

## The voice of adult women in taking English proficiency test

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### Abstract

A lot of studies reported that female learners' capability in mastering a second language is better than that of male learners. However, adult female test takers experience bigger challenges in dealing with English Proficiency Tests (EPT) since they are usually multi-roles women. The objectives of the study were to analyze the views of adult women test takers on the challenges of English proficiency tests related to the most difficult skill that they have to take and how they cope with their problems. The study applied mixed method study with descriptive quantitative and phenomenology approaches. The data were taken through a questionnaire and structured interview for 77 respondents of the study. Based on the result of the data analysis on 77 respondents, the questionnaire data show that the most difficult part of EPT was listening. The respondents provided many strategies for raising their EPT scores. The most popular method of learning EPT was autonomous learning, which was followed by taking a course, studying with friends, and not trying to improve EPT at all.

**Keywords:** Adult women; coping mechanism; difficult skill; EPT.

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## 1. Introduction

English proficiency testing is still a crucial component in evaluating students' English fluency in academic contexts (Adserà & Bhowmick, 2022). While hearing, reading, and structuring are unproductive aspects of language competence, speaking and writing are productive parts of language proficiency. To function well in a language, it is necessary to master both productive and non-productive skills. However, due to several restrictions on performing those productive skills, such as a lack of time for administering the tests, insufficient human capital to serve as the examiners, and difficulties in determining the aspects of rubric assessment, several English proficiency tests (EPT) do not assess the productive skills. Due to its time efficiency, English proficiency tests with non-productive skills—which are primarily paper-based—are still employed in a variety of settings, including academic settings and professional settings, even though they cannot properly analyze a person's language competency. Since a significant number of books and other information resources about modern knowledge are written in English, it is necessary to master English (Lauder, 2008).

English proficiency test still “haunts” test takers because generally, they have to achieve a particular required score based on the standard regulated by the institution. Language achievement tests are viewed as a powerful means of control and dominance by test takers from various institutions, genders, and proficiency levels (Razavipour, 2014; Fattahi & Nushi, 2021). Although English has been taught almost in all primary schools, not all skills of EPT are taught at school, so it still becomes a challenge for those who do not master it. According to empirical studies, a significant number of students performed poorly on the EPT (Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah, 2020). English proficiency test becomes a “big” problem for them because it is not only merely a proficiency test of English that stand alone in its subject but also a test that can be a requirement for other academic achievements. Sometimes, a required English proficiency test becomes a prerequisite condition to conduct a proposal seminar, enroll in the graduation ceremony, or continue their further study. These “burdens” are the cause of why EPT becomes a very challenging matter.

Although a lot of studies reported that female learners' capability in mastering a second language is better than that of male learners (Lasekan, 2018; Brown et al., 2022) and female students tend to be more successful than male students (Hamsinah, 2017), adult female test takers experience bigger challenges in dealing with EPT since they are usually multi-roles women i.e. working women, students, wives, and even mothers with babies. Women are assumed in homemaking, caregiving, and subservient roles (Rahmi, 2015; Neelam, 2022). Thus, they tend to lay aside their need to spare their particular time to prepare for the test to obtain the required score. Those roles for sure bring impact to women's strategy to obtain the required EPT scores. Gender stereotypes in language learning are a real factor influencing learners' success and attitudes toward language learning (Tran, 2021). On the other hand, gender disparities may also be related to the cultural, social, and educational context in which a foreign language is learned (Solhaug & Kristensen, 2020; Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Hence, the researcher wishes to find the answer to several questions related to adult women's challenges with English proficiency tests based on the cultural, social, and educational context namely:

1. What is the most difficult skill on English proficiency Test? Why?
2. What are women's respondent's strategies to combat their problem(s) in doing EPT?

### 1.1. Purpose of study

The objectives of the study were to analyze the views of adult women test takers on the challenges of English proficiency tests related to the most difficult skill that they have to take. The study also answered the question of why the skill became the most difficult for them. In addition, the study also determined the women test-takers' strategies to combat their problems in taking English Proficiency Test considering their multi-roles as mothers, wives, students, and employees.

The study is significant considering that previous studies mostly discussed the correlation between gender and language learning (Zoghi, Kazemi, & Kalani, 2013; Tran, 2021; Hamsinah, 2017; Radwan, 2011; Glowka, 2014), gender and language use (Rahmi, 2015; Montero-SaizAja, 2021),

gender and a mono-skill test such as vocabulary and reading (Montero-SaizAja, 2021; Danuwijaya & Roebiyanto, 2020; Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah, 2020; Braund, James, Johnston & Mullaney, 2020). Among the research, none of them discussed the problems faced by adult women in performing EPT. This study becomes a novel matter because the researcher discusses the image of adult women in combatting their problem in performing EPT.

## **2. Materials and Method**

The study employed mixed-method research combining qualitative and quantitative research designs. Qualitative research with a phenomenology approach was chosen to deeply analyze the respondents' perspectives related to the most difficult skill of the English proficiency test and how they coped with their difficulties.

### **2.1. Data collection instrument**

A structured interview was used to collect qualitative data. Qualitative data were obtained in the form of words, sentences, expressions, and paragraphs of the respondents, and they will be analyzed qualitatively. In addition, a quantitative research design with a descriptive study approach was employed to analyze the breadth of the study. The researcher did not use any software to analyze quantitative data but simply used quantitative data in the form of numbers as supporting data showing the significance of the data to the analysis. Research data in the form of numbers within tables or diagrams were obtained as the main source of quantitative data analysis.

### **2.2. Participants**

The study was conducted in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Yogyakarta was chosen as the location of the study considering that Yogyakarta is a center of students in Indonesia. Students from all over cities in Indonesia come to Yogyakarta to continue their studies in the city. It is assumed that the diversity of students can represent the real condition of society in Indonesia. The respondents were students of the magister program of midwifery as many as 78 respondents were taken by total sampling. Students of a magister program were used as the respondents of the study considering that they might have diversity in the term of ages and origins (not only from one city). It is important to consider the age of the respondents since the main focus of the study was to analyze adult women's perspectives. Moreover, all students of the midwifery program were female, thus it was easier to take a total sampling technique to collect the data from respondents. All respondents were female; hence the study did not consider gender matters.

### **2.3. Ethics**

The data collecting technique was employed through an online questionnaire which included a consent form, to obtain quantitative data analyzed based on the descriptive quantitative method. Qualitative data were obtained through structured interviews, and oral consent was sought from participants.

### **2.4. Data analysis**

After obtaining data both in the form of tables and diagrams as quantitative data and in the form of words, sentences, and utterances as qualitative data, the researcher sorted and classified the data into several categories. Then, analyses were conducted based on those categories.

Quantitative data were analyzed by using the descriptive method; descriptive quantitative was employed to present numeric data in the form of tables or diagrams. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed by employing a phenomenology approach. The qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive phenomenology, which tried to depict the essential meanings and structures of phenomena without imposing any biases or judgments. Bracketing, horizontalization, clustering, and textualization were the four processes in the data processing process. Bracketing is putting one's personal biases and assumptions aside to focus on the evidence. Horizontalization entailed

considering every word or expression to be equally essential and relevant. Clustering referred to categorizing or grouping statements based on their similarities and contrasts. Textualization entailed creating a detailed account of the phenomena and their essences (Greening , 2019). Phenomenological research has the potential to broaden the understanding of the complex phenomena involved in learning, behavior, and communication. The researcher plays the role of a blank slate, using the experiences of participants to gain knowledge of the essence of a phenomenon (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

### 3. Result

The study was analyzed based on several significant aspects determining the challenges of participating English Proficiency Test namely the most difficult part of the EPT and the steps of test takers coping with their problems related to the English Proficiency Test. Before analyzing deeply, the result of the study, the characteristics of respondents can be explained below (table 1):

**Table 1**

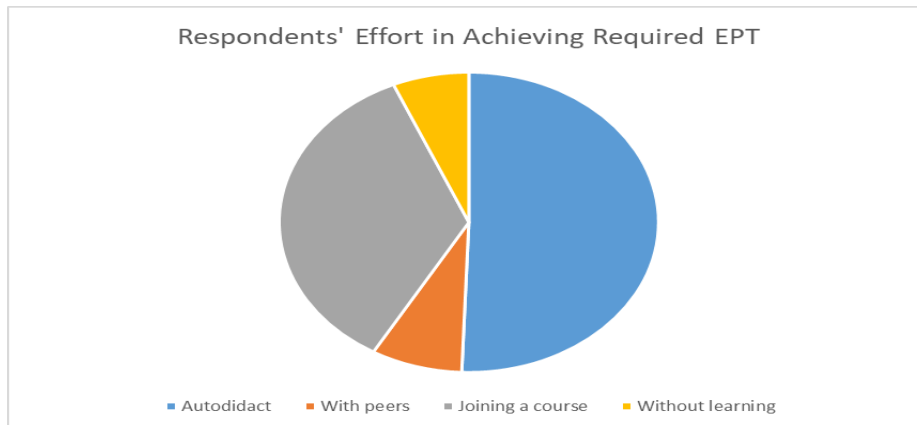
*Characteristics of the Respondents*

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
20 – 24 years	54	70.1%
25 – 29 years	10	13%
30 – 34 years	10	13%
35 – 39 years	1	1.3%
>40 year	2	2.6%
<b>Learning English Duration</b>		
1 year	11	14.3%
2 years	1	1.3%
3 years	6	7.8%
4 years	5	6.5%
5 years	8	10.4%
5-10 year	23	29.9%
>10 year	23	29.9%
<b>Number of taking EPT test</b>		
1x	20	26%
2x	21	27.3%
3x	18	23.4%
More than 3x	18	23.4%

#### **3.1. Coping mechanism of EPT problems in adult female test takers**

The fact that most respondents were not satisfied with their EPT score, they had to cope with their problem to get the required one. There were several ways that the respondents shared regarding how they improved their EPT scores. Four main ways were stated; the most dominant way to learn EPT was by doing autonomous learning (50.6%), and it was followed by joining a course, studying with friends, and having no effort in increasing EPT; each of the learning ways obtained 35.1%, 7.8%, and 6.5% respectively. Through autonomous learning, language learners set targets and objectives within the framework of the class, as well as outside of the class (Budianto & Mason, 2022). The following pie chart (figure 1) describes respondents' efforts in achieving the required EPT.

**Figure 1**  
*respondents' efforts in achieving the required EPT*

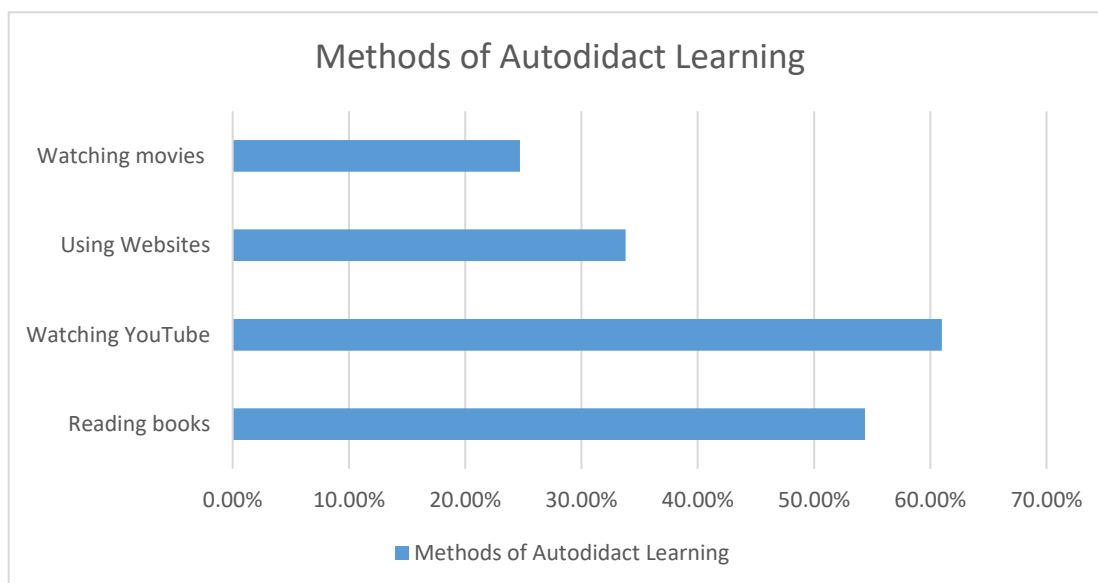


Some respondents stated the reason why they chose to study autonomously was because they found it difficult to study outside their house due to multiple roles and burdens in their daily life. They had to take care of their family (Respondents 2, 7, 18, 23, 31, 44, 45, 52, 63, 69, 70, 72, 77) especially those who still had a baby (Respondents 7 and 31); they needed to work (Respondent 23, 45, 70); and they had to do campus' assignments (all respondents). Their multiple roles made them difficult to add more activities especially activities to join an English course to prepare their EPT. Hence, autonomous learning was chosen as the respondents' effort to struggle with their EPT. One respondent stated that

Well, for me the most draining energy is to take care of my baby and to do all campus activities. I can't even think of anything else or spend more time taking courses for this. This EPT burdens me so much because my English is not good, but I have to get the required score. What I have done so far is to individually learn from the module that has been given by the teachers (Respondent 31).

Respondents who preferred having autodidact learning mentioned several ways that they had to improve their EPT score. The following graph (Figure 2) shows several ways of learning the material independently.

**Figure 2**  
*Methods of autodidact learning*



#### 4. Discussion

The respondents of the study were female students of a magister program at a university in Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta was chosen as the representative of all cities in Indonesia because the city is also called a student city in which all students from all over Indonesia come to the city to study. Yogyakarta city has more than 20 universities, and the city also offers hospitality and relatively cheap living cost. Hence, a lot of students from all over Indonesia come to the city to continue their higher studies. Students of a magister program were selected as the population of the study because the respondents were considered adult women. Moreover, the study program chosen became a multi-steps educational degree which started from Diploma 3 Degree, Bachelor's Degree, and Master's Degree. It was assumed that some or most of the students of the major had obtained their professional path.

Meanwhile, the frequency of test-takers taking EPT varied. The classification varies from once, twice, three times, and more than three (3) times, and respectively it obtained almost even results with 26%, 27.3%, 23.4%, and 23.4%. All respondents stated that they took English Proficiency Test because the EPT score was used as the requirement for continuing their studies, enrolling in any scholarship, or finishing their studies. None of them took EPT to know their English capability. It can be inferred that if the test was not a requirement given by educational institutions, respondents would never take any test anyway. A language test can bring intended and unintended consequences for its shareholders including students given the fact that their test performance might have effects on their occupational and educational promotion (Rezaeian, Seyyedrezaei, Barani , & Seyyedrezaei, 2020).

The total respondents of the study were 77 respondents who took English Proficiency Test. All respondents were female students with post-graduate degrees ranging from 20 years old to more than 40 years old. Moreover, based on the data, it can be known that the duration of test takers learning English varied ranging from 1 year to more than 10 years. There were 11 test takers (14.3%) studying English for 1 (one) year; only 1 student (1.3%) had learned English in 2 (two) years, and the most dominant duration of learning English was more than 5 years (46%). Based on the respondents' learning English duration, they should have been able to master English well. Time learning spent by a student is directly relevant to an academic outcome (Fisher , et al., 2015 ). However, the satisfaction level of the respondents was relatively low.

The satisfaction of respondents to take EPT simulation was dominated by the response that 68.8% of respondents were not satisfied with their pretest results. Based on the interview, it can be known that the reason why test takers were not satisfied with the results of their test was due to various reasons. One most dominant reason was that the test taker could not achieve the required score of the EPT simulation. It can be inferred that self-acceptance became the most dominant determinant of the test takers' satisfaction level (Bavani & Mohan , 2015) in performing their EPT. The respondents mentioned that they had to obtain 500 of the score to pass the requirement, but their score was lower than that (82.7%). Some respondents admitted that they had fulfilled the required score, but they had not done their maximum efforts in doing the test (13.5%); they believed that they could get more if they had more struggle. Another critical component influencing respondents' achievement is the effort they are willing to put into the learning process (Giladi, Koslowsky, & Davidovitch, 2022). Once they put great effort into their EPT, they will have good self-satisfaction. One test taker admitted that she was satisfied with the result, but she still had concerns that the real test would give her a lower score.

*For this EPT exercise, I am quite satisfied with the results, however, I still feel lacking because during the exam later the processing time is more conditional and I am afraid that if I cannot take advantage of the time available and my suspension will not reach what was targeted, and according to I personally still have a lot to learn more to be able to get a better score for the next test (Respondent 17).*



A different response was stated by one respondent mentioning that EPT score was not merely a parameter to determine someone to master English. Based on her opinion:

*Alhamdulillah, (I'm) satisfied with the score, because it meets the minimum requirements for the EPT score requested by the campus, but I want to increase this score even more to hone the knowledge I have gained and not only rely on the numbers obtained but to understand more about English materials (Respondent 52).*

Based on the result of the data analysis on 77 respondents, the questionnaire data show that the most difficult part of EPT was listening (58.4%). The result of the study also supports a study conducted by Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah (2020) stating that listening for TOEFL was reported as the most challenging. Respondents stated that the problem in listening was mostly due to limited time to follow the conversation. They think that the conversation was too fast to follow. Some respondents admitted that they did not get enough English exposure. The respondents realized if they wanted to understand the speaker's pronunciation well, they had to get used to hear or listen the way native English speakers spoke. Another problem related to respondents' listening skill problem was their vocabulary mastery, similar to the findings of Akhavan Masoumi & Sadeghi (2020). According to one of the students, another problem in listening is also the similarity of pronunciation.

For me, listening is the most difficult part of the test because some of the words sound similar, especially when I need to choose the most correct answer. It's confusing (Respondent 30).

Another respondent shared her problem related to her focus on concentration.

*I think I have a personal problem in doing the listening test because I cannot follow the conversation. It takes me much time to choose the answer while listening to the conversation. I feel so frustrated once I was left listening to the conversation, and it eventually will make everything worse (Respondent 60).*

On the other hand, some other respondents (36.5%) disagreed that listening became the most difficult skill in the English Proficiency test. They stated that structure and written expression were the most difficult ones. The most dominant reason stating that structure was the most difficult part was because test takers had to both memorize and understand grammar in sentences (78%). Respondents stated that it is hard for them to put the formulas of sentence structures. Somehow English learners still heavily depend on their teachers or peers in learning grammar or structure because they need somebody to discuss any formula presented in it (Rahayu, 2019). Besides, other test takers indicated that the choices of the answers seemed similar (20%), so they found it difficult to determine the most correct answer.

Nevertheless, based on the interview data, only did 4 (5.2%) respondents report that reading was the most difficult part of the English Proficiency Test. In this skill, vocabulary mastery became the highest problem of the respondents. One respondent shared that the most difficult part of EPT was when she had to find the synonym of any word. She admitted that she needed to improve her vocabulary mastery to improve her EPT score. Indeed, vocabulary size is one important that enhances reading comprehension (Ibrahim, Sarudin, & Muhamad, 2016).

Based on the data, it can be inferred that watching YouTube became the most favorite autonomous learning method; it was followed by reading books, learning through websites, and watching movies respectively. Watching YouTube became the most dominant way of learning EPT because it provides easy access and is available everywhere and at every time (Rahayu, 2020). Moreover, the respondents can also adjust what materials they want to find on YouTube easily (Rahayu, 2018). One of the respondents mentioned:

*I prefer to watch EPT materials through YouTube videos because I can do it whenever and wherever I want. I usually learn EPT by watching YouTube when all my children have slept or*

*while I am waiting for them to have extracurricular activities. Whenever I have a little free time, I will watch YouTube to learn EPT (Respondent 52).*

Other respondents thought that reading books was better for them to learn EPT because they could do the exercises and make notes directly in the book (Respondents 3, 14, 23, 25, 35, 37, 40, 48, 52, 77). The more they practice their English, the more capable they will be (Rahayu, 2021). Some other respondents prefer to use websites to learn English especially materials related to EPT. On websites, respondents could ask all questions they wanted to know. All information was available on websites; they just needed to type the keywords, and all explanations would be presented (Respondents 6, 7, 18, 20, 42, 55, 61, 63, 74). Although female respondents use language learning significantly more than males, there is a significant difference between them regarding productive vocabulary (Montero-SaizAja, 2021; Mashhadlou & Izadpanah, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

Adult women had more challenges in performing EPT to achieve their required score. The study concludes that based on adult women's opinion, the most difficult task of the EPT test taken paper-based test was listening skills because respondents had limited time to follow the conversation. There were several ways that the respondents shared regarding how they improved their EPT scores. Four main ways were stated; the most dominant way to learn EPT was by doing autonomous learning and it was followed by joining a course, studying with friends, and having no effort in increasing EPT.

Some respondents stated the reason why they chose to study autonomously was because they found it difficult to study outside their house due to multiple roles and burdens in their daily life. They had to take care of their family especially those who still had a baby; they needed to work; and they had to do campus assignments (all respondents). Their multiple roles made them difficult to add more activities especially activities to join an English course to prepare their EPT. Hence, autonomous learning was chosen as the respondents' effort to struggle with their EPT. It is recommended that prospective test takers especially adult women prepare themselves before taking EPT by having more exercises autonomously or by taking courses to have more exposure to EPT.

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