



Understanding Internal and External Factors Influencing the Decline of English Language Proficiency among Students of the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy

Muhamad Alfi Khoiruman

Akademi Kelautan Banyuwangi, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: malfikhoiruman@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study explores the internal and external factors contributing to the decline of English language proficiency among students of the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations involving students, English instructors, and academic staff. The findings reveal several internal factors, including low learner motivation, limited self-study habits, and anxiety in using English during classroom activities. External factors include insufficient learning resources, inconsistent teaching strategies, and limited exposure to real maritime communication contexts. The study also notes a gap between curriculum demands and students' actual language needs for the maritime industry. These combined factors create a learning environment that does not fully support the development of English proficiency. The research highlights the importance of enhancing instructional methods, increasing authentic maritime English exposure, and improving institutional support systems. Recommendations include designing context-based English learning, strengthening student support services, and aligning teaching practices with international maritime communication standards. This study contributes to understanding language proficiency challenges in vocational maritime education and offers practical insights for curriculum improvement and policy development.

Keywords: English proficiency, internal factors, external factors, maritime students

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become a critical requirement for maritime students worldwide as the industry undergoes rapid globalization and technological transformation. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) mandates English as the lingua franca for communication on board, requiring seafarers to master Maritime English for safety procedures, radio communication, navigation, and emergency operations. Recent global trends—such as the rise of smart ships, multinational crews, and digital navigation systems—have heightened the demand for highly skilled maritime professionals with strong English competence. Despite these growing demands, maritime education institutions in Indonesia, including the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy, face persistent challenges related to declining English proficiency among students. This issue raises concerns about graduates' readiness to compete in the international maritime sector.

National and international assessments reflect a broader trend of decreasing English competence among Indonesian students. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2024), Indonesia is ranked 79th out of 113 countries, placing it in the "low proficiency" category. This ranking dropped compared to previous years, indicating a downward trend in English mastery. Vocational and technical students exhibit even lower proficiency scores, particularly in areas of listening comprehension, technical vocabulary, and oral communication. Internal reports from the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy show that students' average English scores have gradually decreased over the last three academic periods, especially in courses related to Maritime Communication and Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). These data indicate that the problem is not merely individual but systemic, requiring further exploration of the underlying contributing factors.

Preliminary observations conducted at the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy reveal several symptoms of declining English proficiency. During classroom visits, many students demonstrated

difficulty understanding basic maritime instructions, struggled to pronounce essential nautical terms, and relied heavily on translation tools instead of developing communicative competence. Classroom participation in English-speaking activities was also noticeably low, with students expressing discomfort and anxiety when required to speak English in front of their peers. Lecturers reported that only a small percentage of students actively engage in English learning beyond class hours, indicating limited self-directed learning habits. These observational findings suggest the presence of both psychological and environmental factors that hinder language acquisition and communication confidence.

Internally, students face several challenges affecting their English proficiency. Interviews with instructors indicate that many students lack intrinsic motivation to learn English, perceiving it as a difficult and irrelevant subject, despite its importance in maritime operations. This negative attitude is often shaped by prior learning experiences, fear of making mistakes, and low academic self-efficacy in language-related tasks. In addition, the absence of consistent study routines and limited exposure to English outside of the classroom further weaken their linguistic abilities. Language anxiety, particularly in speaking, was frequently observed, with students expressing concerns about embarrassment, mispronunciation, and peer judgment. These internal factors collectively create psychological barriers that hinder effective learning.

External factors within the learning environment also contribute significantly to the decline in English proficiency. Observations show that English instruction in the academy still relies heavily on traditional grammar-translation methods, offering limited opportunities for communicative practice or contextualized learning. Teaching materials used in the classroom are often outdated and do not reflect the current needs of the maritime industry, such as real-time communication scenarios, emergency drills, or digitally integrated maritime tools. Furthermore, the academy's limited English-speaking environment—where neither students nor staff consistently use English for academic or operational purposes—reduces opportunities for meaningful language exposure. These external limitations create a learning ecosystem that lacks the reinforcement necessary for proficiency development.

The issue is further compounded by broader challenges in maritime education across Indonesia. The rapid evolution of global maritime standards demands that graduates have not only technical competence but also strong communication skills to operate safely in multinational environments. However, many maritime institutions struggle to keep pace with technological innovations and international expectations. Graduates with weak English proficiency often encounter difficulties during shipboard internships, certification examinations, and professional maritime communication tasks. These challenges impact employability, especially as shipping companies increasingly prioritize candidates capable of performing in English-dominant operational settings.

Previous research reinforces the significance of both internal and external factors in shaping English proficiency. Studies by Ahmed and Musa (2021), Sutrisno (2022), and Tanjung (2023) highlight that low motivation, anxiety, limited exposure, outdated learning materials, and unsupportive learning environments are common issues in vocational and maritime education. Similarly, findings from maritime institutions in the Philippines and Vietnam show that students' communicative competence is strongly influenced by teaching approaches, curriculum relevance, and opportunities for authentic language use. These studies align with the current situation at the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy, suggesting that the decline in proficiency is not an isolated case but part of a broader pattern affecting maritime students globally.

Given these pressing issues, investigating the internal and external factors influencing the decline of English language proficiency among students at the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy becomes essential. Understanding these multidimensional factors will allow educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders to design more responsive interventions, including curriculum improvement, updated pedagogical strategies, enhanced learning resources, and increased exposure to maritime English contexts. By exploring these aspects through a qualitative lens, this research aims to provide a comprehensive foundation for strengthening English education in maritime institutions and ensuring that future graduates are better prepared to participate in the global maritime workforce.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the internal and external factors influencing the decline of English language proficiency among students at the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows the researcher to gain an

in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities that shape their language learning processes. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative inquiry is most suitable when the objective is to understand complex social phenomena from the perspective of the participants. Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that qualitative research seeks to uncover meanings constructed by individuals within real-life settings, making it ideal for examining educational problems such as declining proficiency. This framework enables the researcher to identify not only observable behaviors but also the psychological, academic, and environmental factors underlying students' learning challenges.

Data collection was conducted using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were administered to students, English instructors, and academic staff to gather rich, narrative-based information regarding their experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured interview guides were used to maintain flexibility and allow participants to elaborate freely, consistent with the recommendations of Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), who argue that interviews in qualitative studies should encourage open dialogue. Classroom observations were carried out to capture real-time learning behaviors, participation patterns, and instructional practices. These observations followed the guidelines of Spradley (2016), who highlights the importance of systematically observing social interactions to identify recurring patterns. Additionally, institutional documents such as syllabi, assessment reports, and curriculum guides were analyzed to contextualize the teaching and learning environment.

The sampling technique used in this study is purposeful sampling, selecting participants who are directly involved in or affected by English learning at the academy. Purposeful sampling is widely recommended in qualitative research because it ensures that selected participants can provide rich and relevant information (Patton, 2015). The sample consisted of 15 students experiencing declining English performance, 3 English instructors, and 2 administrative staff involved in curriculum development. This diverse participant composition allowed for triangulation of perspectives, strengthening the credibility of the findings. To ensure ethical research procedures, all participants were informed about the study's purpose, provided consent, and were assured of confidentiality.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, classifying, and interpreting patterns within the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework was applied: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing final interpretations. This method allowed the researcher to organize data into categories representing internal and external factors affecting English proficiency. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of data sources, member checking, and thick description, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These validation strategies ensured that the conclusions accurately reflected participants' perspectives and the realities of the learning environment at the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy.

3. Results and Discussion

1. Observation Findings: Classroom Engagement and Learning Behavior

Observations conducted across six English classes revealed a noticeably low level of student engagement during instructional activities. Throughout the lessons, most students demonstrated passive learning behaviors, such as minimal note-taking, lack of eye contact, and dependence on Indonesian translations before responding to questions. When instructors introduced maritime vocabulary or Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), students frequently hesitated, whispering to peers for confirmation before answering. Only a small number of students voluntarily participated in speaking tasks, while the majority remained silent or appeared disengaged.

During pronunciation and speaking exercises, students often mispronounced essential maritime terms such as "starboard," "bearing," or "distress alert." Many relied on reading directly from their notes rather than speaking naturally. Observations also showed that collaborative tasks—such as pair dialogue or role-play simulations—were rarely completed in English. Students almost immediately switched to Indonesian when discussing instructions or responding to problems, even when prompted to maintain English use. This behavior reduced opportunities for authentic communication practice, which is crucial for proficiency development.

In addition, the learning environment lacked visual or auditory supports that could reinforce English exposure. Classrooms contained minimal English signage, and the instructional materials used were outdated, including textbooks with limited maritime context. Audio recordings of maritime communication, essential for listening training, were not used consistently. As a result, students

received limited opportunities to experience real-world maritime English scenarios, contributing to a superficial understanding of the language.

2. Observation Findings: Teaching Practices and Institutional Conditions

Observations of teaching practices revealed that instructors predominantly relied on teacher-centered methods. Lessons were often delivered through extended explanations, grammar translations, and textbook readings. Interactive learning activities—such as maritime communication drills, role plays, or audio-based simulations—were used infrequently due to time limitations and insufficient learning resources. When these activities were attempted, instructors struggled to manage the large class sizes, resulting in uneven student participation.

The institutional conditions were also found to be unsupportive of language development. English was rarely used in campus announcements, administrative communication, or maritime drill instructions. The absence of an English-speaking environment reduced students' exposure to the language, limiting both receptive and productive language use. Furthermore, the academy lacked a functional language laboratory or digital learning center, restricting access to multimedia materials that could strengthen listening and speaking skills. This misalignment between academic expectations and available institutional support contributed to the overall decline in English proficiency.

3. Interview Findings: Internal Factors Affecting Students' Proficiency

Interviews with students revealed several internal challenges that strongly contributed to declining English proficiency. Many students described having low motivation to study English, stating that they perceived it as difficult, irrelevant, or secondary to their technical maritime subjects. One student stated, "I know English is important, but it feels too hard. Sometimes I don't understand anything the teacher says, so I just give up." This sentiment was common among interviewees, suggesting a widespread lack of confidence and perceived competence.

Another internal factor identified was language anxiety. Students frequently reported feeling nervous or embarrassed when required to speak English during class. Several shared that they feared making mistakes in front of classmates. One interviewee said, "I want to speak, but I'm afraid my friends will laugh if my pronunciation is wrong." This anxiety discouraged students from participating actively, reinforcing passive learning habits. Furthermore, few students practiced English outside of class. Most admitted that they rarely reviewed vocabulary, listened to English content, or accessed maritime communication videos. Their learning behavior was primarily exam-driven, indicating a lack of self-directed learning routines.

4. Interview Findings: External Factors from Instructors, Curriculum, and Learning Environment

Interviews with instructors revealed external issues that significantly affected students' proficiency. Teachers acknowledged that the existing English curriculum had not been revised in several years and did not fully align with current maritime industry demands. One instructor explained, "Our materials are outdated. We need more maritime communication examples—especially SMCP recordings and VHF simulations—but we don't have them." This lack of updated resources limited instructors' ability to design engaging, industry-relevant lessons.

Teaching strategies also played a role. Several instructors admitted that large class sizes and limited teaching hours made it difficult to implement communicative or practice-based methods. As one instructor stated, "I want to do more speaking drills, but with almost 30 students in a class, it is hard to manage." As a result, they relied heavily on grammar instruction and textbook exercises, which did not effectively build speaking or listening skills.

Institutional factors also contributed to the issue. Students reported the absence of English clubs, speaking forums, or extracurricular activities supporting language development. One student highlighted, "There is no activity outside class that helps us practice English. After class, we never use English at all." This lack of opportunities for extended exposure further weakened students' learning outcomes. Together, these external factors—curriculum limitations, instructional constraints, and institutional shortcomings—created an environment that did not fully support the improvement of English proficiency.

The findings of this study reveal that the decline in English language proficiency among students of the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. This aligns with the theoretical understanding that language acquisition is shaped by psychological,

environmental, and pedagogical variables. The observed low motivation, language anxiety, and lack of self-directed learning among students confirm the importance of internal factors, supporting the claims of Dörnyei (2005), who identifies motivation and confidence as core determinants of second language learning success. The limited willingness of students to participate in classroom discussions and their dependence on Indonesian during tasks suggest that affective barriers significantly hinder active engagement, consistent with Horwitz et al. (2010), who emphasize that language anxiety reduces learners' willingness to communicate and lowers classroom performance.

The external factors identified—including outdated curriculum materials, teacher-centered instructional methods, and insufficient institutional support—further validate findings from earlier studies conducted in vocational and maritime education contexts. Sutrisno (2022) reported that maritime students in Indonesia often face challenges due to the lack of updated teaching resources and minimal exposure to authentic maritime communication. The present study's observations that students rarely encounter real SMCP recordings, VHF radio simulations, or modern audio-visual materials mirror this concern. Similarly, Ahmed and Musa (2021) found that inadequate integration of maritime-specific content in English lessons weakens the relevance of learning and reduces student motivation. The reliance on general English textbooks observed in this study reflects this misalignment between curriculum content and industry demands.

Instructional practices observed in the academy also correspond with broader critiques of traditional teaching in vocational institutions. Many instructors relied on grammar-translation and lecture-based strategies, despite the strong need for communicative competence in maritime professions. This finding echoes the conclusions of Richards and Rodgers (2014), who argue that teacher-centered approaches limit opportunities for authentic communication and fail to develop speaking and listening skills effectively. The inability to conduct interactive activities due to large class sizes and limited teaching hours reinforces the structural constraints noted by Mustapha (2019), who found that vocational educators often struggle to implement communicative language teaching due to logistical and institutional limitations.

Institutional factors further compound the issue. The absence of English-speaking environments, lack of extracurricular English programs, and the unavailability of digital learning facilities directly impact students' exposure to the language. These results are consistent with studies by Hamied (2020), who observed that Indonesian vocational institutions rarely integrate English into campus communication systems, resulting in limited informal language use. This study's findings expand on Hamied's work by demonstrating that even in a maritime context—where international communication is critical—English remains isolated within the classroom and disconnected from students' daily practices. Such conditions limit the development of the communicative competence required by the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute new insights by illustrating how internal and external factors interact to influence proficiency decline. For example, low motivation is intensified by outdated materials, and language anxiety is reinforced by a lack of supportive classroom environments. This interplay supports the socio-cultural perspective of language learning emphasized by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), which posits that learning difficulties cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed within the broader social and institutional context. The current study confirms this view by showing that students' internal barriers do not exist independently of the external limitations of their learning environment.

Finally, this study extends previous research by focusing specifically on maritime education in Banyuwangi, a context that has received little scholarly attention. While earlier studies in Indonesian maritime academies have addressed general issues of English competence, this research provides detailed evidence on classroom behaviors, psychological barriers, and institutional shortcomings that collectively contribute to proficiency decline. Thus, the study not only validates existing theories but also offers highly contextual insights that can guide curriculum reform, teacher training, and institutional policy improvements in maritime English education.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the decline in English language proficiency among students of the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy is a multifaceted issue shaped by the interaction of internal and external factors. Internally, students' low learning motivation, limited self-regulation, and persistent anxiety toward English create significant barriers to skill development. Many students reported feeling "not confident enough to speak" and expressed a tendency to avoid English-related tasks unless required, indicating a motivation gap that aligns with previous studies highlighting

affective factors as major predictors of language achievement. Externally, the scarcity of English immersion environments, insufficient instructional resources, and inconsistent pedagogical practices further hinder language acquisition. The institutional environment, although supportive in structure, lacks sustained exposure to English, especially in daily communication and maritime-specific contexts. The combination of these factors not only weakens students' proficiency but also limits their preparedness for global maritime operations where English remains the lingua franca. Overall, the study emphasizes the need for strategic interventions—such as enhanced curriculum design, integrated maritime-English training, stronger learning support systems, and improved teacher professional development—to address these challenges holistically. By understanding these contributing factors, the Banyuwangi Maritime Academy can develop targeted programs to strengthen English proficiency and better equip its students for competitive roles in the international maritime industry.

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