



Breaking the Language Barrier: Exploring English Learning Difficulties among Business Students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa

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Abstract. English proficiency plays a significant role in preparing business students for academic success and future professional communication. However, many students continue to encounter challenges in learning English, particularly within business-related contexts. This study aimed to explore and analyze the English learning difficulties experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa and to identify the linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors contributing to these difficulties. The study employed an exploratory qualitative case-study design involving fifteen Management and Accounting students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major themes: students perceived English as a difficult foreign language, experienced limited speaking ability due to insufficient opportunities for meaningful practice, and demonstrated limited understanding of TOEFL materials despite showing strong motivation to improve. The results indicate that students' learning difficulties are shaped by the interaction of limited vocabulary and business terminology, low confidence, inadequate exposure to English, and limited speaking practice. The study implies that Business English instruction should emphasize communicative learning, contextualized business vocabulary, regular speaking activities, and structured TOEFL preparation to enhance students' academic achievement, workplace readiness, and overall English proficiency.

Keywords: Business English; English Learning Difficulties; English Specific Purposes; Speaking Skills; TOEFL Preparation.

1. BACKGROUND

English proficiency has become an important academic and professional competence in business education. Business students are expected not only to understand general English but also to use the language for discipline-specific purposes, such as interpreting business information, reading reports, writing professional correspondence, delivering presentations, participating in meetings, and communicating with people from different linguistic backgrounds. Accordingly, English competence in business education extends beyond knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; it also involves the ability to perform communicative tasks accurately, confidently, and appropriately. Research involving business and management students indicates that learners perceive Business English as an important component of their preparation for employment and professional communication (Alharbi, 2022). Higher education institutions that offer business-related programs therefore need to ensure that English instruction is aligned with students' academic needs and prospective workplace demands.

This orientation corresponds with English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which positions learners' disciplinary and professional contexts as the foundation of language instruction. Within this framework, English learning should be designed around the communicative

situations that learners are likely to encounter rather than around general linguistic knowledge alone. For business students, this involves developing the ability to present business ideas, describe financial information, negotiate, write professional emails, interpret charts, and discuss managerial or accounting issues. A context-sensitive approach is essential because students from different academic programs and institutional environments may experience different learning barriers. An investigation of ESP implementation at an Indonesian university demonstrated that students' language development could be constrained by interconnected issues at the institutional, program, and classroom levels, highlighting the importance of conducting systematic and context-specific investigations (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017).

Despite its importance, learning English in an English as a Foreign Language context can present multiple and interrelated difficulties. Students may experience linguistic difficulties involving vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sentence construction, which can subsequently influence their listening, speaking, reading, and writing performance. Difficulties may also arise from affective factors, including anxiety, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and limited motivation to communicate in English. Meanwhile, restricted exposure to English, limited opportunities for meaningful practice, learning materials that are insufficiently connected to students' disciplines, and instructional approaches that do not accommodate differences in proficiency may intensify these challenges. English learning difficulties should therefore be understood as a multidimensional issue shaped by the interaction of linguistic competence, psychological conditions, learning experiences, and the educational environment.

STIE Gema Widya Bangsa offers undergraduate programs in Management and Accounting, both of which prepare students for academic and professional activities in business-related fields. Preliminary observations conducted by the researchers indicate that several students still experience difficulty understanding English, particularly vocabulary and technical terms used in business contexts. The observations also suggest that many students continue to perceive English as a difficult subject. Such perceptions may affect their confidence, classroom participation, willingness to practise, and ability to use English communicatively. These preliminary indications do not constitute the final findings of the study, but they provide an empirical starting point for investigating the nature and sources of the difficulties experienced by the students.

The issue is particularly important because students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa are expected to develop functional English competence, especially speaking ability. Oral communication skills can support their future participation in job interviews, business

presentations, workplace discussions, negotiations, and professional interactions with colleagues or clients. Speaking competence requires students to combine vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and confidence in real-time communication. Therefore, students who perceive English as difficult or possess limited business-related vocabulary may face obstacles not only in their current learning process but also in developing the communicative readiness required for employment.

In addition to its professional relevance, English competence also carries an immediate academic consequence for students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa. Students are required to fulfil a TOEFL-related requirement as part of their eligibility for the final undergraduate thesis examination. This institutional requirement means that English competence is not merely an additional skill but is connected to students' academic progression and completion of their undergraduate studies. Students who continue to experience difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and other language components may encounter challenges in preparing for the TOEFL requirement. This condition strengthens the urgency of identifying their English learning difficulties before those difficulties become barriers to completing their academic requirements.

Previous studies provide evidence of similar challenges in business-related higher education. Simaremare et al. (2023) found that Business Administration students experienced difficulties associated with limited vocabulary, mispronunciation, and inaccurate sentence construction. These problems contributed to anxiety and obstructed effective communication. The study also indicated that students needed to develop all four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing, to meet their academic and professional needs (Simaremare et al., 2023). Similarly, Desnaranti and Putra (2023) reported that undergraduate students considered English important for communication in formal and informal business settings, while speaking remained an area requiring substantial improvement (Desnaranti & Putra, 2023). Alharbi (2022) also showed that business students were aware of the relationship between appropriate Business English provision and their preparation for the labour market. Collectively, these studies confirm the relevance of English for business students and demonstrate that language difficulties can affect both academic participation and professional readiness.

Nevertheless, the reviewed studies predominantly employ a needs-analysis orientation by identifying students' necessities, perceived deficiencies, preferred skills, and expectations regarding Business English courses. Such studies are valuable for determining what students need to learn, but they do not always provide a comprehensive explanation of how students

experience their learning difficulties, why those difficulties occur, and how linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors interact. Several investigations also concentrate on a particular language skill or rank the skills students consider important without connecting the identified difficulties to the specific communicative tasks required in business education. Furthermore, no published study identified in the literature reviewed for this research has specifically investigated English learning difficulties among business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa. Consequently, the research gap is not limited to the absence of evidence from a particular institution; it also concerns the need for a multidimensional and task-oriented analysis of English learning barriers in a business-education context.

The urgency of the present study arises from the intersection of three conditions: students' preliminary indications of difficulty in understanding English and business-related terminology, the importance of speaking competence for workplace readiness, and the TOEFL-related requirement associated with the final thesis examination. Without a systematic understanding of these difficulties, instructional decisions may not fully address students' actual learning barriers. Teachers may focus on general language content while students require more specific support in business vocabulary, oral communication, listening comprehension, grammar, or TOEFL-related language components. An empirical investigation is therefore needed to provide a reliable basis for selecting teaching strategies, designing relevant learning materials, and developing academic support programs.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of English learning difficulties rather than merely identifying students' preferred skills or general Business English needs. The study connects difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing with underlying language components such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sentence construction. It also considers affective and learning-related factors, including students' perceptions of English, confidence, anxiety, motivation, exposure to the language, instructional practices, and the relevance of learning materials. These dimensions are interpreted in relation to business communication, workplace preparation, and the TOEFL-related academic requirement at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa. This multidimensional and contextually grounded perspective is expected to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the barriers encountered by business students.

Based on this rationale, the study aims to explore and analyse the English learning difficulties experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa. Specifically, it seeks to identify the forms of difficulty encountered across English language skills, examine the linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors contributing to those difficulties,

and analyse how these challenges relate to students' Business English communication, workplace readiness, and preparation for the TOEFL requirement. The findings are expected to provide an empirical basis for developing more relevant teaching strategies, learning materials, and academic support that correspond to students' characteristics and future professional communication needs.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is grounded in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly Business English. ESP focuses on the language, vocabulary, genres, and communicative situations associated with learners' academic or professional purposes. Unlike General English, ESP instruction should be designed according to the language tasks learners are expected to perform in a specific field (Chan & McGrath, 2026). In business education, these tasks may include delivering presentations, participating in meetings, attending job interviews, writing professional correspondence, interpreting business information, and communicating with clients or colleagues. Therefore, English instruction for business students should address both their current learning difficulties and the language demands they will encounter academically and professionally. Shanavas et al. (2024) emphasise that effective ESP instruction at the tertiary level requires alignment among students' needs, learning materials, instructional practices, and assessment.

English learning difficulties may involve linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, unfamiliar business terminology, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems, and inaccurate sentence construction. These limitations may affect students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Simaremare et al. (2023) found that Business Administration students experienced difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence construction. The difficulties hindered their ability to communicate, understand business-related information, deliver presentations, and produce professional written texts. This finding indicates that English learning difficulties should not be examined through one skill alone because weaknesses in language components can influence several communicative abilities simultaneously.

Speaking is particularly important for business students because it supports workplace communication, presentations, negotiations, meetings, and job interviews. However, speaking also requires students to retrieve vocabulary, construct sentences, pronounce words, and respond to other speakers in real time. In addition to linguistic limitations, students may experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence. Fauzi and Asi (2023)

found that Indonesian university students experienced considerable speaking anxiety associated with apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and assessment pressure. Annur and Yunita (2025) similarly reported that non-English-major students experienced oral-presentation anxiety related to language ability and evaluation. These findings support the preliminary observation at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa that many students still perceive English as difficult. Such perceptions may reduce their willingness to speak and restrict their opportunities to develop communicative competence.

Previous research has also demonstrated the relevance of Business English to students' academic and professional preparation. Alharbi (2022) found that business and management students recognised Business English as an important element of employability and workplace readiness. Desnaranti and Putra (2023) reported that undergraduate students required English for formal and informal business communication, with speaking identified as an ability that needed further development. Simaremare et al. (2023) identified more specific barriers involving business vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, anxiety, and confidence. These studies confirm the importance of Business English but predominantly focus on students' language needs or preferred skills.

The present study differs from previous research by examining students' learning difficulties as an interaction among linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors. It also connects these difficulties with three demands encountered by students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa: understanding Business English, developing speaking competence for future employment, and preparing for the TOEFL-related requirement connected to the final undergraduate thesis examination. The study is guided by the proposition that students' difficulties do not arise from linguistic limitations alone but from the interaction between limited language competence, negative perceptions of English, communication anxiety, restricted practice, and learning conditions.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the present study explicitly focuses on two research issues. The first focus is the identification and analysis of English learning difficulties experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, particularly in understanding and using business-related English. The second focus is the analysis of linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors contributing to these difficulties and their implications for students' speaking competence, workplace readiness, and preparation for the TOEFL-related academic requirement. The study is grounded in the proposition that students' English learning difficulties result from the interaction of limited linguistic competence, negative perceptions of English, communication anxiety, restricted

opportunities for practice, and learning conditions that may not fully correspond to their academic and professional needs.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case-study design to develop an in-depth understanding of the English learning difficulties experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa. This design was appropriate because the study examined students' experiences and perceptions within a specific institutional context rather than seeking statistical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The investigation covered difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, particularly those associated with vocabulary, business terminology, grammar, pronunciation, sentence construction, speaking competence, workplace readiness, and preparation for the TOEFL-related academic requirement.

The research population comprised active undergraduate students from the Management and Accounting study programs who had completed at least one English course. Fifteen students were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevant English-learning experiences and willingness to participate. This number was considered sufficient for a focused qualitative study that prioritised the relevance, depth, and adequacy of the information obtained from participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Only students participated in the study, while the researcher's position as their English lecturer was acknowledged and managed through reflexive practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The individual interviews explored students' difficulties across the four English language skills, their experiences in understanding Business English, confidence and anxiety when speaking, learning motivation, opportunities for practice, workplace communication needs, and TOEFL preparation. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Classroom observations focused on students' participation, responses to English instructions, use of business terminology, willingness to speak, and strategies for managing communication difficulties. Student assignments, presentation materials, English-learning materials, and documents related to the TOEFL requirement were analysed as supporting data.

The research instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide, an observation guide, and a document-analysis guide developed according to the research objectives and analytical dimensions. Before use, the instruments were reviewed for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research focus. The review confirmed that the instruments adequately

covered the required dimensions after minor wording revisions. The interview guide was also piloted with a student who met the selection criteria but was not included among the 15 principal participants.

The data were analysed thematically by repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes, assigning initial codes, grouping related codes, developing themes, reviewing the themes, and interpreting their meanings in relation to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Deductive coding employed linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors as initial analytical categories, while inductive coding accommodated additional patterns emerging from the participants' experiences. Microsoft Excel was used to organise transcripts, codes, supporting quotations, and themes. No inferential statistical tests were applied.

The trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents, participant confirmation, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling (Ahmed, 2024). Because the researcher was also the participants' English lecturer, participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their decision did not affect their grades or academic status. Participant identities were protected using codes, and the collected data were stored securely. The research model positioned English learning difficulties as the central phenomenon shaped by linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors. These factors were interpreted in relation to difficulties across the four language skills and their implications for Business English communication, speaking competence, workplace readiness, and TOEFL preparation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were collected from February–June, 2026 at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa, Bandung, West Java. The participants consisted of 15 students from the Management and Accounting study programs who had completed at least one English course. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews explored students' experiences in learning the four English language skills, using Business English, speaking in English, and understanding TOEFL materials. Classroom observations and relevant learning documents were used to support and verify the interview findings.

The data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring statements, grouping similar codes, and developing themes related to the two research focuses. The analysis produced three central themes: English as a difficult foreign language, limited speaking ability caused by insufficient practice, and limited understanding of TOEFL materials accompanied

by a desire for further learning. Table 1 summarises the relationship between the research focuses and the main findings.

Table 1. Summary of the Research Findings.

No.	Main Theme	Key Findings	Interpretation
1	English as a Difficult Foreign Language	Students perceived English as difficult because it was unfamiliar and different from the language they normally used. They also experienced difficulty understanding general vocabulary and business-related terms.	Limited exposure and familiarity created linguistic and affective barriers to learning English.
2	Limited Speaking Ability and Practice	Students experienced difficulty expressing ideas orally because they were not accustomed to using English in classroom activities or daily communication.	Insufficient speaking practice prevented students from developing fluency and confidence.
3	Limited TOEFL Comprehension	Students had limited understanding of TOEFL materials but expressed a desire to receive additional instruction and practice.	Limited preparation affected students' TOEFL readiness, while their willingness to learn reflected positive learning motivation.

Source: Research data processed by the author (2026).

As shown in Table 1, students' difficulties did not originate from a single language component. Their problems reflected the interaction of linguistic limitations, perceptions of English, limited speaking practice, and insufficient familiarity with TOEFL materials. Although the investigation covered four language skills, the most prominent difficulties were related to speaking and TOEFL comprehension.

English Learning Difficulties

English as a Difficult Foreign Language

The first finding showed that the students generally perceived English as a difficult subject because it was a foreign language. English was considered unfamiliar compared with the language they normally used in academic and social interactions. This perception influenced their readiness to participate in English-learning activities. When students had already assumed that English was difficult, they tended to experience greater difficulty processing unfamiliar words, sentence patterns, and meanings.

This difficulty became more apparent when students encountered business-related English. Business terms were not always easily understood because students needed to connect their general English knowledge with specialised concepts in management and accounting. Therefore, the perceived difficulty of English was not merely caused by its status as a foreign language. It also reflected limited exposure to English and insufficient familiarity with vocabulary relevant to the students' fields of study.

This finding supports Winantaka's (2024) study, which found that Indonesian management students experienced difficulties in Business English and required more appropriate learning materials across language skills. Romadhon (2023) similarly reported that business students needed English for academic and professional communication but continued to experience difficulties in oral presentations, discussions, pronunciation, listening, and reading. The present findings extend these studies by demonstrating that students' perceptions of English as difficult may function as an initial barrier before they attempt to use Business English actively.

Limited Speaking Ability and Speaking Practice

Speaking emerged as the most prominent productive-language difficulty. The students experienced difficulty expressing their ideas orally and could not use English spontaneously. The findings indicated that this problem was closely related to the absence of regular speaking habits. English was mainly encountered as a classroom subject rather than as a language used consistently for communication.

The lack of habitual practice created a continuing cycle. Limited practice reduced students' opportunities to develop fluency, while their limited fluency made them less prepared to speak. Consequently, English speaking remained an unfamiliar activity. This finding suggests that the students' speaking difficulties should not be interpreted only as a lack of language knowledge. Their difficulties were also influenced by a learning environment that had not provided sufficient opportunities for repeated and meaningful oral communication.

The findings are consistent with Mustamir's (2024) synthesis of studies on Indonesian EFL learners, which identified limited confidence, perceived language limitations, and classroom conditions as important factors influencing English-speaking performance. However, the present study particularly emphasised the role of speaking habits. The students did not simply need additional explanations of grammar and vocabulary; they needed regular opportunities to transform their knowledge into actual communication.

This finding is particularly relevant to business students because speaking competence is required in workplace activities such as presentations, meetings, negotiations, telephone conversations, and job interviews. Romadhon (2023) found that business students considered speaking particularly important for real-time professional communication. Similarly, Winantaka (2024) highlighted the need for a more dynamic Business English learning model to address management students' speaking difficulties. Therefore, the speaking difficulties identified at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa may affect students' readiness to participate in future professional communication.

Limited Understanding of TOEFL Materials

The third finding concerned students' limited understanding of TOEFL materials. The students indicated that they still had difficulty comprehending TOEFL tasks and needed more preparation. Their limited understanding suggested that general English instruction had not fully equipped them with the language knowledge and test-taking familiarity required for the TOEFL-related academic requirement.

This finding corresponds with Jasrial et al. (2022), who found that Indonesian university students experienced considerable difficulties in the listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension sections of a TOEFL prediction test. Muziatun et al. (2024) also reported that vocabulary mastery and reading strategies were important components in overcoming TOEFL reading-comprehension difficulties. These previous findings confirm that TOEFL performance requires both general English competence and specific preparation for the structure and demands of the test.

Nevertheless, the students' limited TOEFL comprehension was accompanied by a positive finding: they expressed a desire to learn more. Their willingness to receive additional instruction indicated that limited proficiency did not necessarily represent a lack of motivation. Instead, it demonstrated a gap between their current ability and the learning support they required. This motivation could become an important foundation for developing a more systematic TOEFL preparation programme.

Contributing Factors and Implications

Interaction of Linguistic, Affective, Pedagogical, and Contextual Factors

The findings demonstrated that the students' English learning difficulties resulted from interacting factors. Linguistic factors included limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with Business English terms, difficulty producing spoken language, and limited comprehension of TOEFL materials. The affective factor was reflected in the perception that English was inherently difficult. Pedagogical and contextual factors involved limited opportunities to practise speaking and insufficient exposure to English outside formal lessons.

These factors reinforced one another. Limited linguistic competence made speaking more difficult, while the perception that English was difficult could discourage active participation. Reduced participation then limited the practice necessary for developing fluency. In the TOEFL context, limited English proficiency combined with insufficient familiarity with test materials affected students' readiness for the institutional requirement. Thus, the findings qualitatively supported the research proposition that English learning difficulties were

produced by the interaction of linguistic, affective, pedagogical, and contextual conditions. No statistical hypothesis testing was conducted because the study employed a qualitative design.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings indicate that English learning difficulties among business students should not be explained exclusively through vocabulary or grammar limitations. The difficulties need to be understood as a combination of language competence, students' perceptions, learning habits, and the availability of meaningful practice. The study also highlights the importance of examining English difficulties within a specific academic and professional context.

Practically, English instruction at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa should provide more consistent speaking opportunities through short presentations, role-plays, business meetings, job-interview simulations, telephone conversations, and negotiation activities. These activities should be conducted gradually and regularly so that speaking becomes a familiar classroom practice. Business vocabulary should also be integrated into communicative tasks rather than taught only through memorisation.

TOEFL preparation should be organised progressively through diagnostic activities, explicit instruction, guided exercises, and regular practice covering the relevant TOEFL components. The students' willingness to learn more should be used as motivational support for this programme. Integrating Business English speaking practice with structured TOEFL preparation would help students meet both professional communication needs and the TOEFL-related academic requirement for completing their final thesis examination.

Overall, the findings revealed that the language barrier experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa was shaped by limited exposure, insufficient speaking habits, and limited TOEFL comprehension. At the same time, the students' desire for further learning indicated an opportunity for improvement through contextual, communicative, and needs-based English instruction.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the English learning difficulties experienced by business students at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa were most evident in speaking and TOEFL comprehension. Students perceived English as difficult because it was a foreign language, had limited familiarity with business-related vocabulary, and were not accustomed to communicating in English. These difficulties resulted from the interaction of linguistic limitations, negative perceptions of English, limited opportunities for speaking practice, and

insufficient TOEFL preparation. Nevertheless, the students' willingness to continue learning indicated positive motivation that could support future improvement. As this study employed a qualitative design, no statistical hypothesis testing was conducted.

Based on these findings, English instruction at STIE Gema Widya Bangsa should provide regular and contextual speaking activities, including business presentations, meetings, negotiations, telephone conversations, and job-interview simulations. A structured TOEFL preparation programme should also be provided progressively through diagnostic exercises, guided instruction, and regular practice. These recommendations are expected to support students' academic requirements and prepare them for English communication in the workplace.

The findings should be interpreted cautiously because the study involved only 15 purposively selected students from one institution. Therefore, the results describe the experiences of the participants within the specific context of STIE Gema Widya Bangsa and should not be generalised to all business students. Future research could involve participants from multiple institutions, examine differences between study programmes or proficiency levels, and evaluate the effectiveness of communicative Business English instruction and structured TOEFL preparation over a longer period.

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