

# REVISITING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND ITS POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RIAU

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## Abstract

The rapid change in today's society forces higher education to adapt to it and transform to prepare their graduates for the future, which entails regulating minimum language proficiency levels for a graduation requirement in universities. This study aims to investigate university students' English proficiency level to revisit English language requirements at higher education institutions. To do so, this study used simple descriptive research using a TOEFL Prediction test administered to 400 university students at the University of Riau. The score was converted to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) to investigate whether the scores are relevant to the university's needs. The results show that the majority of students (N=258) have achieved the A2 CEFR level (Basic User – way stage). This suggests that it has fulfilled the minimum requirement set by the university. However, this is unlikely to reflect the objectives envisioned by the institution. Therefore, recommendations aroused from the findings will be provided in this research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, the fast-changing world requires people to acquire certain skills, namely 21st-century skills, to remain competitive (Akçay et al., 2022; Karatas & Arpacı, 2021; Mirici & Ataberk, 2014; Mıhladı Turhan & Açıık Demirci, 2021). However, these skills, along with the flow of information worldwide, are mostly delivered in English. Without learning the language, one can be unlikely able to reap the benefit of the free flow of information and compete in this globalized era. Therefore, people need to master English and all other skills necessary to survive in the 21st century (Husin & Radzuan, 2021).

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To achieve perceived English language proficiency, many countries have given an effort to facilitate their students through educational institutions. For example, in the United States, its government invested in designing effective methods to improve students' English proficiency, which involves creating bilingual classes and two-way bilingual classes (Education Commission of The States, 2020b). Proficiency is also measured every year to track students' progress (Education Commission of The States, 2020a). For those identified as international students, the schools and universities are obliged to provide English language proficiency tests upon arrival to measure their initial proficiency as well as to offer any necessary assistance (The Center on Standards & Assessment Implementation, 2017). A similar effort has been made by other countries, such as Turkey, Hong Kong, and Thailand who design English-based higher education to improve their competitive advantage (Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022; Ulum, 2020; Yeung, 2020) as well as Saudi Arabia, Mongolia, and China, who set English Language Proficiency (ELP) test in higher education (Cheewasukthaworn, 2022; Ling & Gu, 2019; Nasser Alnasser, 2018; Orosoo & Jamiyansuren, 2021).

In developing countries where English is still a foreign language, such as Indonesia, Education plays an important role to respond to globalization (Roach, 2019; Susilo, 2015). As education is expected to prepare students for the future, educational institutions must equip students with relevant skills so that they can succeed once they leave school. One of them is to develop their students' English language abilities, which has been done in many ways. At the national level, English is treated as one of the compulsory subjects at high school levels, regardless of what major they are in (Makewa et al., 2013; Manuel, 2022; Nguyen, 2019). At institutional levels, many schools provide different programs which allow their students to be familiar with the language (Zein et al., 2020). Such effort shows the significance of English in developing countries' education.

The same importance applies to Indonesian higher education, although the strategy used is slightly different from those in high schools (Zein et al., 2020). Besides offering particular subjects for English skills (Roach, 2019), universities in Indonesia also require students to obtain a standardized test certificate with a certain score for graduation requirements. This regulation is implemented nationwide, using TOEFL ITP test with some score variations according to students' majors. In general, Undergraduate students should achieve at least 450 points, while those studying English 500 (Dwi Raharjo, 2020).

The English language proficiency requirement set by Indonesian universities might be linked to the country's target for the internationalization of education to achieve economic growth (Kyrychenko, 2018). This is reflected in the eighth Key Performance Index (IKU) of Indonesian higher education which was launched in 2020 (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, 2020). Some points in the 'IKU' directly aim at promoting the internalization of education through international collaboration, research, and accreditation, which implies the need for stakeholders to be able to communicate in English both socially and academically. As someone who can communicate in English does not necessarily mean that they can understand language in the academic setting, universities need to ensure that their graduates can do well in both contexts (Shaw, 2019).

In realizing this target, many studies have been conducted to find the best practice for English language mastery in the Indonesian higher education context. Some focus on internal factors such as perceptions (Dwi Raharjo, 2020; Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021; Yufrizal & Eka Pratiwi, 2020; Zulaiha et al., 2020) and motivation (Maruf et al., 2022; Weda et al., 2021), while others look at the external factors such as learning materials (Basuki et al., 2018) and practices (Ahsanu et al., 2020; Erni, 2021; Pasaribu & Syarfi, 2021; Tri Purwanti, 2021; Weda, 2018; Zulaiha et al., 2020). However, the evaluation of whether the current English language proficiency policy in Indonesian higher education covers both social and academic proficiency standards is still scarce, especially those which look at the relevance of the standard score required by the university (TOEFL ITP with a minimum score of 450) with the need of academic English. With many changes that have taken place in University's agenda for the future, it is vital to ensure that the policy and practice are in line with the overall economic goals (Kyrychenko, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the current English language proficiency of university students based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) to investigate whether students' language proficiency has met the university's minimum requirement and whether the scores are relevant to the university's need. This evaluation is expected to shed light on the relevance of the policy towards the university's objectives and projections for the future.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive quantitative study that aims at measuring university students' English proficiency. To do so, a TOEFL prediction test was used. The test was provided by the University of Riau's Language Center for all current students. As there are currently over 30,000 students enrolled in the university, 400 students who took the test in 2023 were taken as the sample using simple random sampling which fulfills a 95% of confidence level and 5% margin of error. Simple statistical analysis was used to calculate means and percentages from the scores. The final scores were presented in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) criteria. This framework is preferred in this study as it offers a detailed description of each score which can be useful to make a meaningful understanding of the data (Shaw, 2019). The score cuts were provided in the following table to clarify the conversion.

**Table 1.** The minimum TOEFL ITP scores corresponding with CEFR levels and CEFR descriptions

<b>Minimum TOEFL ITP Scores</b>	<b>CEFR Levels</b>	<b>CEFR General Description</b>
627	C1 Proficient User – Effective	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use

	Operational Proficiency	language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
543	B2 Independent User – Vantage	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
460	B1 Independent User – Threshold	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
337	A2 Basic User – Waystage	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

Source: (Tannenbaum & Baron, 2011)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to investigate university students' English proficiency level and evaluate the policy regulated by higher education institutions related to this. The highest score obtained from the data was 527, while the lowest was 370. The TOEFL scores of all participants can be seen in the following table:

**Table 2.** TOEFL prediction test scores

TOEFL Score Range	N	%
370-385	10	2.5
386-401	28	7
402-417	20	5
418-433	23	5.75
434-449	46	11.5
450-465	185	46.25
466-481	43	10.75
482-497	19	4.75
498-513	23	5.75
514-529	3	0.75
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

According to Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of students scored between 450 and 465, accounting for almost half of all participants (46.25%). Only 31.75% of students received less than 450 points. This shows that most students have met the minimum requirement set by the institution. In detail, the average score based on the faculty is presented in the following table:

**Table 3.** Score distribution based on faculty

Faculty	N	Mean						Score
		Section 1		Section 2		Section 3		
		CA	CS	CA	CS	CA	CS	
FKIP (Teacher Training and Education)	106	24	47	15	39	34	51	456
FISIP (Social and Political Science)	70	20	44	15	39	34	51	444
FT (Engineering)	16	21	44	15	38	36	52	448
Faperta (Agriculture)	28	19	43	18	42	32	49	448
Faperika (Fisheries and Marine Science)	62	21	44	18	41	32	49	447
FEB (Economics and Business)	65	22	45	15	39	34	51	452
FMIPA (Mathematics and Natural	20	23	46	16	40	35	52	459

Science)								
FH (Law)	25	20	44	16	40	35	52	455
FKp (Nursing)	8	21	44	16	40	30	48	440
<b>Total</b>	400	191	401	144	358	302	455	4049
<b>Mean</b>	44	21	45	16	40	34	51	450

Notes: CA= Correct Answers; CS= Converted Score

Table 3 depicts the distribution of participants by faculty. As is observed, they came from nine faculties, with over a quarter from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education with an average TOEFL score of 456. The highest mean score belongs to the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science (459). The faculty of law came third (455), just ahead of the Faculty of Economics and Business (452). Even though the average score from all faculties was 450 (meeting the minimum requirement set by the university), there were five faculties whose mean scores were below the required score, namely the Faculty of Nursing (440), the Faculty of Social and Political Science (444), the Faculty of Engineering (448), the Faculty of Agriculture (448), and the Faculty Fisheries and Marine Science (447).

Regarding the classification and conversion to CEFR score levels, the results of the TOEFL Prediction Test administered to 400 university students at the University of Riau can be seen as follow:

**Table 4.** Cambridge language proficiency test results

TOEFL Score Ranges	Frequency (N=28)	CEFR Level	CEFR descriptions
460-527	142	B1 Independent User – Threshold	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
370-457	258	A2 Basic User – Waystage	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of

immediate need.

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Table 4 illustrates the outcomes of converting TOEFL scores to CEFR score levels of students' proficiency. As the obtained TOEFL scores ranged from 370 to 527, they fell into two levels, namely B1 and A2. From the table, it can be seen that the majority of students have reached the A2 proficiency level (N=258). This means that most of the participants are considered able to use the language for basic communication, such as understanding simple terms and daily routines. Only 142 students (over a third of the participants) were categorized as B1 (Independent User–Threshold), which implies that they were expected to be able to deal with simple text. However, none of the participants received higher than B1, which implies that they might be not ready for using English in an academic setting, especially dealing with complex text.

If referred to University policy regarding the standardized test criteria (minimum score of 450), it shows that students have met the requirement. However, it raises a question as to whether the score is sufficient for preparing university students for their academic careers. Apart from the TOEFL ITP score requirement, the university has set certain goals for its graduates (Kyrychenko, 2018). For example, in its vision, the University of Riau aims to be a research university that strives for excellence in science and technology in South East Asia in the year 2035. This vision should be the basis for many of the policies circulating in the university.

Looking at the English Language Certificate required by the university, it seems that the policy does not reflect the vision set. When a higher institution aims for excellence in science and technology, the actors within the institution should bear the responsibility to achieve this. This means that each of the stakeholders, be it students or lecturers, should have certain competencies (namely 21st-century skills) to be competitive globally (Karatas & Arpacı, 2021; Mirici & Ataberk, 2014; Mıhladı Turhan & Açıık Demirci, 2021). To achieve this, they have to have certain levels of English which allow them to understand information circulating using the international language.

To be able to actively engage in an academic setting, students need to have at least B1 or B2 level. As described in Table 1, students at the two levels can write up simple text, read and communicate in an academic setting. Thus, these proficiency levels allow them to read academic articles, write an essay, interact with international students, and understand English academic instructions. Such levels are pertinent to the need of the university to achieve its desired goals.

Therefore, it is the right time for the university to revisit its language policy. Students have reached the minimum ability to understand basic English, which means the current requirement has been met. However, when aiming for its vision, it is unlikely relevant. The

university needs to aim higher level of proficiency to support the vision. Thus, the university should reconsider evaluating the needs and the relevance of its language policy.

Another question raises as to how to achieve the desired goals besides revising the policy, as changing the policy alone will unlikely make an immediate transformation in students' English. It should be aligned with the university's program to support students so they can learn better. In doing so, the university can give some interventions which take students' characteristics, perceptions, motivations, and difficulties into consideration (Elliott & Zhang, 2019; Nguyen, 2019; Ozawa, 2019; Pinphet & Wasanasomsithi, 2022). Besides, the institution should also provide more resources, such as access to learning resources, facilities, programs and training which allow them to learn autonomously (Song, 2020). It is also important for the university to revisit its assessment procedure, so it can provide valid and reliable information for decision-making (Dunworth, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

From the research findings, it is clear that students have reached the minimum requirement set by the university. Even though they achieve the required score, it is unlikely to reflect the need of both the university and the graduates. As the institution aims to excel in science and technology, it means that it needs to equip students with English skills that allow them to engage in academic activities. Therefore, the university needs to re-assess its language proficiency requirement and provide assistance for the student to reach the target score.

Based on the findings, there are some recommendations offered to the University. Firstly, to realize its vision the university needs to reconsider aiming for a higher English proficiency level, which is at least at B1 level for its students. If referring to the TOEFL ITP score cuts, it is equal to at least 460 points. However, it should not be done by only raising the bar. As the English language is a skill, students should be prepared through the learning process before they sit on the exam for obtaining an English language certificate. Thus, the university should offer English subjects that accommodate this need. Besides, it is necessary that lecturers also improve their English skills so that they can provide a supportive environment for students to be familiar with the language to enhance their immersion in English.

It is important to note that this study is not generalizable as it is limited to a small number of samples. Therefore, there is a need for further research with a larger number of participants so that it can be used as consideration in decision-making. Besides, further research on the effective English program at the university level is also required to support students and lecturers to meet the requirement set by the institution.



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