



Students' opinion on the transition from EFL to ELF: Revisiting English pedagogy in vocational higher education

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As workforce diversity increases in the globalization era, vocational education plays a crucial role in preparing students to be competent and industry-ready, with English serving as a key medium for professional integration. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has emerged as a flexible mode of communication, facilitating interaction not only between native and non-native speakers but also among non-native speakers from varied linguistic backgrounds. This study examines the perceptions of Indonesian Vocational Higher Education (VHE) students regarding the role and relevance of ELF in meeting global workplace communication demands. Participants consisted of sixty-nine sixth-semester English majors who had completed two- to three-month internships in various industries. Data were collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, enabling both quantitative and qualitative insights. Statistical analysis using a t-test, following the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, revealed mean differences ranging from $M = 2.95$ (Q10) to $M = 4.28$ (Q14). These findings were supported by interview data, indicating that most participants viewed ELF as more suitable for workplace communication than traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) norm. The study highlights the need to align English Language Teaching (ELT) in vocational education with ELF-oriented principles to enhance communicative effectiveness in global professional settings.

Keywords: ELF, intercultural competence, language pedagogy, students' perceptions, VHE

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INTRODUCTION

With the rapidly changing work environment in Asia including Indonesia's industries amid globalization, the demand for highly skilled work forces has significantly increased. There has been an increasing tendency now in the labour market to hire graduates who have skills and competencies that meet the needs of the employer (Alanazi & Benlaria, 2023; Booth, 2019; Suharno et al., 2020; Tsou & Chen, 2014). Consequently, it is crucial for Vocational Higher Education (henceforth VHE) institutions to prioritize developing their educational quality as the response to industry needs. Especially if these institutions want their graduates to have better chances of securing career opportunities in an increasingly competitive job market. The circumstance has led these institutions to shift their education structure and system from traditional competency-based models toward a capability-oriented framework that promotes workplace readiness (Alanazi & Benlaria, 2023; Chiwen & Qin, 2018; Nuraeni & Henigusnia, 2021; Tsou & Chen, 2014).

Likewise with language learning, in recent years, many industries in Indonesia due to the rapid expansion of multinational and national companies use English as the medium for communication. Empirical research underscores this circumstance highlighting that most of the companies require their employees to be reliable and fluent in English, as a critical threshold for communication in the workplace ([Dewi, 2022](#); [Haryati et al., 2019](#); [Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Widiastuti et al., 2021](#); [Zein, 2018, 2019](#)). High level of proficiency in English often results in strategic job opportunities within various industries being offered to overseas graduates, who typically receive significantly higher salaries than their domestic counterparts ([Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Zein, 2018](#)). [Haryati et al. \(2019\)](#) found the significance of English fluency in Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), whereas [Widiastuti et al. \(2021\)](#) note that English has become the key to global marketing success in tourism through effective communication with international visitors. However, even though [Dewi \(2022\)](#) identifies English as the supporting skill rather than the substantial skill, she indicates that Indonesian IT specialists should be fluent in the language in terms of promotion and their future career.

In Indonesia, English has long been taught as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL), using most of their teaching resources and evaluation materials orienting to and subtly strongly focused on native-speaker norms, typically American or British English. For the past few decades, there has been long-standing debate among English language educators and authoritative bodies regarding how to define students' English proficiency, often using British and American instructional models as benchmarks for Standard English ([Harsanti & Manara, 2021](#); [Irham et al., 2022](#); [Jayanti & Norahmi, 2014](#); [Jon et al., 2021](#); [Zacharias & Manara, 2013](#)). These models are frequently regarded as the "correct" and "original" forms of English, serving as a basis for determining teacher professionalism and shaping students' language adoption ([Zacharias & Manara, 2013](#)). This orientation has created challenges for learners, who frequently depend on rote memorization and grammar-centered instruction. In the area of speaking, especially in pronunciation instruction, teachers commonly have the prevalence on native-speakerism ideology and engage the students in drill-based activities that align with either British or American English norms ([Harsanti & Manara, 2021](#); [Sariani et al., 2022, 2024](#); [Satiti, 2022](#); [Yulia & Saukah, 2021](#)).

This phenomenon contrasts with the findings of empirical studies by [Zein \(2018, 2019\)](#), which highlight those English learners in Indonesia demonstrate distinct linguistic characteristics, as they bring their indigenous language identities into their English language use. Although native-speaker normativity has been widely affirmed and continues to assert its dominance ([Canagarajah, 2013](#); [Kimura & Canagarajah, 2018](#); [Wang & Hill, 2011](#)), English is primarily used to meet communicative needs across diverse domains such as education, government, and business ([Canagarajah, 2013](#); [Irham et al., 2022](#); [Kimura & Canagarajah, 2018](#); [Wang & Hill, 2011](#)). The development of English in Indonesia is beyond the educational domain; it serves as a driving force for globalization, and a means of fostering global

competitiveness, enabling learners to communicate effectively not only with native speakers but also with interlocutors both within the country and internationally ([Curran & Chern, 2017](#); [Dewi, 2022](#); [Irham et al., 2022](#); [Jon et al., 2021](#); [Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Zein, 2019](#)).

Given the diverse linguistic backgrounds of Indonesian learners and the continually evolving landscape of English usage, it is essential to adopt a pedagogical paradigm shift from native-speaker norms toward more inclusive and contextually relevant language teaching strategies ([Irham et al., 2022](#); [Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Rahimi & Ruzrokh, 2016](#); [Sariani et al., 2024](#); [Zein, 2019](#)). The English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) paradigm, as proposed by [Jenkins \(2006, 2015, 2018; Leung & Jenkins, 2020\)](#) and [Seidlhofer \(2011\)](#), challenges the legitimacy of native-speaker norms as universal standards in teaching, which should be used identically in all respects. Alternately, ELF underpins the teaching on functional intelligibility and mutual accommodation for intercultural communication by speakers who are from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds using English during the interaction ([Leung & Jenkins, 2020](#)). Thus, the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework is particularly relevant in the context of a globalized workplace, as it embraces linguistic diversity and prioritizes practical communication needs ([Jenkins, 2012, 2015](#)).

[Canagarajah \(2012\)](#) and [Kimura and Canagarajah \(2018\)](#) further the discussion by promoting translanguaging practices to the ELF context in terms of multilingual communication. The practices are dynamic and fluid, encouraging the language learners to actively negotiate meaning utilizing linguistic flexibility and pragmatic strategies of multiple linguistic resources. Notably in vocational settings, where English is used by non-native speakers from diverse backgrounds and contexts, being proficient in translanguaging becomes a critical skill. In today's interconnected world, English educators can develop various alternatives to address diverse linguistic backgrounds and challenge rigid language boundaries through translanguaging practices, aligning with the realities faced by students in vocational settings qualifying for globalized workplaces ([Anderson, 2018](#); [Matsumoto & Kimura, 2024](#)). These points of view offer a strong theoretical foundation for re-evaluating the purposes of English language learning in Indonesia's VHE system.

Throughout the years, several studies have been revisiting the traditional tenets of English Language Teaching (ELT) paradigms in Indonesia ([Irham et al., 2022](#); [Jon et al., 2021](#); [Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Sariani et al., 2024](#); [Zacharias & Manara, 2013](#); [Zein, 2019](#)), improving teacher proficiency ([Jon et al., 2021](#); [Musthafa et al., 2018](#); [Yulia & Saukah, 2021](#)), and assisting students with their EFL learning challenges ([Satiti, 2022](#); [Wirza, 2018](#)), whereas others exploring English for Specific Purposes (ESP), such as Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) ([Haryati et al., 2019](#)), and tourism ([Widiastuti et al., 2021](#)). However, the ELF paradigm in vocational education is still not widely implemented.

Thus, the ELF theoretical framework serves as the foundation for this study to determine the language learning priorities of VHE students correspond with the demands present-day global communication. It explores whether

instruction practices should continue to be rooted in EFL paradigms or shift toward ELF principles to enhance employability and intercultural competence. In specific, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of VHE students on the English language they need to learn as preparation for their working life?, (2) Does cultural background or current stage in their language learning affect their perceptions toward the working environment's demands?.

METHODS

Participant

The study involved 69 sixth-semester Vocational Higher Education (VHE) students majoring in English. The sixth semester comprised three intact classes: Class A (22 students), Class B (23 students), and Class C (24 students), with a total of 48 female and 21 male students. These participants were purposively selected because they had completed a mandatory internship program during their fifth semester, which lasted between two to three months. The internship program is a compulsory component of the vocational curriculum, aimed at preparing students for the workforce by equipping them with practical skills and familiarizing them with the demands of professional environments. The majority of students completed their internship programs at multinational or national companies where English served as a secondary workplace language. These placements enabled them to apply their English skills in authentic, professional contexts. This because during this period, they were required to communicate in English with colleagues in professional, often multilingual, workplace settings.

At the time of data collection, the participants were between 20 and 22 years old. Although they shared the same first language (L1), they demonstrated a range of English accents due to their diverse cultural and regional backgrounds. As sixth-semester students, their English proficiency was classified at the B1 level, or "Independent User," according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) ([Council of Europe, 2003](#)). This classification is in accordance to Level 2 of the Practical Rating Rubric of Speaking Test (P2RST), a locally designed rubric to assess the speaking proficiency of university students. The rubric was developed and validated by [Latifa et al. \(2015\)](#) for use at Universitas Parepare, Indonesia, to address limitations in existing rubrics, which were considered impractical and unreliable due to overlapping evaluative components.

Instruments and Data Collection

This study drew upon a mix-methods approach, with the quantitative data collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, where 1 represented "Strongly disagree" and 5 represented "Strongly agree." The Likert scale was chosen to capture detailed insights into participants' thoughts and perceptions without being overwhelmed. Likewise, this scale is particularly suitable for larger questionnaires with multiple items, as it enhances respondents' understanding of the statements and provides more consistent and reliable data

([Babakus & Mangold, 1992](#)).

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to facilitate easy access and convenience for the students. To maintain a consistent environment during data collection, all participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire simultaneously during a designated break period within class hours. The questionnaire was adapted from the validated instrument developed by [Curran and Chern \(2017\)](#), and modified to align with the context of the current study, which focused on VHE students' perceptions of ELF and the value of exposing learners to diverse English accents into classroom instruction. Whilst, [Curran and Chen' \(2017\)](#) empirical study examined the attitudes of pre-service teachers, this study specifically targeted VHE students. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent a careful revision process to ensure the suitability and relevance of its content in relation to the objectives of this study.

There were 20 statements in the questionnaire, and were grouped into four clusters. The first cluster, comprising 10 statements, emphasized principles related to various English models and accents. The second cluster included two statements addressing the use of English in real-life communication, particularly in interactions with other non-native speakers (NNS). The third cluster consisted of four statements highlighting the importance of understanding the culture of Native Speakers (NS), while also recognizing the different kinds of cultural origins associated with English usage. The fourth cluster consisted of four statements exploring language use in classroom instruction, specifically the preference for English-only instruction versus a combination with students' first language (L1) and/or second language (L2)—in this case, Indonesian, the national and official language used in formal contexts— and the appropriate contexts for employing code-switching strategies.

Moreover, a semi-structured interview was performed as part of the qualitative analysis to explore the complexity of students' perspectives in greater depth. Ten students—six females and four males, volunteered to participate in one-on-one interviews, with each participant interviewed individually on a single occasion. The purpose and procedures of the study were clearly explained to the participants in advance of the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 20 minutes and was conducted via the Zoom platform, in accordance with participants' preferences. To reduce language barriers and promote a comfortable interview environment, the interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, Indonesian. This approach was intended to encourage participants to express themselves more authentically and generate richer data grounded in their lived experiences ([Dornyei, 2007](#); [Temple & Young, 2004](#)). The interview questions were adapted from [Zhang's \(2021\)](#) study and consisted of five core questions, focusing on the use of different English varieties in classroom settings and the appropriate models of English in learning resources to prepare students for future workplace interactions.

Ethics Statement

The protocol for this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Politeknik Negeri Padang Centre for Research and Community Service. In accordance with the committee's

established policies regarding the recruitment of humans as subjects in research, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection for both the questionnaire and the interviews. Specifically, participants were informed that their responses would be anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, they were assured of their right to participate voluntarily and at their own convenience without any consequence. Additionally, participants were notified that any recordings would be accessible only to the researcher and used solely for the purposes of the study.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, a data screening process was conducted to ensure response validity and reliability. Of the 69 initial participants, only 40 responses met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis purposes. Responses were excluded if they (1) contained more than 10% missing data, (2) showed patterned or inconsistent answers (e.g., identical responses across items), (3) were completed in an unrealistically short time (less than one-third of the average completion time), or (4) did not include both pre-test and post-test measures required for paired analysis. In total, 29 responses were excluded, ensuring that only high-quality data were analyzed.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), utilizing a t-test to determine the statistical significance level at the $p < 0.05$ level. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis was performed based on participants' interview responses. As part of the analysis procedure, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researchers. To ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the transcriptions were returned to the respective participants for content validation and approval. Following this, the qualitative findings were compared with the quantitative results by examining the interview responses for recurring themes and patterns, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the students' perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistic Related to Research Question 1
Perceptions of VTE students on the English language they need to learn as preparation for their working life

Descriptive analysis was conducted to identify trends in the questionnaire responses. The data obtained from the questionnaires were screened and assessed to ensure their eligibility for further synthesis, with only 40 responses meeting the inclusion criteria. In response to the first research question regarding students' perceptions of English needed for future employment, the results showed an obvious preference for exposure to varied English models instead of to a single standardized variety. As shown in [Table 1](#), participants expressed strong support for the use of various English accents from both L1 and L2 speakers in learning materials (Question 11/ Q11), which received the highest mean score ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.87$). Conversely, participants showed the least agreement with the statement supporting the use of single-native speaker model (either American or British) (Q10) —as pictured in the lowest mean score ($M=2.95$). This low means score exhibits participants' reluctance to adopt a single native-speaker norm as the default pedagogical model in the classroom. Instead, the findings suggest a preference for broader exposure to the plurality of English, including varied accents and discourse conventions that can enrich learners' linguistic repertoire in terms of achieving mutual intelligibility in today's globalized world communication. The implicit rejection of the participants on the most dominant used of a singular native-speaker standard is quantitatively demonstrated by the lowest score on Q10, which then indicated an emerging acceptance for diverse language use for successful communication among L2 speakers of different lingua-cultural backgrounds, aligning with the values of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

TABLE 1 | Descriptive Statistics for Cluster 1: English Models and Accents

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q10	Q11	Q18	Q19
Mean	3.42	3.6	3.54	3.23	3.77	3.39	2.95	4.1	3.67	3.2
Median	3.5	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	3
Std. Deviation	0.84	0.93	0.76	0.83	0.97	0.79	1.01	0.87	0.76	0.88
Minimum	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Note. Q1 for Question1; Q2 for Question 2, and so forth

Cluster 2 focused on students' perceptions of English use in everyday communication between non-native speakers in professional contexts. Notably, this cluster generated the two highest mean scores across all questionnaire items. The findings showed strong agreement among participants concerning the importance of English lessons in vocational education preparing them for practical, day-to-day engagement, —as demonstrated in the high responses to Q14 ($M = 4.28$) and Q15 ($M = 3.95$). These findings pointed to a practical approach to language acquisition and were in line with the principles of ELF, reflecting students' recognition of the significance of communicative competence in

increasingly globalized workplaces.

Furthermore, Cluster 3 explored students' perspectives regarding intercultural awareness and language use for workplace readiness. Among the four items within this cluster, Q20 obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.98$), as shown in [Table 2](#), demonstrating participants' strong agreement on the emphasis of recognizing intercultural differences and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. The participants recognized that being culturally sensitive played a prominent role in enhancing language learning and promoting effective engagement in work-related settings. These findings were consistent with the ELF

framework, emphasizing the value of real-life exposure and intercultural engagement in preparing students to become competent, adaptable communicators in global communication.

TABLE 2 | Descriptive Statistics for Cluster 3: Intercultural Awareness and Language Use

	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q20
Mean	3.6	3.4	3.77	3.98
Median	4	3	4	4
Standard Deviation	1.01	0.84	0.94	0.66
Minimum	1	1	1	3
Maximum	5	5	5	5

Cluster 4 focused on students' perceptions of language use in classroom instruction, particularly in preparation to communicate in a professional environment. From the results, it is clear that the participants preferred English-medium or bilingual instruction over frequent code-switching. The highest mean score in the cluster, Q16 ($M = 4.13$) illustrated the belief of the participants to balance the use of Indonesian language in the classroom in order to enhance the learning process. They considered the excessive use of Indonesian language in the classroom could interfere with the development of effective English communication strategies. Likewise, the mean score of Q13 ($M = 3.92$) pinpointed students' affirmation of the advantage of using bilingual instruction in improving their understanding while maintaining sufficient exposure to English. This means that students supported teaching strategies that incorporated Indonesian language when necessary to strengthen their English proficiency, particularly through a functional approach suited to vocational learners preparing for workplace communication.

Descriptive Statistic Related to Research Question 2
Participants' cultural background or current stage in their language learning affect their perceptions toward the working environment's demands.

Whilst Research Question 1 described vocational students' perception of the English needed for the workplace, Research Question 2 examined the extent to which their present situation of language learning and cultural context influenced these perceptions.

The data obtained from Cluster 1 to 4 was in agreement that both the students' cultural background and their current language learning circumstances affected their perception on the English needed for professional life. As an example, in accordance with the concepts of ELF, Q11 ($M = 4.10$) demonstrated participants' strong enthusiasm for engaging with a variety of English accents, indicating their willingness to adapt to global English usage. However, some contradictions emerged, as reflected in the relatively high mean scores for Q5 ($M = 3.77$) and Q18 ($M = 3.67$), indicating a degree of ambivalence in participants' perceptions. While they valued linguistic diversity, they also viewed varied English accents as challenging and showed some inclination toward native-speaker norms. This mixed perception reflects a transitional stage in vocational students' language learning, attempting to accommodate their

established prior educational experiences and cultural expectations with the practical application of English in an international environment.

This dynamic is also reflected in the data from other clusters. The findings revealed high levels of agreement with Q14 ($M = 4.28$) and Q15 ($M = 3.95$), which address real-world communication needs, as well as Q13 ($M = 3.92$) concerning bilingual classroom instruction, indicating a pragmatic perspective influenced by industry demands and the participants' current language proficiency. Participants with lower proficiency expressed a continued need for bilingual assistance in the classroom, underscoring the necessity of a transitional approach, despite their reinforcement on English-medium instruction. Their relatively low agreement with Q8 ($M = 3.00$) to the function of English lessons in preparing them for multi-lingual communication, might signal limited exposure or insufficient preparedness. Hence, these results implied that how vocational students noticed English as a means for global job preparation was affected across their cultural backgrounds along with stages of language development.

Interview Data Related to Research Question 1

The majority of participants interviewed strongly agreed that ELF was the most appropriate form of English needed for their future employment, as they recognized that workplaces often include employees from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making them inherently multilingual. The findings revealed that nine out of ten participants expressed strong support for the significant role of ELF in preparing them to communicate effectively in a global, international work environment. Regarding participants' perceptions of ELF in the context of vocational education, one participant stated:

“Since we are in vocational education and will directly enter the workforce, what we need is English as a lingua franca. Because, in my opinion, in the workplace, how can we communicate with the people from – for example – Spain, Italy, and other countries, so they understand what we’re saying. We don’t have to adopt the native accent. The important thing is that we can communicate with our work partners and both understand each other.”

In regards to vocational education, when participants were asked regarding their expectation for English learning to support their professional career and future goals, they attributed a clear preference for ELF due to its practical orientation. Many shared that, based on their previous experiences being exposed to the EFL principles, they often experienced anxiety when attempting to communicate in English. This was largely due to the fear of being not understood and making grammatical or pronunciation errors as structured in native-speaker norms. By contrast, the participants considered ELF-oriented learning as a more effective and inclusive approach. It reduced the pressure to the native-speaker standards and promoted more on intelligibility and comprehensibility. They considered the shift of learning to ELF developed their self-confidence and increased willingness to interact in authentic, real-world communication.

This sentiment was reinforced by other interviewees emphasizing that ELF provides greater opportunities for authentic communication in a globalized work atmosphere. They acknowledged that, unlike EFL, ELF regards highly linguistic diversity, as long as mutual understanding is achieved between speakers and interlocutors, without enforcing precise compliance to native-speaker norms or specific accents. One student reflected on practical communication in the professional environment, stating:

"Probably 1-2 companies might require proficiency in English and the use of native speakers, but in my opinion, ELF is still the most suitable for workplace. In multinational companies, for example, there are people from many different countries with different accent"

The interview quotes indicate the students' realization regarding how most companies prioritize communicative capability, specifically in order to negotiate meaning across linguistic boundaries. There is a transition from the EFL mindset, which is pedagogically ideal for native-like proficiency, to the ELF perspective, which refers to a context-aware point of view. This shift suggests that in a multinational workplace, the conventional view of English is replaced by how diversity of accent is not a barrier, but has been a standard in professional and mutual understanding.

Additionally, the interview data revealed that the participants perceived ELF-oriented instruction as more beneficial in enhancing their employability compared to traditional EFL approaches. Based on their previous English language learning experiences, they believed that a learning approach emphasized on ELF would enrich their portfolios and strengthen their confidence in expressing themselves and communicating effectively within workplace settings. For instance, several participants stated that:

"I consider ELF can help me to prepare for industry. I personally also suited to ELF, especially for industrial purpose"

"If the institution concern on EFL, there will be limitation for us to express our English well due to boundaries of specific accent. In fact, the working world isn't that rigid anymore"

"I like English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) over English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because, in my view, communicating through ELF principles makes interaction becomes more natural without the need to pause frequently to think about correct grammar or pronunciation. This reduces the awkward silences during conversations and helps maintain the flow of communication, as speakers are less afraid of making mistakes and more focused on mutual understanding."

These participants' perceptions demonstrate that the flexibility inherent in the ELF-oriented approach resonates with the linguistic demands of global workplaces. Indeed, achieving communicative competence through this approach can indirectly enhance their engagement and promote career development within professional environments.

Interview Data Related to Research Question 2

Interview responses also revealed that the majority of

participants argued the value of ELF-oriented instruction through their classroom and internship experiences in various industries. As students of VHE, they became more knowledgeable that effective communication in the workplace did not rely on conformity to Standard English norms. Instead, they reported being able to interact successfully with colleagues from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds using English as a lingua franca, despite not conforming to native-speakers' perspectives. Several participants noted, although not all instructors incorporated ELF principles into their teaching, their exposure to ELF within the VHE curriculum had significantly changed their point of view from Standard English accuracy to communicative effectiveness, particularly in terms of intelligibility and mutual understanding:

"Since we are in vocational education and will directly enter the workforce, what we need is English as lingua franca."

"We don't have to adopt the native accent. The important thing is that we can communicate with our work partners and both understand each other."

"Actually, the primary goal of communication is to achieve mutual understanding between interlocutors. Therefore, in my opinion, even if a speaker communicates with an Indonesian accent or an accent from another non-native English-speaking country, it should not be an issue—as long as the intended message is conveyed clearly."

Moreover, the participants also highlighted their non-conformity to the native-speaker accents. Their experiences showed that, even when their English was influenced by their first language, they were still able to communicate adequately. This circumstance led them to believe that adopting a native-speaker accent was not a prerequisite for being accepted in the workplace environments. Rather, they felt empowered to use English reflected their own linguistic identity while still having effective interactions with co-workers in work settings:

"Nowadays, I think, we all have our own accents and don't stick to British accent, for example. If the institution concern on EFL, there will be limitation for us to express our English well due to boundaries of specific accent."

"I believe that not all individuals are capable of acquiring a native-like accent. However, I think native speakers are generally able to understand non-native speakers, even when they speak with various accents. As long as the message is conveyed clearly and the communication flows effectively, mutual understanding can still be achieved."

"I am neither a native speaker nor of mixed native heritage, so I realize that my English may not be as fluent as that of a native speaker. Inevitably, there will be traces of an Indonesian accent in my English."

As evidenced in the data, the participants suggested the institution and the lecturers to fully integrate ELF pedagogies and provided greater exposures as possible to ELF principles. They believed that doing so would encourage students to express themselves more freely and reduce their hesitation to

speak English. This would allow them to use the language based on their own needs and real-life contexts, rather than being constrained by rigid notions of English standard.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the VHE students' perceptions of the English language they need to learn in preparation for their future career (RQ1). Furthermore, it also investigated whether the evolving students' evolving views on the English language demands in the workplace were influenced by their cultural background and current stage of language learning (RQ2). The results indicate an increasing awareness among students of a shift in language learning orientation from EFL approaches to principles associated with ELF. The results also demonstrated students' increasingly positive viewpoint, as they become conscious of the importance of communicative effectiveness and linguistic realities required for successful engagement in multicultural and multilingual real-world international communication.

Redefining Language Needs: From Native-Speaker Fluency to Communicative Effectiveness

As shown in the presented findings, there is a greater preference among students for being exposed to a range of English accents within their learning, rather than focusing solely on native-speaker accuracy. This preference may derive from their previous learning experiences, and internship experiences in the modern companies consisted of multicultural and multilingual environments. They acknowledged that communicative effectiveness is achieved through mutual understanding and meaningful interaction rather than concentrating on native-speaker pronunciation or linguistic precision (Jenkins, 2000, 2007, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011), in respect of appropriateness, accuracy, and naturalness (Canagarajah, 2013; Zacharias & Manara, 2013).

In this regard, vocational learners are becoming increasingly aware that authentic real-life communication, requires a pedagogical shift from 'Standard Norms' to promoting greater exposures on ELF core tenets. This evolving perspective encourages both teachers and students to adopt practical strategies suited to multilingual contexts (Zhang, 2021), and to value accommodation skills as essential components in the process of meaning-making (Irham et al., 2022). In other words, by demonstrating the ability to converge accordingly and show tolerance to variations in pronunciation and accent depending on the interlocutor and communicative context, students are already actively employing the principles of ELF (Jenkins, 2000). This pragmatic perspective on English usage is in accordance with the existing research highlighting how ELF facilitates communicative efficiency among speakers who share different first-language backgrounds, particularly in response to the globalized demands of many multinational companies where varied instances of English are commonly accepted (Ren et al., 2016; Tsou & Chen, 2014). As the use of English continues to grow in workplace interactions across Indonesia, embracing diverse English accents can empower learners to express their linguistic identity more confidently (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Sung, 2016a). It is therefore conceivable that traditional English approach (EFL) in the Indonesia context may no longer be relevant (Musthafa et al., 2018).

An Instrument for Professional Empowerment: ELF-Oriented Instruction

The findings show that ELF-informed pedagogy is more adequate for vocational learners compared to traditional EFL instruction. They highlighted that their reluctance to engage in English communication often resulted from fears of being not understood or making grammatical errors or inaccurate pronunciation as structured in native-speaker norms (Irham et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2000, 2006). Such an approach disregarded the value of the speakers' linguistics repertoire (Sung, 2016a; Zhang, 2021), placing emphasis on forms rather than meaning (Irham et al., 2022). Thus, VHE lecturers can integrate ELF awareness into their teaching by adopting practices that expose students to real-world communication (Kordia, 2020; Musa et al., 2025; Sifakis, 2017). Taken as an example, listening materials can include a variety of English accents commonly used in regional and international workplaces such as Asian English, or non-native varieties. In addition, task-based activities can emphasize communication strategies by connecting students with authentic and meaningful context for workplace communication (Kordia, 2020; Musa et al., 2025). These may include practicing paraphrasing technical instructions, requesting clarification, and ensuring mutual understanding in the conversations during the role-play interaction. Such simulations allow students to focus on achieving clarity and appropriateness for successful communication (Sifakis, 2017). By doing so, these classroom activities can engage the students more into ELF-oriented practices and encourage them to develop critical reflection of effective communication in the workplace. Hence, ELF-oriented instructions are perceived to provide greater opportunities to develop accommodation skills, enhance students' self-esteem, and empower them to express themselves more freely and effectively in distinctive communicative contexts.

Furthermore, students acknowledged that incorporating their first language proportionately during the learning process, while still receiving adequate exposure to English, enhanced their comprehension and encouraged them to improve. There is a definite preference in their responses that the students have greater preference for English-medium instruction that integrates the use of their first language. They considered that bilingual instructional strategies as appropriate for vocational learners, many of whom are still developing their English proficiency while seeking immediate employment applicability. In other words, the strategic use of their L1 in English learning is seen as an adaptive communication strategy that supports and reinforces English language acquisition. This perspective aligns with empirical research by Jenkins (2015), Zein (2019), Zein (2018), Seidlhofer (2011), which suggest that integrating learners' first language within English-medium instruction can serve as an effective form of scaffolding to support and promote language learning development.

The Impact of Learning Background and Cultural Values

Despite the majority of students demonstrating openness to ELF principles, some contradictions were evident. A few students expressed that they remained attached to native-speaker norms in certain aspects of their language learning and considered particular non-native accents demanding.

These contradictory responses indicate that the students are in a transitional phase in their language beliefs. The phase where these students acknowledge the practicality of ELF, yet they are still being attached to native-speaker norms shaped by their prior EFL oriented pedagogy learning experiences. Long-term knowledge acquisition to either American or British standards during their previous learning has shaped their views to take these norms as the reference points of correctness and prominence of English language. This circumstance is further reinforced by language curricula that continue to follow the EFL paradigm, aiming to prepare students with what is perceived as the appropriate model for their future professional needs (Jenkins, 2007; Rahimi & Ruzrokh, 2016; Ren et al., 2016; Sung, 2016a). In addition, students' attachment to native-speaker norms is often due to the prestige, as they aspire to be seen as competent speakers of English. Consequently, sustained exposure to EFL principles, as well as dominant cultural expectations concerning the perceived standard or desirable form of English (Jenkins, 2007; Ren et al., 2016; Sung, 2016b, 2016a; Tsou & Chen, 2014), likely contributes to these mixed perceptions, where students continue to view native-speaker models as ideal references while also appreciating ELF for communication across diverse linguistic background.

This contradiction of the students' belief between the increasing recognition of ELF principles and their persistent conformity to native-speaker norms is manifested in existing research. Chiwen and Qin (2018) and Rahimi and Ruzrokh (2016) reported that multilingual speakers often adjust their language use based on the communicative context, employing strategies like code-switching and pragmatic adaptations when interacting with various interlocutors. Rather than striving for structural accuracy or native-like fluency, these speakers ensure mutual intelligibility. To achieve the mutual understanding, these speakers adopt various accommodation strategies (Seidlhofer, 2011; Zhang, 2021) including customizing their speech patterns in their pronunciation to accommodate particular interlocutors or contexts (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Sung, 2016a). Hence, these practices demonstrate the constantly changing and adaptable character of ELF communication, prioritizing the need to reform the pedagogical approach that equips learners with language skills in accordance with the expectations of global industries.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations to this study. First, the research draws findings based on a sample of single English-major VHE institutional students with minor participants. It may not adequately reflect the broader vocational student population. Further research may involve a wider and varied sample from various vocational institutions across different regions or disciplines to enhance the generalizability of the results. Second, the data collected through questionnaires and interviews may be subject to bias, since they illustrate participants' subjective self-perception. To address this, therefore, future studies could examine class observation to comprehend how ELF-based teaching practices are implemented and obtain a real-time classroom interaction. These insights point to the need of examining for students' communicative development within classroom contexts. Longitudinal studies may also be beneficial in evaluating the long-term impact of ELF-oriented pedagogy as

it can measure broadly to the ELF perceptions and learners' communicative competence in the multilingual and multicultural workforce.

CONCLUSION

Communicative effectiveness, intelligibility and mutual understanding are increasingly recognized as essential in today's globalized and culturally diverse workplaces, where interactions often occur among individuals from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, Vocational Higher Education (VHE) students must be adequately prepared to face such environments, particularly with their English. In line with this, the findings of the current study reveal a growing awareness among students of the linguistic demands in global professional setting. Based on the students' real-world experiences, such as internships and cross-cultural interactions in multilingual workplace environments, they appreciate greatly on practical communication, mutual intelligibility, and tolerance for linguistic diversity, rather than grammatical accuracy and native-like pronunciation. These views are closely aligned with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) principles.

Despite a few students expressed a continued attachment to native-speaker norms, the majority demonstrated their preference to re-evaluating current pedagogical approaches. They suggested a shift on language learning from the conventional EFL-based teaching paradigm toward ELF-informed pedagogical approaches, which more represent their communicative needs. This includes integrating the use of Indonesian alongside English, determining the importance of a comprehensive and context-sensitive curriculum.

Therefore, it is an urge for VTE institution to reconsider their instructional approaches and incorporate ELF principles for practical classroom strategies, so accordingly enhancing students' confidence, communicative adaptability, and relevance in the global workforce.

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