A SURVEY RESEARCH OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY LEVEL SCORE OF DUOLINGO ENGLISH PRACTICE TEST

Asri Indah Wali[1*], Andi Rachmawati Syarif[2], Ririn Syahriani[3]

[1,2,3]Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari, Kendari, Indonesia
*Corresponding author email: asrih.students@umkendari.ac.id

Abstract

Assessing students' English proficiency is a crucial aspect in evaluating learning effectiveness, particularly in English Language Education study programs. However, limited research has examined student achievement in the context of online test-based evaluation. This study aimed to determine students' English proficiency levels based on Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) scores and examine their implications for English language teaching in higher education. This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach through a survey of 60 students from semesters 2, 4, and 6. Data were obtained through independent DEPT score collection uploaded by respondents via Google Form. The results showed that most students were at a moderate proficiency level, with average scores ranging from 75 to 89. Only a small proportion of students achieved the high category, and there was significant variation between individuals and between semesters. These findings suggest a need for re-evaluation of implemented learning strategies and the importance of increasing students' exposure to contextual language practices. Programs such as Student Talent Search and English Language Day can be supportive tools, but their implementation needs to be optimized to have a significant impact on improving language proficiency. This study contributes to highlighting the importance of synergy between learning evaluation, student motivation, and the quality of language teaching strategies in higher education.

Keywords: *english language proficiency; EFL students; language assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English language proficiency tests have become an essential tool. Plotnikova et al., (2020) said that whether in academic, professional, or international communication, strong English language skills are still needed. To measure ones' English proficiency, there are quite a lot of English language proficiency tests, such as TOEFL, IELTS, and the latest and quite popular one is the Duolingo English Test (DET). These tests are known as tools to assess the four English language skills like reading, writing, listening, and speaking, especially among non-native speakers (Lu, 2023). Besides that, as one of the requirements for higher education admissions, scholarship applications, immigration purposes, participation in global programs, and many more, these tests are often required (Coney & Isbell, 2024). That idea making them increasingly relevant for students seeking international opportunities.

In Indonesia, some English language proficiency tests are commonly used for academic concern, such as the TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS (Rahayu, 2019). However, the availability and accessibility of these tests are still limited, especially

outside of major cities. Cited from IELTS Exam official website (2024), there is no IELTS test center in Kendari; thus, candidates must travel to Makassar, which is approximately 364 km away. Moreover, the costs associated with international standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL can also be expensive for many students (Azhari et al., 2022). In Indonesia, several universities have also developed their own local English Language Proficiency Tests (EPT) for graduation or placement purposes, such as at one private university in Kendari. They use a test called EAST (English as Standardized Test). However, this test can only be used internally at the university, not nationally and certainly not internationally.

To address this issue, a tool that is affordable, easily accessible, and of course has been accepted by international institutions and students today to evaluate English language proficiency is needed. One such tool is the Duolingo English Test (DET), a modern online assessment that can be adapted to a computer (Wagner, 2020). Make it easily access everywhere and anywhere. Of course, the DET also evaluates all four language skills through interactive tasks and has been accepted by today's international institutions (Chen, 2024). In the other hand, in addition to its official paid test, Duolingo also provides the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT), known as a free practice test. According to Burstein e t al. (2022), DEPT itself is designed to simulate the actual DET experience, offering to the test users the opportunity to practice and estimate their proficiency level at not at all cost (free). It also offers practical value for students preparing for programs that require English proficiency benchmarks (Riniati, 2022).

Although DEPT does not provide an official certification like the full DET, but it's still a valuable tool for assessing English skills, as it evaluates reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities in a similar format to the real test (Wagner, 2020). Several studies have discussed about the importance of English language proficiency test in supporting students' access to international academic and professional opportunities. For example, language assessment (English language proficiency test) like TOEFL, IELTS, and DET have been widely used to measure readiness for such global engagement (Lu, 2023); (Coney & Isbell, 2024). While, some studies have explored the link between English language proficiency and academic performance (Devi, 2014), the recently researchers have turned their attention to how test results can be used to evaluate students' readiness for international programs.

For example, Napitupulu and Yulita (2023) analyzed students' DET practice test scores in the Department of Information Technology using qualitative descriptive methods. They categorized the student's score into 4 level. The results of this study stated that the ability of the Informatics Technology students is intermediate level which scored 60-95 with the average score 82. It is crucial for the students to improve their skill better than before learning English.

While Resdiana and Yulientinah (2024) evaluated DET scores among students at an international university in Bandung as part of their preparation to

participate or take opportunities in the IISMA program. The score results were analyzed by calculating the average results of the independent sample t-Test, which aims to test whether there is a significant difference in English language skills between the two study programs. So the result, referring to the Duolingo score requirement for D4 level which is 100, then the study program still cannot send prospective students to the IISMA Program. At the D3 level, the minimum requirement is 90, then this study program can send prospective students to this Program. And the results of the independent sample t-test calculation also show that the two study programs have significant differences in English language ability based on DET. These findings highlight the growing use of DET-related tools to assess students' communicative competence and readiness for global programs.

Although these studies confirm the importance of the DET in assessing readiness for global opportunities, they focused on different academic disciplines, test types, and student contexts. However, little is known about the use of the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) to determine the English proficiency levels of English Education students, particularly in the context of a private university in Kendari. This study seeks to address that gap by investigating the DEPT scores of English Education students in a private university in Kendari. To guide this investigation, the following research question is proposed: (1) what are students' scores on the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT)? and (2) what are students' average practice scores on the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) for English Education students at a private university in Kendari?

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted in the English Language Education Undergraduate Study Program at a private university in Kendari, Indonesia. The population involved in this study were English Language Education students in the 2023/2024 academic year who were actively taking courses from semesters 2, 4, and 6, totaling 129 people. To estimate the minimum number of participants, the Slovin formula was used with a margin of error of 5%. Based on a population of 129 students, the ideal sample size was calculated to be approximately 98 students. However, because this study used purposive sampling and voluntary participation, this study obtained a smaller sample size with a tolerable deviation from the ideal number that had been calculated. So, overall, there were 66 students who participated in this study, namely those who had worked on the DEPT questions from start to finish and obtained estimated scores, and those who voluntarily filled out the questionnaires that were distributed

To answer the research question no. 1 regarding students' DEPT scores, questionnaires were distributed to students in semesters 2, 4, and 6 who had completed DEPT and obtained estimated scores. The questionnaire items contained information about students such as name, age, semester, and of course the score they obtained after completing DEPT, they were also asked to include screenshots of their score.

To answer the research question no. 2 regarding the average proficiency level of students, the collected grades were arranged based on semester groups using a clustering approach. This clustering allowed the researcher to calculate the average grade for each group to observe trends and differences per semester.

Data were collected using a Google Form that included demographic questions and a request for participants to submit their DEPT scores, accompanied by screenshots as evidence. The DEPT itself functioned as the platform for measuring the students' English proficiency, though it was not developed by the researcher. The collected data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on mean, minimum and maximum scores, standard deviation, and categorical grouping of proficiency levels.

The categorization of proficiency levels in this study was adapted for simplification, informed by the official Duolingo English Test (DET) score interpretation which ranges from 10 to 160. While DET broadly maps scores onto CEFR levels such as 10–55 (A1–A2), 60–85 (B1), 90–115 (B2), and 120–160 (C1–C2), this study condensed these into three practical groups: Low (<75), Moderate (75–89), and High (≥90). This simplification aimed to facilitate clearer analysis and comparison of students' general English proficiency across academic levels within the DEPT.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the DEPT score analysis from 66 English Education students in semesters 2, 4, and 6. The data are organized to show individual scores, categorized proficiency levels, distribution percentages, and average scores per semester. The findings are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Individual DEPT Scores and Levels of Participants

No.	Initial Name	Semester	Overall Score	Level
1	S.1	2	85	Moderate
2	S.2	2	65	Low
3	S.3	2	85	Moderate
4	S.4	2	70	Low
5	S.5	2	50	Low
6	S.6	2	50	Low
7	S.7	2	55	Low
8	S.8	2	95	High
9	S.9	2	80	Moderate
10	S.10	2	80	Moderate
11	S.11	2	50	Low
12	S.12	2	65	Low
13	S.13	2	30	Low
14	S.14	2	45	Low
15	S.15	2	70	Low
16	S.16	2	70	Low
17	S.17	2	40	Low
18	S.18	2	35	Low
19	S.19	4	65	Low
20	S.20	4	50	Low
21	S.21	4	55	Low
22	S.22	4	50	Low
23	S.23	4	75	Moderate
24	S.24	4	75	Moderate
25	S.25	4	60	Low

No.	Initial Name	Semester	Overall Score	Level
26	S.26	4	75	Moderate
27	S.27	4	85	Moderate
28	S.28	4	85	Moderate
29	S.29	4	45	Low
30	S.30	4	60	Low
31	S.31	4	95	High
32	S.32	4	85	Moderate
33	S.33	4	45	Low
34	S.34	4	70	Low
35	S.35	4	120	High
36	S.36	4	60	Low
37	S.37	4	85	Moderate
38	S.38	4	60	Low
39	S.39	4	50	Low
40	S.40	4	50	Low
41	S.41	4	55	Low
42	S.42	4	90	High
43	S.43	4	80	Moderate
44	S.44	4	45	Low
45	S.45	4	100	High
46	S.46	4	70	Low
47	S.47	6	100	High
48	S.48	6	90	High
49	S.49	6	95	High
50	S.50	6	80	Moderate
51	S.51	6	115	High
52	S.52	6	60	Low
53	S.53	6	90	High
54	S.54	6	70	Low
55	S.55	6	55	Low
56	S.56	6	55	Low
57	S.57	6	90	High
58	S.58	6	75	Moderate
59	S.59	6	65	Low
60	S.60	6	65	Low
61	S.61	6	65	Low
62	S.62	6	85	Moderate
63	S.63	6	75	Moderate
64	S.64	6	35	Low
65	S.65	6	70	Low
66	S.66	6	45	Low

The Table 1 shows the detailed DEPT scores of all 66 students, including their semester classification and assigned proficiency levels. The results reflect a broad range of performance, with many students falling into the lower categories, especially in earlier semesters.

Table 2. Percentage of Participants by Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	Number of Students	Percentage
Low	39	59.09%
Moderate	16	24.24%
High	11	16.67%

In Table 2, these percentages indicate that a majority of students were in the Low proficiency category, while less than one-fifth reached the High level. This distribution helps highlight the general English proficiency level among students and reinforces the need for instructional support.

To provide a clearer picture of students' DEPT performance, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. The minimum score obtained by participants was 35, while the maximum score was 120. The standard deviation was 19.39, indicating a relatively high variation in students' English proficiency levels across the sample. The standard deviation (SD) in this study was calculated using Microsoft Excel, utilizing the STDEV.S function which is commonly used to measure the dispersion of sample data. This method reflects how much students' DEPT scores deviate from the mean, helping to identify the level of variability in English proficiency scores. This approach to measuring score dispersion is supported by statistical literature. According to Ary et al. (2010), standard deviation is a fundamental descriptive statistic that shows how much individual scores deviate from the mean, providing insight into consistency in a data set. Similarly, Sugiyono (2013) emphasized that standard deviation is essential in educational research to describe variation in student performance.

To gain deeper insights into students' performance, the DEPT scores were grouped based on academic semester. The average scores for each group were calculated using the midpoint of each DEPT score range submitted. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Average DEPT Score by Semester

Semester	Number of Students	Average Score
2	18	62.22
4	28	69.29
6	20	74

From the Table 3, it can be seen that there is a gradual increase in average DEPT scores across academic levels. Students in semester 6 achieved the highest average score, while those in semester 2 scored the lowest. This trend suggests a steady development of English proficiency as students advance through their academic journey.

In addition to average scores, the DEPT scores of all 66 participants revealed varied proficiency levels. The majority of students (approximately 65%) scored between 75 and 89, which was categorized as moderate proficiency. A smaller portion, around 24%, scored below 75, indicating low proficiency. Only about 11% of the students scored 90 and above, placing them in the high proficiency category**.**

The results of this study indicate that the majority of English Education students have a moderate level of English proficiency. Their DEPT scores generally range from 75 to 89, with only a small percentage reaching the high category. Sixth-semester students had higher average scores than second- and fourth-semester students. This indicates that the higher the semester level, the more students' English skills develop, along with the accumulation of learning experiences.

This finding aligns with Bloom's Mastery Learning theory. Wong & Kang (2012) study explains that if students are given sufficient time and adequate

learning support, they have the potential to achieve higher academic results. However, in the context of this study, not all students were able to reach the expected level, indicating that study time alone is insufficient without being balanced by quality learning and individual motivation.

Although this study did not directly investigate the teaching methods applied in the English Education department, the overall proficiency level of students raises several possible interpretations. It is possible that, despite institutional efforts to enhance English instruction, students may not be receiving or fully engaging in adequate opportunities for active language use, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. This aligns with (Li et al., 2025), who emphasize the importance of communicative practice in achieving higher proficiency and shows that the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is proven to be more effective in improving students' communicative skills than methods that focus solely on theory. However, another possibility is that existing teaching strategies are already aligned with best practices such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), but students may lack the motivation, consistency, or seriousness when participating in assessments like the DEPT.

From the researcher's perspective, the overall scores, most of which fall within the moderate range are not yet satisfactory for English education students, especially for those in higher semesters. However, several underlying factors may have influenced these results. First, many students have only taken the DEPT once and are unfamiliar with its structure or question types, which can contribute to anxiety. Recent studies have shown that familiarity with digital test formats has a significant impact. Familiarity with digital tools positively impacts preferences and perceptions of online exams, and reduces anxiety related to the digital interface (Domínguez-Figaredo & Gil-Jaurena, 2025). This suggests that some of the observed variability in DEPT scores may stem from the format, rather than purely language proficiency. Second, some students may have taken the test less seriously, viewing it as a casual or "mock" exercise rather than a meaningful evaluation. Others may have been less motivated to achieve a high score, resulting in less enthusiastic or rushed responses. This may have led to underperformance, as motivation plays a significant role in outcomes (Wolgast et al., 2020). However, it is also possible that some students viewed the test as an opportunity to challenge themselves and demonstrate their current level of proficiency.

In addition to examining score trends by semester, the results of this study also show significant variation in individual student scores. The highest score in the study was 120, achieved by a fourth-semester student. Meanwhile, the lowest score was 35, achieved by both second- and sixth-semester students. This significant difference in scores indicates the diversity of English language abilities among students, which can be influenced by many factors, such as educational background, personal motivation, previous learning experiences, and frequency of English use outside of class.

This finding also serves as a reminder that semester progress does not always follow a linear path with score improvement. This means that while

students in higher semesters generally tend to score better, some students in lower semesters also demonstrate exceptional performance. Therefore, learning approaches need to consider individual needs and potential more individually, so that all students can develop according to their respective capacities.

Research conducted by Napitupulu and Yulita (2023) shows that the majority of students demonstrate an intermediate level of English proficiency. This phenomenon is also observed in the current study. In the context of Indonesian students as foreign language (EFL) learners, this finding is reasonable, considering the challenges of developing all four language skills in a balanced manner.

The fact that only a small number of students achieved high scores indicates that significant efforts are still needed to support the English language learning process, both from the student and the institution's perspective. Students need to be more actively exposed to the language environment, for example by reading English articles, listening to podcasts, or practicing speaking through informal activities. Furthermore, universities can also review their learning approaches to better encourage active practice and familiarization with language use in real-world contexts.

It should be noted that the score data used in this study were obtained from students' independent practice using the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT), which is not an official certification test. Therefore, the scores collected only estimations and cannot be equated from official tests such as the TOEFL, IELTS, or the officially issued Duolingo English Test (DET). For further research, it is recommended to use score data from official, standardized tests to obtain a more accurate picture of English proficiency

To further improve students' English proficiency, both lecturers and students must take more proactive roles in the learning process. Wong & Kang (2012), referring to Bloom's Mastery Learning Theory, emphasize that with sufficient time and support, students can reach higher levels of achievement. However, this must be matched with quality instruction and meaningful practice opportunities. In the context of English Language Education, consistent exposure and active use of the language are essential to achieving communicative competence. . Plotnikova et al., (2020) stress that English proficiency is a fundamental skill for academic mobility and global communication, which highlights the importance of preparing students for both academic and professional contexts. Meanwhile, Devi (2014) confirms a strong link between English proficiency and academic performance, indicating that improved English skills can lead to better learning outcomes across subjects. Existing initiatives offered by the university such as *Student Talent Scouting* classes and the *English Day* program held every Monday can support this goal. However, to be more effective, these programs may require stronger implementation strategies and greater student involvement. A culture that supports risk-taking, speaking practice, and constructive feedback can help bridge the gap between passive understanding and actual language performance. Ultimately, the improvement of

English proficiency requires a mutual effort grounded in intentional practice, contextual learning, and continuous support

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study concludes that the majority of English Education students at a private university in Kendari possess a moderate level of English proficiency, as reflected in their DEPT scores. Although some students demonstrated high performance, others are still in the process of developing their language skills. These findings confirm the need for sustained efforts in English learning across all academic levels.

The results suggest that students should actively engage with English both within and beyond the classroom setting. Activities such as reading, peer discussions, and listening to English media can support their improvement. Meanwhile, the university is encouraged to provide more accessible and engaging platforms, such as speaking clubs, tutorial programs, or one-on-one mentoring that cater to diverse student needs.

In the context of English Language Education, consistent exposure and practice are essential to achieving communicative competence. Existing initiatives offered by the university such as Student Talent Scouting classes and the English Day program held every Monday can support this goal. However, to be more effective, these programs may require stronger implementation strategies and greater student involvement.

Ultimately, enhancing students' English proficiency is a shared responsibility between learners and the institution. With consistent support and motivation, students can gradually improve both their competence and confidence in using English effectively. Future studies are recommended to explore language learning strategies and their impact on student performance, using more standardized assessment tools for deeper analysis.

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