

Exploring Students' Perceptions of the English Academic Competency Test

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ABSTRACT

The Academic Competency Test (*Tes Kemampuan Akademik/TKA*) has become an important assessment instrument for evaluating students' academic readiness, including their competence in English. Students' perceptions of the English TKA are essential to explore because their experiences, responses, and interpretations can influence their motivation, engagement, and preparation strategies. This study investigated students' perceptions of the implementation of the English Academic Competency Test and identified the factors that shaped those perceptions. This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The participants were Grade XII students who had completed the English TKA. Data were collected through interviews to obtain in-depth information about students' experiences, opinions, and responses toward the implementation of the English TKA. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation and member checking. The findings revealed students' perceptions regarding the relevance, difficulty level, fairness, and benefits of the English TKA. The study also showed that the test influenced students' learning motivation and preparation strategies. Overall, the findings provide insights into the implementation of the English TKA and contribute to the improvement of English assessment practices. This study also offers meaningful input for policymakers, school leaders, and English teachers in designing assessment systems that better support students' learning needs.

Keywords: Academic Competency Test, English Assessment, Student Perception, Qualitative Study, Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays an important role in education because it provides information about students' academic achievement, learning progress, and readiness for further study. In language education, assessment is not only used to measure students' mastery of linguistic knowledge but also to evaluate their ability to use language skills in meaningful contexts. A good language assessment should consider validity, reliability, practicality, authenticity, and washback, as these principles determine whether a test can provide useful information and support the learning process (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Therefore, the implementation of an assessment instrument needs to be examined not only from the perspective of test design but also from the perspective of students as test takers.

In the Indonesian educational context, the Academic Competency Test, or *Tes Kemampuan Akademik* (TKA), has been introduced as a standardized assessment instrument to provide information about students' academic achievement. The TKA is intended to produce standardized information on students' academic competence, support academic selection processes, and provide students with information about their academic strengths and weaknesses (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah, 2026).

The implementation of the English TKA is significant because English remains an important subject in senior high school education and is closely related to students' academic readiness. English competence, particularly reading comprehension, is needed by students to access academic texts, understand information, and prepare for higher education. However, students may experience the English TKA differently depending on their English proficiency, learning background, test preparation, and familiarity with the test format. These experiences may shape how they perceive the relevance, difficulty, fairness, and benefits of the test.

Students' perceptions are important to investigate because assessment can influence students' learning motivation, engagement, and preparation strategies. In language testing, the influence of tests on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Washback may be positive when a test encourages students to study more seriously, improve their learning strategies, and become more aware of their learning needs. However, it may also be negative when students feel pressured, anxious, or focus only on test-taking strategies rather than meaningful language

learning (Bailey, 1996). For this reason, understanding students' perceptions of the English TKA can provide valuable insights into how the test is experienced by students and how it affects their learning behavior.

Previous studies on language assessment have emphasized that students' responses to tests are closely related to their motivation, confidence, and learning strategies. Assessment does not only produce scores; it also creates educational consequences for learners, teachers, and institutions (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). When students perceive a test as relevant, fair, and useful, they may be more motivated to prepare and engage in learning. In contrast, when they perceive a test as too difficult, unclear, or less connected to their learning needs, they may experience anxiety or reduced motivation. Therefore, exploring students' perceptions is necessary to understand the broader impact of the English TKA beyond its function as an assessment tool.

Although the TKA has been designed to provide standardized information about students' academic competence, limited attention has been given to how students themselves perceive its implementation, particularly in the English subject. Most discussions about standardized assessment tend to focus on policy, test results, or institutional needs, while students' voices are often less represented. This creates a research gap because students are the direct participants of the test and their perceptions can provide meaningful feedback for improving assessment practices. A qualitative case study is appropriate for this research because it allows the researcher to explore students' experiences and perceptions in depth within a specific educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Based on this background, this study aims to explore Grade XII students' perceptions of the English Academic Competency Test. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate how students perceive the relevance, difficulty level, fairness, and benefits of the English TKA, as well as how the test influences their learning motivation and preparation strategies. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of English assessment practices and provide useful insights for policymakers, school leaders, and English teachers in designing assessment systems that are meaningful, fair, and supportive of student learning.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore Grade XII students' perceptions of the English Academic Competency Test (TKA). A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to

understand a phenomenon in depth within its real-life context and to interpret participants' experiences and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had completed the English TKA and were able to provide relevant information related to the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which enabled the researcher to obtain in-depth information about students' experiences, opinions, and perceptions of the test (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the interview data, students' perceptions of the English Academic Competency Test (TKA) were categorized into five main themes: students' general experience in taking the English TKA, perceptions of test difficulty, perceptions of the benefits of the English TKA, the influence of the test on learning motivation and preparation strategies, and students' suggestions for improving the test. The participants' names were anonymized as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. The quotations presented in this section were translated from Indonesian into English.

Students' General Experience in Taking the English TKA

The findings showed that students had varied but generally positive experiences in taking the English TKA. Some participants felt confident because they were familiar with English learning activities and had received preparation before the test. One participant explained, "I felt quite confident because I was used to learning and using English, and the school also provided intensive learning activities for TKA preparation" (P1). This indicates that prior exposure to English and school-based preparation helped students feel more ready to take the test.

However, the positive experience was also accompanied by challenges, especially related to time management. P1 stated, "I could answer the questions as well as I could, but the limited time became my biggest obstacle." Similarly, another participant said, "The test went relatively smoothly because I felt ready in terms of basic competence. However, time management became the biggest challenge" (P4). These responses suggest that although students felt

capable of answering the questions, the time allocation influenced their test-taking experience.

Students' Perceptions of Test Difficulty

The students generally perceived the English TKA as moderately difficult. Some participants described the test as manageable, while others found it challenging because the questions varied in difficulty. P3 stated, "On a scale of 1 to 10, I would rate the English test as 4." Meanwhile, P1 rated the test as "5 out of 10" and explained that the material itself was not too difficult, but limited time made it harder to answer carefully. This shows that students' perception of difficulty was not only related to the content of the test, but also to the testing conditions.

The most difficult part of the English TKA was reading long texts. Several participants mentioned that long passages required concentration and careful reading. P2 explained, "The most difficult part for me was staying focused while reading the passages." Similarly, P5 stated, "Reading long texts felt more difficult." P3 also emphasized that reading texts under time pressure was challenging: "I was not used to reading in a short duration, while the subtest had limited time." These findings indicate that long reading passages became a major source of difficulty for students.

Another issue identified by the students was the ambiguity of answer choices. Some participants felt that several options were confusing or too similar. P2 stated, "Some statements seemed ambiguous and confusing, making me unsure about the answers I chose, especially in multiple-answer questions." P4 also explained, "The biggest challenge was finding the most appropriate answer because there were many distractors and some options were too vague." This suggests that ambiguity in the test items affected students' confidence in choosing answers.

Students' Perceptions of the Easiest Test Components

Although students experienced difficulties with long texts and ambiguous options, they also identified several parts of the English TKA as relatively easy. The easiest components were mostly related to vocabulary, translation, contextual meaning, short texts, and explicit information. P1 stated, "Questions related to translation were the easiest because they usually asked about synonyms or context that could be understood from one sentence." Similarly, P2 said, "The easiest part was determining the appropriate word based on the context of the passage or sentence."

Other participants also found questions based on explicit information easier than interpretive questions. P4 explained, "The easiest part was analyzing information that was explicitly available in the text, such as finding direct facts and stated information." This finding shows that students felt more confident when the answers could be found directly in the text rather than inferred through deeper interpretation.

Students' Perceptions of the Benefits of the English TKA

The findings revealed that students generally considered the English TKA important. Most participants believed that English competence is necessary because English is widely used in education, communication, and the workplace. P3 stated, "The English TKA is quite important to measure our English ability." P5 also said, "It is important because we have to be able to use English properly and correctly." These responses indicate that students viewed the test as a tool to evaluate their English competence.

Some participants connected the importance of the English TKA with broader academic and national purposes. P4 stated, "TKA is important because it can become a national mapping tool and a validator of report card scores so that academic selection becomes fairer." However, P4 also emphasized that the quality of the test should be evaluated regularly so that the result truly reflects students' abilities. This shows that students recognized the potential benefits of the English TKA, but they also expected the test to be accurate and fair.

The Influence of the English TKA on Learning Motivation and Preparation Strategies

The English TKA influenced most students' learning motivation and preparation strategies. Several participants stated that the test encouraged them to study more seriously. P3 explained, "TKA made me study more seriously." P1 also stated, "Because of the TKA, I had more things to prepare." These responses indicate that the existence of the test encouraged students to increase their learning effort.

The test also changed students' learning strategies. P3 stated, "Usually, I studied only the night before the exam. However, after knowing that there would be TKA, I forced myself to study earlier." P5 also explained, "I joined tutoring and studied from various sources such as books, YouTube, and others." These findings suggest that the TKA encouraged students to prepare earlier and use more learning resources.

In addition, some students became more focused on test-taking strategies. P4 explained, "My English learning strategy, which was

initially focused on expanding exposure, shifted to practicing reasoning efficiency, time management per question, and elimination strategies through test simulations.” This shows that the TKA influenced not only students’ motivation but also the way they prepared for English learning and testing.

However, one participant had a different view. P2 stated, “My motivation to learn mostly comes from personal curiosity, so it was not really influenced by the existence of the TKA.” This indicates that the impact of the English TKA on motivation may vary depending on students’ personal goals and future academic plans.

Students’ Suggestions for Improving the English TKA

The participants provided several suggestions for improving the English TKA. The most common suggestion was related to the length of reading texts and the time allocation. P1 stated, “The long English texts should be made shorter because the time is very limited, or the number of this type of question should be reduced and the test time should be increased.” Similarly, P4 suggested that “the available time allocation needs to be adjusted because the English TKA requires deep analysis of long texts.” These responses show that students expected the test to provide a better balance between text length, question complexity, and time allocation.

Another suggestion was related to the clarity of answer options. P4 stated, “The test developers should evaluate the distractors so that they are not logically ambiguous, so score differences better reflect students’ literacy skills rather than differences in interpreting answer choices.” This indicates that students wanted the test items to be clearer and less confusing.

Students also suggested that the distribution of question types should be made more proportional. P2 explained, “The distribution of questions for each dimension should be considered more carefully so that the assessment can be more comprehensive.” This response shows that students expected the English TKA to measure different aspects of English competence more evenly.

In addition, students suggested that the implementation of the English TKA should be supported by clearer socialization. P5 stated, “There should be clearer socialization about the form and materials of the test.” This finding suggests that students needed more information about the test format and content before taking the TKA.

Overall, the findings indicate that students perceived the English TKA as important and generally manageable. However, several issues still need attention, particularly long reading texts, limited time, ambiguous answer choices, unequal distribution of question types,

and the need for clearer socialization. These findings suggest that the English TKA has the potential to support English assessment, but its implementation and item quality should be continuously improved to ensure fairness, clarity, and meaningful assessment outcomes.

The findings of this study show that students generally perceived the English Academic Competency Test (TKA) as an important and meaningful assessment, although several aspects of its implementation still need improvement. The students' responses indicate that the English TKA was not viewed merely as a school examination, but also as an instrument that could measure English competence, encourage preparation, and provide information about students' readiness. This finding is in line with the function of assessment as a tool for measuring learning achievement and supporting educational decision-making (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). In this study, students recognized the importance of English as an international language and perceived the English TKA as relevant to their academic and future needs.

One important finding is that most students did not perceive the English TKA as extremely difficult. Several participants described the test as manageable, especially in questions related to vocabulary, translation, contextual meaning, and explicit information. This suggests that students were more confident when the questions required literal comprehension or direct identification of information from the text. However, students experienced greater difficulty when the questions required deeper interpretation, such as identifying the author's purpose, choosing the best summary, and analyzing implied meaning. This indicates that the English TKA tested not only basic vocabulary knowledge but also higher-level reading comprehension skills.

The difficulty experienced by students was closely related to the length of reading texts and limited time allocation. Several students stated that long reading passages made it difficult for them to maintain focus and manage time effectively. This finding reflects the importance of practicality in language assessment. According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2019), a good test should not only be valid and reliable but also practical in terms of time, administration, and test-taking demands. When students perceive that the time provided is not sufficient for the complexity of the questions, the test may create additional pressure that affects their performance. Therefore, the balance between text length, question difficulty, and time allocation should be carefully considered in the implementation of the English TKA.

Another significant issue found in this study is students' perception of ambiguity in answer choices. Some participants felt that several options were too similar, vague, or open to different interpretations. This finding is important because ambiguity in test items may affect fairness and validity. A valid assessment should measure the intended construct rather than students' ability to guess the logic of the test maker (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). If students feel that more than one answer seems possible, the test may not fully reflect their actual English competence. This issue may also reduce students' confidence because they may understand the text but still feel uncertain about which answer is considered correct. Therefore, test item clarity is an important aspect that should be evaluated to ensure that the English TKA measures students' literacy skills accurately.

The findings also show that the English TKA produced both positive and varied washback effects on students' learning. Washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In this study, most students reported that the TKA encouraged them to study more seriously, prepare earlier, join tutoring, practice test-based questions, and use various learning resources. This indicates a positive washback because the test motivated students to improve their preparation and become more aware of their learning strategies. Some students also shifted their learning focus from general English exposure to more specific strategies, such as time management, reasoning efficiency, and elimination techniques.

However, the washback effect was not the same for all students. One participant stated that their motivation to learn English was mostly influenced by personal curiosity rather than by the TKA. This finding suggests that the impact of assessment on motivation depends on students' personal goals, academic plans, and perceived relevance of the test. Bailey (1996) explains that washback can be positive or negative depending on how learners respond to the test and how the test influences learning behavior. In this study, the English TKA encouraged preparation for most students, but its influence was weaker for students whose future academic plans were not directly connected to TKA results.

Students' suggestions for improving the English TKA also provide important insights. The participants recommended clearer socialization, more official practice questions, better time allocation, shorter reading texts, more proportional distribution of question types, and less ambiguous distractors. These suggestions indicate that students are not only passive test takers but also important

stakeholders who can provide meaningful feedback for assessment improvement. Listening to students' voices is important because their experiences can reveal practical issues that may not be visible from test scores alone. This supports the idea that assessment should consider consequences and usefulness, not only technical measurement aspects (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

Overall, the discussion shows that students' perceptions of the English TKA were generally positive but critical. Students acknowledged the importance and relevance of the test, especially in measuring English competence and encouraging learning preparation. However, they also identified several areas that need improvement, particularly in relation to reading text length, time allocation, answer-choice clarity, and test socialization. These findings suggest that the English TKA has the potential to support meaningful English assessment, but its implementation should continuously be evaluated to ensure validity, fairness, practicality, and positive washback for students' learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Grade XII students generally perceived the English Academic Competency Test (TKA) as an important and useful assessment for measuring their English competence, particularly in reading comprehension. The students considered the test relevant to their academic needs and future readiness, although they also identified several challenges during its implementation. The main difficulties were related to long reading texts, limited time allocation, ambiguous answer choices, and unequal distribution of question types. The findings also show that the English TKA influenced most students' learning motivation and preparation strategies, encouraging them to study earlier, practice more questions, manage their time, and use various learning resources. However, the impact of the test varied depending on students' personal goals and academic plans. Therefore, the English TKA has the potential to support meaningful assessment and learning, but its implementation needs continuous improvement, especially in terms of item clarity, time suitability, test socialization, and the provision of official practice materials.

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