Future research should involve more diverse participants from different educational and geographic

backgrounds to increase generalizability. Secondly, the study relied heavily on qualitative data from interviews and observations, which may be subjective. A mixed-method approach including proficiency tests or surveys would provide a more comprehensive picture.

Another limitation is the short duration of the study. While it revealed immediate coping strategies and classroom issues, it could not capture long-term changes in student performance or motivation. As suggested by Laird (2022) longitudinal studies are needed to explore how students adapt over time and whether current support systems can truly help bridge the proficiency gap.

Based on these findings, the implications for English teaching practices in higher education are significant. Institutions should consider offering basic English support classes for incoming students with low proficiency. Teachers should be trained in differentiated instruction strategies to accommodate varying student needs more effectively. Moreover, integrating digital tools and encouraging peer collaboration should become a formal part of classroom instruction, not just something students turn to on their own.

For future research, it is recommended to explore how foundation classes or placement tests can help reduce the initial proficiency gap. Additionally, studies can investigate how peer mentoring and structured use of online platforms influence students' speaking and listening outcomes over time. Finally, research comparing rural and urban student trajectories under different types of curricula (e.g., local versus national) could offer deeper insight into how educational inequality influences university-level English proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the substantial diversity in English proficiency among university students in Sorong, revealing a range that spans from students with almost no foundational skills to those operating at an advanced level. The findings clearly show that this disparity is rooted in inconsistent educational backgrounds, unequal access to qualified teachers and resources, and the lack of structured opportunities for communicative practice particularly among students from rural areas. The consequences of this proficiency gap are far-reaching. It not only affects classroom dynamics leading to passive participation among less-proficient students and over-reliance on more advanced peers but also places a significant burden on lecturers who must constantly adjust their teaching strategies. Despite these challenges, both students and lecturers have shown resilience by adopting self-initiated strategies such as using digital platforms, AI tools, and peer learning. However, these efforts are often spontaneous and lack formal institutional support.

This study underscores the urgent need for universities to implement foundation or bridging classes, promote differentiated instruction, and incorporate digital learning tools into structured curricula. More importantly, institutional support and teacher training are critical to ensuring that instructional adjustments are sustainable and equitable. Addressing these gaps is not just a pedagogical concern but a matter of educational justice, particularly in regions where rural-urban disparities persist. Future research should expand beyond a single institution, employ mixed methods, and explore long-term outcomes of support systems like placement tests, foundation classes, and peer mentoring programs. By doing so, higher education institutions can build more inclusive English education programs that accommodate the diverse needs of their students and foster more equitable learning environments.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT
The author declares no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article.

REFERENCES
1. Bobi, C., & Ahiavi, M. (2023). Using Differentiated Instruction to Promote Creativity, Critical Thinking and Learning: Perspective of Teachers. *Journal of Education and Practice*. https://doi.org/10.47941/jep.1227
2. Co, M., Kerbage, S. H., Willetts, G., Garvey, L., Bhattacharya, A., Croy, G., & Mitchell, B. (2023). Students coping with change in higher education: An overview. *Educational Research Review*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100508
3. Gerfanova, E. F., Ismagulova, A., Rakisheva, G., Sabitova, D., & Yessengaliyeva, A. (2025). Educational Environment and the Quality of Foreign Language Teaching: Perspectives of Kazakhstani Urban and Rural EFL Teachers. *World Journal of English Language*. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n3p303
4. Hidayat, M. T. (2024). English Language Proficiency and Career Opportunities: Perceptions of Indonesian University Graduates. *Language Value*. https://doi.org/10.6035/languagev.7933

5. Hossain, K. I. (2024). Reviewing the role of culture in English language learning: Challenges and opportunities for educators. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100781

6. Ismajli, E. (2024). Navigating the Development of English Language Skills in Higher Education. *Uluslararası Özel Amaçlar Için İngilizce Dergisi*. https://doi.org/10.70870/joinesp.1594239

7. Laird, N. (2022). Statistical analysis of longitudinal studies. *International Statistical Review*, *90*. https://doi.org/10.1111/insr.12523

8. Li, Z., & Li, J. (2022). Using the Flipped Classroom to Promote Learner Engagement for the Sustainable Development of Language Skills: A Mixed-Methods Study. *Sustainability*. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14105983

9. Nurteteng, N., Setiawan, A., & Yulia Kamandani Putri, F. (2024). THE PAPUAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS ENGLISH MAJORS. *Exposure Journal*, *288*(1), 288–298. https://journal.unismuh.ac.id/index.php/exposure

10. Pappachan, P. (2020). CHALLENGING THE ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH IN LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS. *International Education and Research Journal*, *6*. https://consensus.app/papers/challenging-the-onesizefitsall-approach-in-language-pappachan/71e113333f9d5cbd9249ea8933992b1b/

11. Thao, L. T., Thuy, P. T., Thi, N., Yen, P., Thu, H. T. A., & Tra, N. (2023). Impacts of Emotional Intelligence on Second Language Acquisition: English-Major Students' Perspectives. *SAGE Open*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231212065

12. Usoh, E., Boras, D., & Judas, M. (2024). Improving Education Quality for Higher Education Institutions in Eastern Indonesia: Approaches for Internationalisation Activities. *Environment and Social Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i12.2732

13. Waluyo, B., & Panmei, B. (2021). English Proficiency and Academic Achievement: Can Students' Grades in English Courses Predict Their Academic Achievement? *Mextesol Journal*. https://doi.org/10.61871/mj.v45n4-17

14. Winnie, W., Leong, H., Badiozaman, I. F. A., & Yap, A. (2023). Negotiating the challenges in speaking English for Indonesian undergraduate students in an ESL university. *Studies in English Language and Education*. https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v10i2.26563