



## Analysis of the Basic English Proficiency of Prospective University Students Based on Diagnostic Test Results

Sulistyoadi Jokosaharjo<sup>1\*</sup>, Ni Luh Komang Julyanti Paramita Sari<sup>1</sup>, Ni Nyoman Nidya Trianingrum<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Triatma Mulya

\*Correspondence: [sulistyo.adi@triatmamulya.ac.id](mailto:sulistyo.adi@triatmamulya.ac.id)

### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the basic English proficiency of prospective university students through a multiple-choice test administered during the first batch of the admission process at Triatma Mulya University involving a total of 160 prospective students. The instrument used in this study was a multiple-choice diagnostic English test focusing on basic grammar, vocabulary comprehension, and communication expressions. Therefore, the test was not intended to measure complete English proficiency, but to identify students' initial basic English competence for course design purpose. The study employed a descriptive mixed-method design by categorizing the test items into 10 language components. The findings show that students perform well in communication expressions and relatively well in simple present and past tense, but having difficulties in conditional sentences, subject-verb agreement, verb forms, and complex sentence construction. These findings indicate that an elementary English course should not only repeat general grammar explanations, but also provide communicative drills and contextualized practice.

**Keywords:** Basic English Proficiency; Prospective University Students; Diagnostic English Test; Elementary English Course

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## INTRODUCTION

In higher education, English is not only used for communication purposes but also for accessing scientific references, academic publications, and international collaboration opportunities. Therefore, many universities conduct a diagnostic English test to identify students' initial proficiency level before implementing learning programs. Diagnostic assessment is considered an important educational strategy because it helps institutions identify students' strengths and weaknesses in language learning. Unlike a placement test, which mainly classifies learners into proficiency levels, a diagnostic test provides more specific information about learners' strengths and weaknesses in particular language components. In this study, the diagnostic test was considered more relevant because the purpose was not to place students into different classes, but to identify the language components that should be emphasized in the elementary English course. Brown (2014) explains that diagnostic testing allows educators to design instructional materials based on learners' actual needs. In addition, Richards & Rodgers (2014) emphasize that English language teaching should be aligned with students' communicative competence and linguistic readiness. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs effectively when instruction is adjusted to the learner's zone of proximal development. In the context of English learning, diagnostic test provides valuable information for designing learning experiences that suit students' proficiency levels. In addition, error analysis theory can provide important insights into language acquisition processes and instructional needs (Corder et al., 1981). Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of diagnostic assessment in English language learning (Jokosaharjo, Sari, et al., 2020; Jokosaharjo, Subadra, et al., 2020; Jokosaharjo & Sari, 2023). Based on those studies, several grammar related components such as subject-verb agreement, conditional sentences, verb forms, gerunds and infinitives are categorized as weak. If those problems are not addressed before regular classes begin, students may experience difficulties in understanding English learning materials, participating in classroom interaction, and accessing academic references written in English. Triatma Mulya

University has twenty-one study programs, in which each study program equips its students with English language skills through English courses at various levels. The first level of the English courses at Triatma Mulya University is the elementary English course which is offered to prospective students enrolling in each of these study programs. A diagnostic English test is administered to prospective students of each study program during the admission process. The test results are used to identify students' basic English proficiency and to design an elementary English course that is conducted before regular classes begin. Therefore, this study aims to categorize test items, analyze students' answers, identify strengths and weaknesses, and provide recommendations for designing an adaptive elementary English course. The novelty of this study is its focus on prospective university students from various study programs before they begin their regular academic activities. Previous studies (Jokosaharjo, Sari, et al., 2020; Jokosaharjo, Subadra, et al., 2020; Jokosaharjo & Sari, 2023) mainly investigate English errors among students in specific hospitality-related contexts. In contrast, this study analyzes diagnostic test results from prospective students across different academic backgrounds. The 10 language components were selected because they represent basic grammar, vocabulary, and communication features commonly required in an Elementary English course. Thus, this study contributes the needs-based English course design by providing empirical evidence for determining the course priorities.

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive mixed-method design. Descriptive research is appropriate for analyzing existing conditions and interpreting observed phenomena systematically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach was used to interpret students' language strengths and weaknesses, while the quantitative approach was applied to calculate the accuracy percentages of students' answers. The research data were obtained from a multiple-choice English test that was given to the first batch of prospective students during the admission process at Triatma Mulya University. The participants were 160 prospective students who took the first batch of the admission test. The participants were selected using total sampling because all prospective students who completed the diagnostic test in the first batch were included as research data. The test consisted of 25 items measuring grammar, vocabulary, and communication expressions. The research procedures covered several stages. First, the diagnostic English test items were categorized into 10 language components. Second, the level of correctness in each category was analyzed. Third, the findings were interpreted to identify students' general strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, recommendations were formulated for an adaptive English learning design suitable for an elementary English course.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Research Results

The diagnostic English test, consisting 25 questions, were categorized into 10 language components: i) communication expressions; ii) simple present and past tense; iii) vocabulary comprehension; iv) WH-questions; v) prepositions; vi) passive voice; vii) subject-verb agreement; viii) conditional sentences; ix) verb forms; x) gerunds and infinitives. The categorization showed that the test primarily focused on basic grammar and communication skills required for beginner-level English learning. The analysis results indicated that students performed relatively well in communication-based questions and simple grammar structures (in certain areas). However, several grammatical categories showed a low level of achievement. The percentages of correct answers were classified into four interpretation ranges, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Range Percentage and Interpretation

Range Percentage	Interpretation
100% - 80%	Strong
79% - 70%	Good
69% - 60%	Moderate
59% and lower	Weak

Table 1 above shows the interpretation range used to classify students' correct answer percentages. The strong category indicates a high level of mastery, while good category shows adequate understanding with minor areas for improvement. The moderate category indicates partial mastery that still requires structured reinforcement. The weak category shows major learning difficulties and should become the main priority in the

elementary English course. This interpretation range was used to analyze the results in Table 2 below and to determine which language components need more attention.

**Table 2.** Interpretation of Correct Answers Based on Language Components

Category	% of Correct Answers	Interpretation
Communication Expressions	82%	Strong
Simple Present and Past Tense	76%	Good
Vocabulary Comprehension	74%	Good
WH-Questions	71%	Good
Prepositions	68%	Moderate
Passive Voice	63%	Moderate
Subject-Verb Agreement	52%	Weak
Conditional Sentences	45%	Weak
Verb Forms	43%	Weak
Gerunds and Infinitives	41%	Weak

Table 2 above presents a clear description of the prospective students' English proficiency across 10 language components. The percentage of correct answers in each category was calculated by dividing the total number of correct responses in that category by the total number of the respondents (160 samples). The distribution of scores showed that their competence was not uniform. The highest achievement appeared in communication expressions with 82% correct answers. This result indicated that most students were able to recognize common expressions used in daily interaction, such as asking for permission, responding to offers, introducing oneself, and choosing polite conversational responses. In practical terms, this suggested that the students had already developed a basic communicative skill. They might not be highly accurate in grammar yet, but they were generally able to understand the intention of simple utterances and select responses that were socially and contextually appropriate.

The next group of categories consisting of simple present and past tense (76%), vocabulary comprehension (74%), and WH-questions (71%) fell into the good interpretation range. These results showed that the students had sufficient familiarity with basic English forms that were commonly taught at secondary school level. Their performance in simple tenses suggested that they could identify time reference when sentence pattern was direct and the context was familiar. Their vocabulary scores also indicated that they had a functional stock of general words needed for basic comprehension. The score for WH-questions showed that students could usually recognize question words such as what, where, when, who, why, and how, although their mastery might not be fully stable when the sentence became more complex.

The moderate categories, namely prepositions (68%) and passive voice (63%) showed that students were not completely unfamiliar with these forms, but their understanding was still inconsistent. Prepositions often create difficulty because their use is highly contextual and cannot always be translated directly from Indonesian into English. For example, the difference between in, on, at, to, and for depends on spatial, temporal, and idiomatic meaning. Passive voice is also challenging because it requires students to manipulate word order, auxiliary verbs, and past participles. These moderate scores suggested that students needed structured reinforcement especially through sentence-level exercises connected to meaningful context.

The weakest categories were subject-verb agreement (52%), conditional sentences (45%), verb forms (43%) and gerunds and infinitives (41%). These weakest categories signified the most urgent learning needs. Subject-verb agreement required students to match the subject with the correct verb form, especially in the third-person singular form. Errors in this area indicated that students might understand sentence meaning but failed to control grammatical accuracy. Conditional sentences require understanding of cause-effect relationships, which involves tense sequencing and logical meaning. Verb forms, gerunds and infinitives require knowledge of patterns after certain verbs, adjectives, and prepositions. The very low scores in these categories suggested that students needed more than rule explanations. They needed repeated contextual practice, guided noticing, and communicative tasks that required them to use the forms in meaningfully in context.

Based on the explanation above, the strength of the prospective students was that they had sufficient knowledge on basic English communication from previous educational experiences. However, their weaknesses

suggested that students' previous English learning experiences tended to emphasize rule recognition rather than contextual language application.

In detail, students' strengths could be described as follows. The first strength was that students were able to understand common communication expressions. This is an important starting point for an elementary English course because communication expressions are the foundation of classroom interaction. Students who can understand greetings, requests, offers, apologies, and simple responses are more prepared to participate in dialogue-based learning. The second strength was that students had an adequate comprehension of basic vocabulary. Vocabulary is important in language comprehension because students cannot understand grammar or meaning without knowing the words used in a sentence. The relatively good result in vocabulary comprehension suggested that many students could identify the meaning of common nouns, verbs, adjectives, and expressions. It also meant that they were able to follow simple classroom instructions and understand short reading or listening materials. The third strength was that students had a relatively good performance in simple tense structures. This indicated that students had basic awareness of time reference in English. This is important because tense awareness supports reading comprehension, writing accuracy, and spoken interaction. The fourth strength was the ability to respond appropriately to conversational contexts. This suggested that students could identify whether a response should express agreement, refusal, permission, gratitude, or clarification. This skill is important in communicative learning because it enables students to participate in pair work, role-play, and classroom discussion.

Related to weaknesses, the detail is as follows. The first weakness was students' difficulty in applying grammatical rules consistently. It meant that students might recognize rules when they were presented directly, but struggled to apply them across different sentence contexts. The second weakness was frequent errors in subject-verb agreement. This may happen because Indonesian verbs do not change according to the subject, therefore, students may not notice the need to add *-s* or *-es* in third-person singular forms. The third weakness was students' struggle with conditional sentence structures. It might be difficult because it combines grammar and logic. The fourth weakness was students' difficulty in identifying appropriate verb forms in context. This problem might include confusion between base verbs, past forms, past participles, and verbs following auxiliaries. It may also relate to limited understanding of how verbs function after modal verbs, prepositions, and other verbs. The fifth weakness was limited understanding of complex sentence patterns which could be seen in conditional sentences, gerunds and infinitives, passive voice, and verb forms. When students face longer sentences, they may focus on vocabulary meaning but lose track of structure.

## Discussion

The findings showed that diagnostic assessment had a significant role in identifying students' English learning needs. These findings are in accordance with previous researches findings (Jokosaharjo, Subadra, et al., 2020; Jokosaharjo & Sari, 2023) that university students frequently experience grammatical difficulties despite having adequate communication skills. The students' strong performance in communication expressions indicated that they were familiar with functional English used in daily interactions. However, students' weaknesses in grammar-related categories revealed deeper instructional challenges. Errors in subject-verb agreement and verb forms indicated that the students had insufficient understanding of sentence structure. According to Crawford (2020), grammar learning becomes ineffective when students memorize rules without contextual practice. The low performance in conditional sentences indicated that students struggled with hypothetical language structures. This difficulty may be partly influenced by differences between Indonesian and English sentence structures, particularly because Indonesian does not require the same tense sequencing and verb inflection patterns found in English conditional sentences. Related to difficulties in gerunds and infinitives, it could be said that the students needed more exposure to authentic English usage. Harmer (2007) states that learners require repeated contextual practice to internalize grammatical structures effectively.

Based on the findings above, the elementary English course at Triatma Mulya University should be designed using a needs-based learning approach. The course should prioritize: (1) Intensive grammar reinforcement for subject-verb agreement and verb forms; (2) Contextual practice for conditional sentences; (3) Interactive communication activities; (4) Task-based learning to improve grammar application; and (5) Remedial instruction for students with low proficiency.

In addition, blended learning strategies combining grammar instruction and communicative activities could improve students' engagement and language competence. Diagnostic testing should become a continuous evaluation process rather than merely an admission requirement.

## CONCLUSION

The English diagnostic test conducted for prospective university students provides important insights into students' initial English proficiency. Based on the diagnostic English test above, the prospective students demonstrated strengths in basic communication expressions and some simple grammatical areas, particularly simple present and past tense. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students had initial basis for participating in dialogue-based learning and everyday communication contexts. However, several core grammatical areas including subject-verb agreement, verb forms, conditional sentences, and complex grammatical structures remained problematic. These findings indicate that the elementary English course for the prospective students should focus on strengthening grammar competence while maintaining communicative practice. These findings also justify that a diagnostic assessment is highly effective in identifying students' needs and supporting adaptive English instruction. The university is recommended to develop a needs-based elementary English course focusing on grammar reinforcement and contextual communication practice. Instructors should provide intensive exercises related to sentence structure, verb forms, and conditional sentences. Additionally, interactive and communicative teaching methods should be implemented to improve students' confidence and English proficiency.

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