



Factors Influencing Students' Low Interest in English: A Case Study at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur

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Abstrak

Minat belajar Bahasa Inggris pada siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan masih menjadi persoalan fundamental yang berpengaruh terhadap hasil belajar. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor penyebab rendahnya minat siswa dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di SMK Negeri 1 Sikur. Metode penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif dengan teknik survei, observasi, dan wawancara terhadap 40 siswa kelas XI. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hanya 7 siswa yang menyukai pelajaran Bahasa Inggris, sementara 33 siswa lainnya menyatakan tidak menyukainya. Faktor utama penyebab rendahnya minat adalah persepsi siswa terhadap tingkat kesulitan materi dan tingginya tuntutan hafalan, sedangkan faktor motivasi dan kendala biaya kursus hanya muncul pada sebagian kecil siswa. Temuan ini memperkuat penelitian sebelumnya bahwa tantangan kognitif, metode pembelajaran yang kurang variatif, dan minimnya relevansi vokasional menjadi determinan rendahnya minat belajar. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa upaya peningkatan minat belajar memerlukan intervensi pedagogis yang lebih kontekstual dan relevan dengan kebutuhan vokasional siswa.

Abstract

Students' interest in learning English at the vocational high school level remains a major issue that influences learning outcomes. This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to students' low interest in English learning at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur. Using a descriptive approach, data were collected through surveys, observations, and interviews involving 40 eleventh-grade students. The results revealed that only 7 students expressed a liking for the English subject, while the remaining 33 students reported disliking it. The dominant factors contributing to low interest were students' perception of English as a difficult subject and the high demand for memorization. Meanwhile, low motivation and financial constraints for additional courses were reported by only a small number of students. These findings support previous studies, indicating that cognitive challenges, limited variation in teaching methods, and insufficient vocational relevance contribute to students' low interest. The study concludes that increasing students' interest requires pedagogical strategies that are more contextual and aligned with vocational needs.



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INTRODUCTION

English has increasingly become a core competency within vocational education, as modern industries now require graduates to operate within globally interconnected work environments. In this context, English should ideally function as a supporting instrument that prepares students for real workplace communication. However, throughout our preliminary observations at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur, we found that the role of English learning has not yet reached this ideal. Instead of feeling empowered

by the subject, many students approached English lessons with hesitation, fear, and diminished confidence. During our early classroom observations, we frequently noticed that students were not fully engaged in learning activities. Many appeared less enthusiastic, often doing unrelated tasks while the teacher explained the material, and several showed visible hesitation or a lack of confidence when asked to pronounce English vocabulary aloud. These behaviors indicate that students' emotional readiness and self-perception significantly influence their engagement with English learning.

As a research team, we recognized early on that understanding students' interest in learning English is not merely a procedural step in conducting research, but a crucial process for diagnosing deeper motivational issues. During informal interviews, students openly described English as "too difficult," often associating the subject with overwhelming vocabulary memorization and complex grammar rules. These barriers are consistent with earlier findings which indicate that cognitive overload contributes to declining interest in English learning, especially in online or structured classroom settings (Puspita, 2022). Yet, in our context, such concerns emerged more intensely. Through direct interactions, we sensed that many students have internalized a belief that English is inherently beyond their capability, which ultimately shapes their willingness or unwillingness to engage in classroom activities. Although previous research emphasizes that instructional strategies can influence student interest (Laela, 2021), our findings suggest that self-perception and internal beliefs play an equally significant role.

Additionally, while the literature highlights cultural relevance, teacher strategies, and contextualized materials as contributors to student motivation (Ismiyani, 2021), our field experience revealed that students' daily realities also shape their attitudes. For instance, a few students mentioned the financial burden of private courses, reflecting the importance of accessible learning support beyond school hours. This corresponds with findings suggesting that external educational resources contribute to students' task persistence (Fakhrudin, 2025). Yet, in our analysis, such external barriers were far less influential than the dominant perception that English is inherently difficult.

Another key finding from our early observations was students' belief that English had little relevance to the vocational programs offered at the school. Many learners felt that the subject was disconnected from their fields of study such as *Desain Komunikasi Visual*, *Teknik Grafika*, *Animasi*, *Seni Lukis*, *Kriya Kreatif Kayu dan Rotan*, *Kriya Kreatif Batik dan Tekstil*, *Desain dan Produksi Busana*, *Kuliner*, *Usaha Layanan Wisata*, *Perhotelan*, and *Tata Kecantikan Kulit dan Rambut*. Students repeatedly expressed that the tasks and competencies emphasized in these programs were largely practical and hands-on, and therefore they assumed that mastering English would not directly affect their performance in daily workshop activities. This perception was reinforced by the fact that most instructional materials, workshop modules, service guidelines, and production procedures used across these departments were presented exclusively in Indonesian, offering little to no exposure to vocational English. Because of this limited contact, students tended to view English as a theoretical subject rather than a functional skill that could enhance their future employability, especially in industries that actually require communication with clients, understanding design terminology, interpreting digital tools, or interacting with tourism and hospitality services. As a result, their motivation to engage in English learning decreased, and they often approached the subject with minimal effort and low confidence, assuming it held little practical value for their chosen career pathways.

We also found that many students avoided speaking English due to fear of making mistakes, a pattern commonly found in vocational schools where linguistic confidence is fragile (Mobit, 2024). Although the Merdeka Curriculum theoretically provides flexibility and encourages personalized learning, our field encounters revealed that curriculum changes alone are insufficient. Teachers must actively contextualize English learning in ways that resonate with students' vocational identities and future professional demands (Octaviani, 2023; Sholihah, 2025). From our perspective, students do not simply need innovative methods; they require experiences that help them understand the practical value of English in real-life vocational scenarios.

These collective observations shaped our motivation to conduct this research. We believed it was essential to systematically analyze the level of students' interest and identify the most prominent factors influencing their attitudes toward English. Throughout our engagement with students—whether through informal discussions, classroom observations, or preliminary questionnaires—we discovered that numerical data alone could not fully capture the complex personal, emotional, and contextual factors involved. By integrating our direct experiences as researchers with established literature, we aim to

provide a comprehensive description of students' English learning interest at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur. Ultimately, we expect that the findings will support the development of more relevant, contextual, and empowering English learning strategies for vocational education.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach supported by light quantitative descriptions, enabling a holistic analysis of students' interest in learning English at the vocational level. This approach was chosen because the study sought to explore not only the observable tendencies in students' engagement but also the underlying cognitive and affective factors shaping their attitudes. As stated by Laela (2021), descriptive research is suitable for capturing naturally occurring conditions and presenting them systematically, especially when the goal is to portray real classroom dynamics. In the context of this study, qualitative insights were central for understanding students' behaviors and perceptions, while simple numerical summaries helped illustrate the general patterns of their interest.

The participants consisted of 40 eleventh-grade students from SMK Negeri 1 Sikur, drawn from various vocational programs such as *Desain Komunikasi Visual, Teknik Grafika, Animasi, Seni Lukis, Kriya Kreatif Kayu dan Rotan, Kriya Kreatif Batik dan Tekstil, Desain dan Produksi Busana, Kuliner, Usaha Layanan Wisata, Perhotelan, and Tata Kecantikan Kulit dan Rambut*. The participants were selected randomly due to the large number of Grade XI students, making it impractical to include the entire population. Random sampling allowed each student an equal chance of selection and ensured that the sample reflected diverse vocational backgrounds, which strengthened the credibility of the findings. This approach is recommended when researchers aim to represent a broad population without compromising practicality (Astuti, 2022).

Data were collected through two techniques only: classroom observation and informal interviews. The classroom observations enabled the researchers to document students' real-time engagement, attentiveness, participation patterns, and behavioral indicators of interest during English lessons. These observations made it possible to recognize concrete signs of disinterest, such as students being easily distracted, hesitating to volunteer answers, showing low confidence during pronunciation tasks, and engaging in unrelated activities while the teacher explained the material. Meanwhile, the informal interviews allowed students to express their motivations, learning challenges, perceptions of English relevance, and personal experiences naturally without the pressure of a formal assessment setting. Such conversational interviews are effective in qualitative studies because they help uncover authentic viewpoints that may not emerge through structured questioning (Amelia et al., 2024).

The instruments used in this study included structured observation sheets and an informal interview guide. The observation sheet consisted of indicators related to affective engagement (enthusiasm, focus, and willingness to participate), behavioral engagement (task completion and responsiveness), and confidence levels when interacting with English vocabulary. The interview guide contained flexible, open-ended prompts that encouraged students to elaborate on issues such as perceived difficulty, personal interest, classroom experiences, and their view of English in relation to their vocational field. This instrument structure aligns with prior research recommending multiple qualitative evidence sources to strengthen data depth and validity (Puspita, 2022).

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative procedure supported by descriptive numerical summaries. Observational notes and interview transcripts were coded using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns such as *perceived irrelevance of English to vocational practice, low confidence in pronunciation, habitual disengagement, and lack of external learning support*. These themes were then compared with findings from previous studies that highlighted similar issues among vocational students learning English (Mobit, 2024; Ismiyani, 2021). Simple numerical descriptions—such as the proportion of students showing low engagement or frequent hesitation—were used only to clarify the distribution of observed behaviors, not to conduct statistical testing. Integrating these qualitative themes with numerical tendencies provided a richer understanding of why students' interest in English remained limited.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was entirely voluntary. All responses were treated confidentially, and data were collected without exerting any form of academic pressure.

Maintaining this ethical stance ensured that the students' perspectives were genuine, thereby strengthening the reliability and authenticity of the study's findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that students' interest in English learning at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur is considerably low. Based on data collected from 40 respondents, only 5 students reported a consistent liking for English, while 2 expressed occasional or situational interest. The overwhelming majority 33 students stated that they did not like English at all. This numerical pattern strengthens previous claims that low readiness and negative perceptions often lead students to disengage from English learning in vocational environments (Aulya, 2023; Puspita, 2022). However, through our direct engagement with the students, we found that the issue is far more complex than the numbers alone suggest.

From our personal observations, many students approached English with a preconceived belief that the subject is inherently difficult. This mindset was evident not only in questionnaire responses but also in their body language and verbal expressions during interviews. Several students mentioned that English is "too hard," "full of memorizing words," or "confusing because of grammar rules." These statements illustrate that the dominant barriers faced by students stem from cognitive perceptions rather than instructional shortcomings. While earlier literature acknowledges that unvaried teaching methods can diminish interest (Laela, 2021), we believe that the psychological burden carried by the students plays an even more substantial role in shaping their disengagement.

Interestingly, as we further interacted with the participants, we realized that many of their perceptions were shaped by previous learning experiences, especially in junior high school. Several students shared experiences of repeated failure in English assignments or embarrassment during oral activities. Such emotional traces appear to influence their current attitudes, supporting the idea that affective factors significantly determine motivation in language learning (Astuti, 2022). From our analysis, this emotional resistance often manifests as avoidance behavior students refusing to participate, hesitating to answer questions, or displaying anxiety when they must speak English aloud.

Although only two to three students mentioned lack of motivation or financial constraints for tutoring, these factors still contribute to the broader picture. Consistent with Fakhrudin (2025), external resources may influence persistence in completing English tasks. Nonetheless, based on our perspective, internal beliefs about capability remain the strongest determinant. In many cases, students seemed to have resigned themselves to the assumption that "English is not for me," a mindset that strongly undermines their willingness to make learning efforts. As researchers, we interpret this as a form of self-limiting belief, which becomes increasingly difficult to break as students grow older.

Another important finding relates to students' perception of relevance. Many participants expressed that English feels disconnected from their vocational field and future career. This echoes previous research stating that vocational students undervalue English when its practical relevance is unclear (Risanti et al., 2025). However, our field observations indicate that this perception is largely shaped by the lack of exposure to authentic English materials in their areas of expertise. For instance, students rarely encounter English terms in culinary recipes, kitchen safety guidelines, or art-related instructions such as painting techniques and exhibition documentation. Because these materials are seldom integrated into classroom learning, students tend to view English as a general academic subject rather than a practical skill. This aligns with the claim that curriculum alignment is essential for improving vocational English outcomes (Rihatmi, 2025).

Additionally, many students expressed a fear of making mistakes when speaking English. Through interviews, we realized that this fear is not simply a matter of linguistic competence but rather a social-emotional issue. Students worry about being mocked, corrected harshly, or appearing incompetent in front of peers. This finding supports the idea that language anxiety remains a significant barrier in vocational classrooms (Mobit, 2024). From our perspective, this anxiety becomes a reinforcing cycle: low confidence leads to low participation, which reduces learning exposure, ultimately strengthening students' belief that English is too difficult for them.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum encourages flexibility and student-centered learning, we found that it has not yet effectively increased students' interest. From our classroom observations, lesson content still appears mostly theoretical and insufficiently connected to students' vocational fields. Without the inclusion of authentic materials such as English for culinary procedures, hospitality communication, menu descriptions, or English for creative arts including artwork documentation and studio instructions—curriculum reforms cannot achieve their intended impact (Octaviani, 2023; Sholihah, 2025). Based on our evaluation, curriculum adjustments alone are not enough; students need to experience English as personally meaningful and relevant to the competencies they are developing.

Table 1. Students' Interest Categories in English Learning

Interest Category	Number of Students
Like	5
Sometimes Like	2
Dislike	33

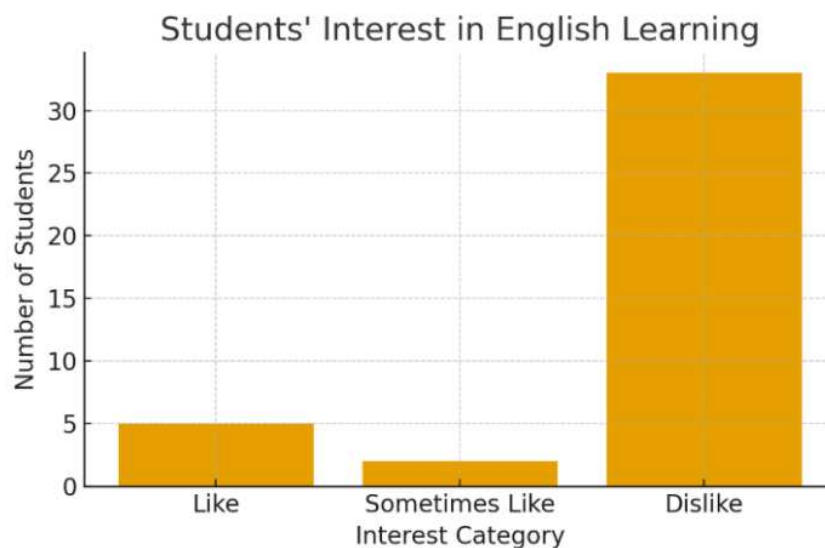


Figure 1. Students' Interest in English Learning

Interpreting the table and figure collectively, we concluded that the students' interest profile is heavily skewed toward negative perceptions of English. As researchers, we believe that these results highlight an urgent need to incorporate vocationally relevant materials, reduce psychological barriers, and reconstruct learning experiences that foster confidence rather than fear. In summary, the findings reveal that the core issues lie not only in linguistic difficulty but also in students' identity as vocational learners who require meaningful, contextualized exposure to English in order to develop genuine interest.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that students' interest in learning English at SMK Negeri 1 Sikur is predominantly low. The majority of students perceive English as difficult, primarily due to vocabulary and grammar demands. Emotional factors such as low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and negative past experiences further reduce engagement. Additionally, students feel that English lacks relevance to their vocational field because they rarely encounter authentic materials. Although external factors such as limited access to tutoring exist, internal psychological perceptions remain the most dominant barriers.

We believe that improving students' interest requires not only varied teaching strategies but also contextualized materials that align with vocational programs. Teaching must address both the emotional and cognitive needs of learners, helping them build confidence, see relevance, and experience English as a practical tool for their future careers.

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