



Navigating English Literacy Challenges: A Qualitative Study of 12th-Grade Students Preparing for UTBK 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the English literacy challenges faced by 12th-grade students in Indonesia as they prepare for the UTBK 2025, focusing on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations from a purposively selected sample of 20-30 students. Thematic analysis revealed that the primary challenges students face include difficulties with complex academic texts, limited vocabulary knowledge, and grammatical errors, all of which hinder their performance in the English section of the UTBK. The study further investigates the factors influencing students' English literacy preparation, such as the quality of educational support, access to external resources (e.g., online learning platforms, tutoring), and peer support. Results indicate that students attending well-resourced schools and those utilizing additional learning resources felt more prepared. Peer learning also played a key role in overcoming literacy challenges. Moreover, students employed various coping strategies, including active reading, vocabulary-building techniques, and practice tests, to improve their skills. This study provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve English literacy preparation for high-stakes exams like the UTBK.

Keywords: English Literacy, High Stake Exam Preparation, UTBK

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

In today's globalized world, English literacy has become an essential skill for academic and professional success. English, often referred to as the "global language," is not only used as a medium of communication across diverse cultures but is also a crucial component of education systems worldwide. English proficiency is particularly important in countries where English serves as a second language, such as Indonesia, as it facilitates access to knowledge, international collaborations, and better career opportunities (Graddol, 2006). Moreover, English literacy has been shown to correlate with improved cognitive abilities, higher academic achievement, and better problem-solving skills (Snow, 2010).

In Indonesia, the Indonesian National Examination (UN) and the University Entrance Test (UTBK) are pivotal assessments that determine students' academic future. With the rising importance of English in the UTBK, the ability to navigate English literacy challenges has become even more crucial for students, particularly in their final year of high school. As English is one of the subjects tested in the UTBK, it plays a significant role in determining students' eligibility for higher education and their subsequent career paths (Lestari, 2021). Research has shown that English proficiency is a common challenge for Indonesian students in facing these standardized tests, with difficulties in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar consistently emerging as major obstacles (Pratiwi & Lestari, 2019).

The UTBK 2025 will be no exception in its emphasis on English language skills. As such, it is critical to examine the factors that contribute to English literacy challenges among 12th-grade students, especially those in their final preparation stages. English literacy is not merely about understanding words but about navigating complex texts, analyzing critical information, and expressing oneself effectively. For students preparing for a high-stakes exam like the UTBK, these skills are imperative, and any gaps in literacy could significantly impact their performance.

Despite the growing recognition of English's importance in academic settings, there is limited research on the specific challenges faced by 12th-grade students in Indonesia as they prepare for the UTBK, particularly in the context of English literacy. While most studies tend to focus on general educational challenges or the impact of English proficiency on academic achievement (Pratiwi & Lestari, 2019; Widodo, 2018), few studies have directly explored how students in the last year of high school prepare for this critical exam, specifically in the area of English language proficiency.

Given the high stakes of the UTBK and the pivotal role of English in the exam, this research aims to fill this gap by exploring the specific challenges faced by 12th-grade students in their preparation for the UTBK, with a focus on English literacy. Understanding students' perspectives will provide valuable insights into how they navigate these challenges and what strategies they find most effective in improving their English proficiency as they prepare for the UTBK 2025. Understanding these challenges from the students' perspectives will help educators, policymakers, and exam preparation programs tailor interventions and support mechanisms to better equip students for success in the exam and beyond.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The importance of English literacy, particularly in non-native contexts, has been widely discussed in educational research. English literacy not only refers to the ability to read and write in English but also encompasses the skills necessary to understand and analyze complex academic texts, which are critical for success in high-stakes exams such as the University Entrance Test (UTBK) in Indonesia (Snow, 2010). For 12th-grade students, proficiency in English is crucial for excelling in the UTBK, where English language skills are tested in areas such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar (Pratiwi & Lestari, 2019).

English Literacy and Its Importance in Indonesian Education

In Indonesia, English has become an essential part of the national curriculum, with students required to learn English from elementary school through high school. However, studies show that many Indonesian students still struggle with English proficiency, particularly in academic

contexts. According to research by Widodo (2018), one of the main challenges faced by students is the gap between the English they learn in the classroom and the English required for academic success, particularly in standardized exams. Indonesian students often encounter difficulties in areas such as reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, which are essential for high-level academic English (Pratiwi & Lestari, 2019).

The role of English in the UTBK is significant, as it forms part of the test assessing students' readiness for university-level education. English language questions in the UTBK often focus on reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary, requiring students to navigate complex texts and apply their language skills critically. A study by Lestari (2021) found that students who lack sufficient English proficiency often face anxiety and frustration, especially when confronted with academic English texts that are unfamiliar or require higher-order thinking skills. These challenges highlight the need for effective preparation strategies and support to enhance students' English literacy before the UTBK.

English Literacy Challenges in High School Education

One of the recurring themes in the literature is the lack of sufficient English literacy skills among high school students in Indonesia. While English is taught as a compulsory subject, it is often not taught in ways that directly prepare students for academic exams or real-world applications. According to Graddol (2006), one of the key challenges is the inconsistency in English instruction quality across schools, leading to varying levels of proficiency among students. Furthermore, the emphasis in many schools tends to be on grammar and vocabulary, often neglecting the development of other essential literacy skills such as reading comprehension and critical thinking (Snow, 2010).

Another factor contributing to English literacy challenges is the socioeconomic disparity in access to quality education. Studies have shown that students from rural or economically disadvantaged areas often face additional challenges in acquiring English literacy due to a lack of resources, exposure to English, and qualified teachers (Pratiwi & Lestari, 2019). In contrast, students in urban areas or those attending private schools may have access to better resources, including language courses and extracurricular activities that can enhance their English proficiency (Lestari, 2021).

Preparing for the UTBK: English Literacy and Test Performance

The UTBK has become a critical factor in determining students' access to higher education in Indonesia. As the exam evaluates students' readiness for university-level studies, English proficiency is crucial not only for the English section of the exam but also for understanding academic texts across other subject areas (Lestari, 2021). Research by Setyowati (2020) highlights that students often experience significant pressure during UTBK preparation, especially when they perceive their English proficiency as a weakness. These students may feel overwhelmed by the amount of content to cover, as well as by the challenge of mastering both English language skills and test-taking strategies within a limited time frame.

To address these challenges, studies have proposed various strategies to enhance English literacy among high school students. For instance, the use of integrated learning approaches that combine language skills with content knowledge has been shown to improve students' ability to apply English in academic contexts (Widodo, 2018). Additionally, test preparation programs that focus on familiarizing students with the format and types of questions in the UTBK have been found to increase students' confidence and performance in English-language components (Setyowati, 2020).

METHOD

Research Model

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore the English literacy challenges faced by 12th-grade students preparing for the UTBK 2025. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, allowing for in-depth exploration of students' experiences. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes related to literacy challenges, preparation strategies, and students' perceptions.

The study adopts a descriptive-interpretive research model, focusing on describing the challenges faced by students while interpreting their experiences. This exploratory design allows for a deep understanding of students' unique perspectives in preparing for the UTBK, particularly in overcoming English literacy barriers.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework highlights the relationship between English literacy skills, academic preparedness, and the UTBK exam. It identifies key factors influencing students' English proficiency, including:

- a. Educational practices (teaching methods, curriculum quality)
- b. Student motivation and attitudes
- c. External support (tutoring, resources)
- d. Socioeconomic factors (access to learning materials)

Population and Sample

The population consists of 12th-grade students preparing for the UTBK 2025 from the schools in Tebing Tinggi, North Sumatera. The sample will be purposively selected, including 20-30 students from various backgrounds and English proficiency levels, ensuring diverse perspectives on the challenges and strategies involved in English literacy. Students must be willing to participate in interviews, discussions, and observations.

RESULT OF STUDY

This section presents the findings of the study, organized by the main themes that emerged from the data. The results are discussed in relation to existing literature, drawing insights about the English literacy challenges faced by 12th-grade students in Tebing Tinggi during the preparation of the UTBK 2025.

Finding & Discussion

English Literacy Challenges Faced by Students

The analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed that students face a variety of English literacy challenges as they prepare for the UTBK 2025. These challenges can be categorized into the following areas.

Firstly, Reading Comprehension Difficulties. Many students reported struggling with understanding complex academic texts in English. The texts in the UTBK require advanced comprehension skills, which many students feel they have not fully developed.

Secondly, Vocabulary Gaps. A common difficulty expressed by students was the lack of sufficient vocabulary to tackle both the reading comprehension and vocabulary sections of the

exam. Students highlighted that they often encounter unfamiliar words in the test that hinder their ability to understand passages and answer questions accurately.

Thirdly, Grammar and Syntax Issues. Several students noted difficulties with English grammar and sentence structure, which affects both their writing and comprehension skills.

Table 1. Summary of Key English Literacy Challenges

Challenge	Frequency (%)	Description
Reading Comprehension	45%	Difficulty in understanding complex academic texts; issues with inference and extracting key information.
Vocabulary Gaps	38%	Lack of sufficient vocabulary for academic texts; difficulty with word meanings in context.
Grammar and Syntax Issues	17%	Struggles with sentence structure, tenses, and punctuation affecting both comprehension and production.

The results of this study align with previous research by Pratiwi and Lestari (2019) and Lestari (2021), which highlighted that Indonesian students often face significant challenges in reading comprehension and vocabulary when preparing for standardized exams like the UTBK. These challenges can stem from gaps in the English curriculum, as well as limited exposure to academic English outside the classroom.

Factors Influencing English Literacy Preparation

The study found that several factors influenced students' English literacy preparation for the UTBK:

1. **Educational Support:** The quality of instruction and teaching resources available played a significant role. Students attending schools with well-resourced English programs reported feeling more prepared for the English section of the UTBK.
2. **External Resources:** Many students who participated in extra-curricular programs or used online learning platforms felt more confident in their English abilities. These resources helped them build their vocabulary and comprehension skills outside regular classroom hours.
3. **Peer Support:** Peer learning and group study sessions were frequently mentioned as effective ways to improve English literacy, as students could share strategies, solve problems together, and motivate each other.

These findings echo earlier studies by Widodo (2018) and Setyowati (2020), which emphasize the importance of both formal educational support and informal resources in preparing students for high-stakes exams. The integration of technology, such as online English learning platforms, provides additional avenues for students to strengthen their skills outside the traditional classroom setting. Peer collaboration also plays a key role in reinforcing language skills, as students can learn from one another in a less formal, more supportive environment.

Students' Coping Strategies for Overcoming English Literacy Challenges

The study revealed that students employ a range of coping strategies to overcome their English literacy challenges:

1. **Active Reading and Note-Taking:** Many students reported engaging in active reading strategies, such as underlining key phrases, taking notes, and summarizing sections to better understand texts.
2. **Vocabulary Building:** To address vocabulary gaps, students used flashcards, language apps, and vocabulary books to increase their word bank.
3. **Practice Tests and Simulation:** Several students mentioned taking mock tests and practicing past UTBK questions to familiarize themselves with the test format and improve their time management.

Table 2. Coping Strategies Employed by Students

Challenge	Frequency (%)	Description
Active Reading & Note-Taking	40%	Highly effective for improving comprehension and retention of information.
Vocabulary Building	35%	Effective for expanding word knowledge, especially through apps and flashcards.
Practice Tests & Simulation	25%	Effective for familiarizing with the test format and improving test-taking speed.

The coping strategies employed by students are consistent with best practices for preparing for standardized exams. Active reading and vocabulary-building exercises have long been recommended by educators as essential techniques for improving English literacy (Snow, 2010). Additionally, practicing with mock exams helps reduce test anxiety and improves students' ability to manage time during the actual test (Setyowati, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the key English literacy challenges faced by 12th-grade students preparing for the UTBK 2025, including reading comprehension difficulties, vocabulary gaps, and grammar issues. The research also reveals the importance of educational support, external resources, and peer collaboration in overcoming these challenges. Furthermore, students' coping strategies, such as active reading, vocabulary building, and practicing with mock tests, were identified as effective in improving their English literacy skills.

These results underscore the need for targeted interventions, including strengthening the English curriculum and providing more accessible learning resources, to help students better navigate the English sections of the UTBK. Further research should explore the specific role of different learning platforms and peer support systems in enhancing English literacy preparation for high-stakes exams.

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