



English Language Proficiency, International Exposure, and Global Career Opportunities among Sport Science Students: Challenges and Pathways toward World-Class University

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Abstract

Keywords:

*English Language Proficiency;
International Exposure; Global
Career Opportunities; Sport
Science Students; Higher
Education Internationalization;
World-Class University*

The internationalization agenda of higher education has become a critical component in achieving World-Class University (WCU) status. Within this context, English language proficiency plays a strategic role in preparing students to participate in international academic and professional environments. This study explores the perceptions, challenges, and expectations of Sport Science students regarding English language competency and its contribution to international exposure and global career opportunities. Using a mix-Methods approach, quantitative data were collected from 81 Sport Science students through open-ended surveys concerning their English language needs, learning experiences, and future career aspirations. While, 4 alumni were interviewed to get deeper context with workplace need. The findings reveal that students perceive English proficiency as essential for accessing international scientific literature, communicating in multicultural environments, participating in international sporting events, and expanding employment opportunities in the global sports industry. Students also recognize English as a crucial tool for obtaining international certifications, scholarships, and overseas professional experiences. However, several barriers remain prominent, including limited vocabulary mastery, difficulties in speaking and pronunciation, listening comprehension challenges, and insufficient confidence in academic writing. Students expect English learning programs to emphasize sport-specific terminology, practical communication skills, international academic literacy, and interactive learning methods aligned with professional sport contexts. This study proposes a conceptual pathway in which English language proficiency functions as a foundational competency that facilitates international exposure, which subsequently enhances global career opportunities for Sport Science students. The findings provide important implications for universities pursuing internationalization and WCU objectives by highlighting the need for discipline-specific English programs that support students' global competitiveness and professional mobility.

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eISSN 2548-7604

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly striving to enhance their academic quality and global reputation (de Wit, 2019). In Indonesia, one of the major strategic goals is achieving higher rank in World-Class University (WCU) status, which emphasizes internationalization as a key performance indicator. Internationalization not only involves institutional collaborations and global research activities but also requires universities to prepare graduates who possess intercultural competence and the ability to communicate effectively in international settings. Student internationalization is particularly important because students serve as primary representatives of universities in academic, professional, and social engagements at the global level.

Within this context, English language proficiency has emerged as a fundamental competency for accessing international opportunities (Naseer et al, 2025). English functions as the *lingua franca* of higher education, scientific communication, and global professional networks. Previous studies have highlighted the role of English proficiency in facilitating academic mobility, access to international literature, participation in global conferences, and employability in multinational environments (Ahmad & Sabah, 2021). Moreover, English competence contributes to the development of communication skills, self-confidence, and cross-cultural interaction, all of which are essential components of graduate competitiveness in the global labor market.

The importance of English proficiency is particularly evident in the field of Sport Science (Đorić, 2020). Contemporary sports industries operate within highly internationalized environments characterized by global competitions, international coaching certifications, cross-border collaborations, scientific conferences, and multinational sport organizations. Consequently, Sport Science students are expected to engage with international academic resources, communicate with athletes and professionals from diverse cultural backgrounds, and participate in global sporting activities. These demands require adequate English proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nam et al, 2020).

Despite its recognized importance, a gap remains between the English language needs and actual competencies of Sport Science students. Findings from a survey involving 81 students of the Faculty of Sport Sciences and four alumni indicate that students perceive English as essential for career development, access to scientific knowledge, professional communication, and participation in international sports activities. However, those students continue to experience challenges related to vocabulary mastery, speaking confidence, pronunciation, academic writing, and listening comprehension. Students also express a strong need for English learning programs that are more contextualized to Sport Science, emphasizing sport-specific terminology, scientific communication, and practical interaction in international settings.

Drawing upon theories of higher education internationalization, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and graduate employability, this study argues that English language proficiency serves as a gateway competency that enables students to gain international exposure, which subsequently enhances global career opportunities (Ettl Rodríguez, 2020). International exposure may include participation in international conferences, student exchange programs, volunteer activities at international sporting events, and interactions with global professional networks (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Such experiences are expected to strengthen students' readiness to compete in the increasingly globalized sport industry (al Zoubi, 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the English language needs of Sport Science students, identify the challenges they encounter in developing English proficiency, and examine the role of English competence in supporting international exposure and global career opportunities. The findings are expected to provide insights for developing more relevant English language programs that support university internationalization agendas and contribute to the achievement of World-Class University objectives.

METHOD

This study adopted an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed in the first phase, followed by qualitative data collection to further explain and enrich the quantitative findings (Toyon, 2021). This design was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of Sport Science students' English language needs, perceived challenges, and expectations, as well as the role of English proficiency in supporting international exposure and career development (Bowen, et al, 2017). The qualitative phase was intended to provide deeper insights into the survey results through the experiences of alumni who had entered professional and international environments.

The quantitative phase involved 81 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Sport Sciences, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), who completed an open-ended questionnaire. The qualitative phase involved four alumni, selected purposively based on their professional experiences and exposure to academic or sport-related international environments. Their experiences provided valuable perspectives on the practical importance of English language proficiency in career advancement and international engagement.

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. In the first phase, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students to identify their perceptions regarding the importance of English proficiency, challenges in learning English, and expectations for English language instruction within the context of Sport Science education. In the second phase, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with alumni to explore how English language skills influenced their academic experiences, professional careers, and opportunities for international exposure. The interview findings were used to explain and contextualize the patterns identified in the survey responses.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive analysis to identify common trends, dominant perceptions, and recurring issues related to English language learning among Sport Science students. Subsequently, the qualitative interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes regarding the role of English proficiency in academic development, international participation, and career opportunities. The findings from both phases were integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between English language proficiency, international exposure, and global career readiness among Sport Science students.

RESULT AND DISCUSION

Result

English as a Gateway to Global Careers

The survey findings indicate that Sport Science students have a strong awareness of the importance of English proficiency for their future careers. Approximately 64.2% of respondents (52 out of 81 students) rated English as a highly important competency (scale 4). Students perceived English as a gateway competency that enables access to global employment opportunities, multinational companies, and international professional environments. English proficiency was also considered essential for accessing global information, scientific resources, and professional knowledge that support career development. Furthermore, students emphasized that English communication skills contribute to the development of soft skills, particularly public speaking and professional communication, which are increasingly valued in the labor market. In the context of sport sciences, English was viewed as crucial for understanding technical terminology, regulations, and international sport-related communication. However, a small number of respondents considered other foreign languages, such as Japanese, to be more relevant to their specific career aspirations.

English for International Academic Access

The results demonstrate that English proficiency is strongly associated with academic development among Sport Science students. A total of 70.3% of respondents (57 students) reported a high need for English reading skills to understand academic literature, journals, textbooks, and learning materials predominantly published in English. Students acknowledged that English literacy enhances access to international knowledge, supports research activities, enriches vocabulary, and fosters independent learning without relying excessively on translation tools. Regarding academic writing, perceptions were more varied. Although 34.6% of respondents (28 students) reported a relatively low need for English writing skills, the combined proportion of students who considered writing skills important or very important reached 56.8% (46 students). Students recognized that English writing competence is necessary for preparing research reports, theses, scientific articles, and journal publications. In addition, writing in English was viewed as a means of communicating ideas to broader international audiences and improving critical thinking and self-confidence.

Challenges in English Language Acquisition

Despite recognizing the importance of English, many students reported limited proficiency. Approximately 64.2% of respondents perceived their English skills as relatively low, while 53.1% indicated that they could only partially understand or were unable to understand sport-related content delivered in English. These findings suggest that English proficiency remains a significant challenge among Sport Science students. The most frequently reported difficulties were related to vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, speaking fluency, grammar, writing, and listening comprehension. Students reported difficulties understanding technical terminology, idiomatic expressions, and contextual meanings due to limited vocabulary. They also experienced challenges in oral communication because of pronunciation issues, unfamiliarity with different accents, and limited confidence in constructing sentences during conversations. In addition, grammar and academic writing were perceived as difficult, particularly in producing formal written texts. Listening comprehension was another major challenge, especially when interacting with native speakers who speak rapidly, often requiring students to rely on subtitles to understand spoken content. These challenges appear to be associated with limited exposure to English in daily life, as many respondents reported that they rarely use English outside the classroom. Consequently, opportunities to practice and reinforce language skills remain limited.

International Exposure as a Development Opportunity

The findings highlight the important role of English proficiency in facilitating international exposure. Approximately 71.6% of respondents (58 students) indicated that understanding spoken English is highly important for participating in international activities. Students emphasized that English is essential for attending international conferences, understanding presentations, engaging in discussions, participating in exchange programs, and undertaking overseas training opportunities. Beyond academic activities, English proficiency was also perceived as necessary for accessing global sport-related content, including international competitions, foreign-language broadcasts, and professional sport resources. Students further highlighted the importance of English when participating in international sporting events, where communication with athletes, coaches, officials, and participants from different countries often requires the use of English as a common language. These findings suggest that English proficiency serves as a key facilitator of international engagement and intercultural communication within the sport industry.

Expectations toward Sport-Specific English Learning

Students expressed strong expectations regarding the development of more relevant English learning programs. Approximately 85.2% of respondents (69 students) expected English courses to improve their ability to communicate effectively in international settings, while 46.9% (38 students) expected to develop the ability to write academic texts and international sport-related literature.

Students emphasized the need for English instruction that focuses on practical communication skills, academic writing, and professional interactions within the global sport industry. They also highlighted the importance of learning sport-specific terminology and technical vocabulary relevant to coaching, sport management, and sport sciences. Furthermore, respondents preferred interactive and application-oriented teaching methods, including case studies, simulations, and real-world communication practices, rather than purely theoretical instruction. Such expectations reflect the need for an English for Sport Science curriculum that aligns language learning with the academic and professional demands of internationalized sport environments.

Discussion

English Proficiency as Strategic Capital for Sport Science Students

The findings demonstrate that English proficiency is perceived by Sport Science students as more than a communication skill; it represents a form of strategic capital that supports academic, professional, and personal development, this result in line with the previous study conduct by M. Cocca (2015). Students consistently associated English proficiency with broader career opportunities, access to international knowledge, and participation in global professional environments. This finding aligns with the internationalization agenda of higher education, which emphasizes the importance of developing graduates who are capable of operating effectively in multicultural and multilingual contexts (de Wit & Albatch, 2021). Within the framework of World-Class University (WCU) development, English proficiency functions as a foundational competency that enables students to access international scientific literature, participate in academic mobility programs, and engage in global knowledge exchange. Previous studies have identified English as the dominant language of scientific communication, international collaboration, and professional networking. Consequently, students with higher English proficiency possess greater opportunities to accumulate academic and professional capital that may enhance their future competitiveness (Juinot, 2022). For Sport Science students specifically, English proficiency is particularly important because the sport industry increasingly operates in international environments. Access to coaching certifications, international sporting events, global sport organizations, and scientific advancements in sport science largely depends on the ability to communicate and learn through English. Therefore, English proficiency should not be viewed merely as a language subject but as a strategic resource that contributes to human capital development and graduate competitiveness.

International Exposure as a Bridge between Language Competency and Employability

A significant finding of this study is the role of international exposure as an intermediary mechanism linking English proficiency with global career opportunities. Students recognized that English competence enables participation in international conferences, student exchange programs, overseas training, international sporting events, and interactions with athletes and professionals from different countries. This finding supports theories of higher education internationalization, which suggest that language competency facilitates student mobility and cross-cultural engagement. Through international exposure, students gain opportunities to apply their language skills in authentic contexts while simultaneously developing intercultural communication competence, global awareness, and professional confidence. These experiences contribute to the formation of global networking opportunities that may subsequently influence employability. From an employability perspective, international exposure provides students with valuable experiences that are increasingly valued by employers in the global labor market (Haidar, 2019). Participation in international academic and professional activities allows students to develop communication skills, adaptability, leadership, and intercultural competencies. Therefore, English proficiency alone may not directly translate into career success; rather, its value is amplified when students utilize their language skills to access international experiences and professional networks. The findings suggest that universities pursuing internationalization should create more opportunities for students to engage in international activities,

including exchange programs, collaborative online international learning, international volunteering, and participation in international sport events. Such initiatives can strengthen the connection between language learning and career readiness.

The Need for Sport-Specific English Learning

Despite recognizing the importance of English proficiency, students reported substantial challenges related to vocabulary, speaking, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and academic writing (akhteer, 2022). These findings indicate that existing English courses may not fully address the specific needs of Sport Science students. The results highlight the importance of adopting an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach, particularly English for Sport Science (Kongcharoen, 2023). ESP theory argues that language learning becomes more effective when instructional content is aligned with learners' academic and professional needs (Fakourian & Ghalibafan, 2024). In the context of Sport Science education, students require specialized knowledge of sport terminology, coaching communication, scientific writing, sport management discourse, and communication skills for international sporting environments. The current tendency to provide general English instruction may limit students' ability to transfer language skills into sport-related contexts. Consequently, students expressed a preference for more practical and contextualized learning experiences, including sport-based case studies, interactive communication activities, academic writing workshops, and exposure to authentic international sport communication scenarios. Developing Sport-Specific English programs would not only improve language proficiency but also support broader institutional goals related to internationalization and World-Class University achievement. Such programs could better prepare students to participate in international academic activities and compete in the increasingly globalized sport industry.

Proposed Model: From English Proficiency to Global Career Opportunities

Based on the findings, this study proposes a conceptual pathway explaining how English proficiency contributes to global career development among Sport Science students. The model suggests that English proficiency enhances students' academic confidence by improving their ability to access international literature, communicate effectively, and participate in academic activities (Miller, 2015). Increased confidence encourages students to engage in international exposure opportunities such as conferences, exchange programs, and international sporting events. Through these experiences, students develop global networks and intercultural competencies that ultimately enhance their employability and access to international career opportunities. This pathway reflects the broader objectives of higher education internationalization, where language competence serves as a catalyst for global engagement and professional mobility (Warscauer, 2012). The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of a conceptual model linking English proficiency, international exposure, and global career opportunities within the context of Sport Science students. While previous studies have examined English language learning, employability, or internationalization separately, limited research has investigated how these dimensions interact in sport higher education.

Table 1. Questionnaire Response Distribution

Indicator	Category	n	%
Importance of English for future career	Very High Need	52	64.2
Need to understand English literature and academic resources	High Need (Scale 3–4)	57	70.3
Need to produce written texts in English	High Need (Scale 3–4)	46	56.8
Need to understand spoken English in academic/professional contexts	High Need (Scale 3–4)	58	71.6
Expectation to improve English communication skills	High Expectation	69	85.2

Expectation to develop academic writing skills	High Expectation	38	46.9
Self-perceived low English proficiency	Scale 2 (Low)	52	64.2
Difficulty understanding English sports content	Low Understanding	43	53.1

Tabel 2. frequency trend related to English as Challenges and Pathways toward World-Class University

Aspect	Frequency Trend
English as a Gateway to Global Careers	Very High
English for International Academic Access	Very High
Challenges in English Language Acquisition	High
International Exposure as a Development Opportunity	Very High
Expectations toward Sport-Specific English Learning	Very High

This study proposes that English proficiency has impact on international exposure which will lead a better global career opportunities. This represents a strategic pathway through which universities can strengthen student competitiveness while simultaneously supporting institutional internationalization goals. The model offers practical implications for universities seeking to achieve World-Class University status by emphasizing the importance of integrating English language development with international engagement opportunities and career preparation initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of English language proficiency in supporting the internationalization of Sport Science students within the context of World-Class University development. The findings reveal that students demonstrate a strong need for English proficiency, primarily driven by aspirations for global career opportunities, access to international knowledge, and participation in international communication. However, challenges remain in key language areas, particularly speaking, listening, vocabulary mastery, and academic writing. The study further indicates that international exposure serves as an important mechanism through which English proficiency contributes to global career readiness. Students who possess stronger English skills are more likely to engage in international academic and professional activities, thereby expanding their global networks and career opportunities. Based on these findings, universities should develop more contextualized and discipline-specific English programs to support student internationalization. Practical initiatives may include English for Sport Science courses, International Sport Communication programs, international volunteer opportunities, joint classes with overseas universities, international internship programs, and academic writing workshops tailored to Sport Science students. Such initiatives can strengthen graduate competitiveness while supporting institutional efforts toward achieving World-Class University status.

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