

Analysis of the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test of Muhammadiyah Vocational High School Students in Sukabumi

Hera Wahdah Humaira¹

Asep Firdaus²

¹²Muhammadiyah University of Sukabumi

¹hera297@ummi.ac.id

²asepfirdaus@ummi.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the Indonesian language proficiency of students at Muhammadiyah Vocational High School (SMK) Sukabumi through the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI). Previous studies have mainly focused only on reading proficiency at the senior high school level, whereas this research covers overall language competence, differences in performance across the domains of listening, grammatical response, and reading, the factors influencing test results, and their relevance to Indonesian language learning needs at the vocational level. This research employed a quantitative descriptive method, involving 46 students as participants. Data were collected through a manual UKBI using a paper-based test format. The results show that the majority of students fall into the Intermediate (Semenjana) category (60.87%) and Marginal category (17.39%), while only 6.52% achieved the Excellent (Unggul) level. Domain analysis revealed that listening skills were relatively stronger, while reading and grammatical response skills were lower. Factors influencing performance included learning motivation, literacy exposure, teaching methods, social background, and everyday language use. This study highlights the importance of implementing literacy-based learning and practical language use to improve the language competence of vocational students.

Keywords: *UKBI; language competence; literacy; vocational high school (SMK)*

Introduction

The Indonesian language plays a central role in Indonesia's education system, particularly as the main medium of communication used in various aspects of life, including the workplace and higher education. At the Vocational High School (SMK) level, mastery of the Indonesian language becomes increasingly crucial, as SMK is designed to prepare students to directly enter the workforce. Therefore, Indonesian language learning in SMK is specifically designed to develop language skills that are both practical and relevant to students' professional needs.

In this context, the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI) holds significant relevance for vocational students. UKBI serves as an objective assessment tool to determine a person's proficiency in the four main language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The advantage of UKBI over conventional forms of assessment lies in its ability to measure functional and contextual language competence according to real-world communication needs. For SMK students, this ability is key to success in facing the industrial and professional world (*IDUKA*), which demands professional communication skills, both oral and written.

Furthermore, UKBI results can serve as a reference for teachers in designing more effective, contextual, and competence-oriented Indonesian language learning strategies. Thus, research on the implementation or analysis of UKBI results in the SMK environment has high relevance, as it can directly contribute to improving the quality of Indonesian

language learning based on workplace demands. This research is also expected to strengthen the position of the Indonesian language, not only as a compulsory subject but also as a professional communication competency that supports the competitiveness of SMK graduates in the industrial and professional sectors.

Vocational students, who are prepared to become skilled workers, need not only a theoretical understanding of the Indonesian language but also the ability to apply their language skills in real-life workplace situations. Good mastery of Indonesian enables students to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, to follow instructions accurately, and to read and understand complex technical documents. In addition, these skills also support them in pursuing higher education. Education must equip learners with literacy skills that enable them to overcome future challenges. To achieve literacy goals, schools need to prepare various programs, including literacy-based activities. Literacy has been recognized as a key component of successful programs, such as reading recovery, journaling, library visits, reading months, and others (Costello, 2012).

In essence, every development and progress is valuable in all aspects of life, as it reflects society's aspiration for improvement. Many sectors strive for progress, including the literacy movement, which brings positive change and advancement for humanity (S. S. (Eds). Ariyanti, 2016). Literacy activities in schools include teaching language skills, which can be integrated into Indonesian language instruction. Indonesian language learning in SMK focuses on developing the four main language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are developed through practical and contextual approaches according to each student's area of expertise. For instance, students in engineering programs are trained to understand and use technical language relevant to their field, while business students focus more on communication skills in business contexts.

Indonesian language proficiency encompasses the ability to use the language effectively and efficiently in various communication situations. This proficiency involves several key aspects: Listening Skills, Reading Skills, Writing Skills, Speaking Skills, and Grammar and Syntax Skills. Enhancing Indonesian language proficiency is essential, especially in educational and professional contexts, because language is the primary tool for thinking, learning, and communicating. Strong Indonesian language competence enables individuals to convey and receive information effectively, participate in discussions, and express ideas clearly and persuasively.

Language proficiency competence is a crucial aspect that must be developed in the school learning environment, as it directly affects students' abilities in comprehension, writing, and academic speaking (Sukenti et al., 2020). The Indonesian government has made various efforts to improve language proficiency through programs such as Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) and the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI). However, the implementation of these programs at the school level has not yet been optimal. Many students and teachers do not fully understand the function and importance of UKBI as an instrument for measuring Indonesian language competence (Nugroho et al., 2024).

In a global context, various countries have internationally recognized language proficiency standards, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) for English and JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) for Japanese. Similarly, Indonesia already has an official assessment tool, the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI), established through the Decree of the Minister of National Education No. 152/U/2003 dated October 28, 2003, as a means of assessing the language proficiency of Indonesian citizens (ukbi.kemdikbud.go.id). However, the popularity and utilization level of UKBI

remain low compared to foreign language proficiency tests. This indicates a gap between national policy and its implementation in the field, particularly in vocational education institutions.

(Ismadi, 2015) even emphasizes that UKBI has not yet received adequate attention, either among academics or educational practitioners. In fact, UKBI has great potential to strengthen the position of the Indonesian language in the professional sphere, particularly as an objective tool for assessing language proficiency in the workplace. Efforts to reinforce this position have been carried out by the Language Development and Fostering Agency through various UKBI testing programs (Pardede et al., 2019), yet these efforts have not been accompanied by a systematic implementation strategy within vocational schools.

Furthermore, according to (Brandenburg-Weeks & Abalkheel, 2021), language proficiency tests such as UKBI play an important role in developing language skills, expanding vocabulary, and accelerating the linguistic growth of test-takers. However, previous studies have mostly focused on policy aspects or general implementation of UKBI, rather than analyzing the actual language proficiency of vocational students, who represent a strategic target group requiring communicative competence in the workforce.

Thus, the research gap that emerges lies in the absence of comprehensive studies on how UKBI can be effectively applied or utilized in the vocational school environment to map and enhance students' language proficiency. This research seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the role and relevance of UKBI in improving the Indonesian language proficiency of vocational students, aligning it with the demands of the industrial and professional world (IDUKA).

Efforts to improve language proficiency have also been made through the implementation of adaptive UKBI language clinics, which can adjust test questions according to the participants' abilities, thereby producing more accurate assessments (Pratama, 2021). Research conducted at Yogyakarta State University showed that students' knowledge and interest in UKBI still need improvement (Cahya et al., 2021). Similarly, (Ramdhan et al., 2022) organized UKBI training at Bojong Gede Vocational School as a form of community service.

In a broader context, studies on language proficiency in Indonesia are not limited to the Indonesian language but also include English as an international language (Renandya et al., 2018). Documentation-based studies on UKBI have also been carried out, one of which is through the Lampiran Pencipta database, managed by a research team (Humaira et al., 2024).

Various previous studies have shown that the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI) holds significant potential as a learning and language evaluation instrument. International studies demonstrate that UKBI can be implemented to enhance students' listening skills through practice based on authentic communication contexts (Elitasari et al., 2019), while at the secondary school level, (Nurhayati, 2016) found that UKBI implementation could improve students' learning activities and outcomes. These findings reinforce the assumption that performance-based evaluations such as UKBI can encourage students' active participation in language learning, in line with constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful learning experiences in developing language competence.

In addition, (Sumarsih, 2018) asserts that strategies for handling UKBI test questions must take into account factual dimensions, since language proficiency depends not only on mastery of linguistic rules but also on the ability to apply language in social and professional contexts, as explained in **the** Communicative Competence Theory.

Based on this theoretical foundation, this study positions UKBI as an analytical tool to measure and understand the functional language proficiency of vocational students, using indicators of listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills to evaluate the alignment between students' language competencies and the demands of the workforce (IDUKA). Accordingly, constructivist theory is used to explain the process of developing language proficiency through UKBI-based learning experiences, while the Communicative Competence Theory serves as a framework for analyzing how far UKBI results reflect professional communication abilities relevant to industry needs.

Optimization of UKBI utilization has been proposed as a strategic step to improve language proficiency in Indonesia (Yanti, 2015). Research conducted in North Lampung even emphasizes that UKBI is beneficial not only for students but also for teachers (Zalmansyah, 2018). The use of UKBI among teachers is also linked to the development of better academic writing skills (Wedayanthi et al., 2014). From a societal perspective, responses to UKBI remain varied and are influenced by professional (Huri & Damaianti, 2019). This aligns with (Mukti et al., 2017), who highlight the importance of UKBI in maintaining the existence of the Indonesian language in the era of the ASEAN Economic Community. However, teachers' ability to complete UKBI tests remains a challenge in several regions (Syahrir, 2017).

The reading aspect, as part of UKBI, has long been studied. (Sasmayunita, 2014) revealed that mastery of main ideas is closely related to reading comprehension ability. The correlation between reading habits and comprehension was also confirmed in a study conducted at the elementary school level (Destiyanti, 2020).

In addition to reading, listening skills often emerge as a weak aspect. Factors contributing to low listening proficiency were identified by (Massitoh, 2021). The issue of listening difficulties in Indonesian language learning in the classroom has also received attention (Prihatin, 2017). Cross-national studies show that listening errors are also experienced by Vietnamese students learning English, particularly at the chunk level (Luu & Trinh, 2023). The issue of language test validity is also relevant to explore; (Cvilikaitė - Mačiulskienė & Zutkienė, 2024) questioned whether participants' English proficiency levels are always accurately reflected in placement tests.

This series of studies demonstrates that UKBI research has covered various aspects, including test-taking strategies, classroom implementation, difficulty factor analysis, and instrument validity. However, specific studies focusing on the linguistic competence of SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students covering listening, grammatical response, and reading skills remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill that research gap by expanding on previous research that examined only the reading comprehension section among high school students. The previous study found that SMA Muhammadiyah students in Sukabumi achieved an intermediate (madya) level in the reading section of the UKBI (Humaira et al., 2024). The present study provides a more comprehensive analysis of three Indonesian language proficiency skills listening, grammatical response, and reading tested in a single UKBI session for SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students. This scope limitation was applied to maintain a focused discussion on these three areas of language proficiency.

Method

This study is a quantitative research since it involves statistical calculations, specifically calculating the average UKBI (Uji Kemahiran Berbahasa Indonesia/Indonesian Language Proficiency Test) scores of participants. It is descriptive in nature because it describes the research findings according to the data obtained. The

research subjects consisted of 46 students from SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi in the 2024/2025 academic year, representing various study programs.

The research instrument used was the paper-based UKBI, which consists of three skill domains:

1. Listening – measuring comprehension of information from spoken discourse.
2. Grammar Response – measuring understanding and application of language rules.
3. Reading – measuring the ability to comprehend written texts.

According to (Sugiyono, 2018), the quantitative method involves research data presented in numerical form and analyzed using statistical techniques. This study presents data in its entirety without any additional processing or manipulation. The purpose of descriptive research is to provide a comprehensive picture of a phenomenon or to explain and clarify ongoing events. Only the variables relevant to the discussed problem are addressed in this study. The collected data are related to attitudes, opinions, and current conditions within a community. As (Rusandi & Muhammad Rusli, 2021) state, this research also explains and describes such data.

The instrument used to analyze Indonesian language proficiency consisted of written test results designed to assess students' abilities in the three UKBI sections. The descriptive method was chosen because it provides a clear representation of students' linguistic proficiency. Qualitative data analysis was conducted after data collection, consisting of three simultaneous processes as described by (Miles et al., 2014): data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The research was conducted using a single test session comprising three test packages: listening, grammar response, and reading. The test aimed to determine the UKBI score achievement of SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students in listening, grammar response, and reading proficiency. The listening test consisted of 40 essay-type questions, the grammar response test of 25 questions, and the reading test of 40 questions. After collecting the results, a simple quantitative assessment was carried out, calculating students' performance percentages and categorizing them according to proficiency levels: *Outstanding, Highly Proficient, Proficient, Intermediate, Fair, Marginal, or Limited*.

Subsequently, conclusions and evaluations were drawn to determine whether there were significant differences in listening, grammar response, and reading abilities among the students. A questionnaire was also used to identify factors influencing students' linguistic competence as measured by UKBI and to assess the relevance of UKBI results to the Indonesian language learning needs at SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi.

At the first stage, the researchers conducted a school survey at SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi. Based on students' background characteristics, selected participants were given the three-section UKBI test (listening, grammar response, and reading). The data obtained from these tests represented the students' performance in the three language domains. The researchers then graded the results, calculated the final scores, and analyzed them both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The collected data from the three skill tests were processed through qualitative data analysis, then converted into percentages and proficiency rankings to identify whether significant differences existed among the students' listening, grammar response, and reading abilities. The next step involved a qualitative descriptive analysis explaining the characteristics of the data, their underlying factors, and their relevance to Indonesian language learning needs at SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi. Finally, data processing concluded with a summary of findings and evaluation.

The proficiency levels of SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students' Indonesian language mastery were determined according to National Language and Culture standards (NASIONAL & KEBUDAYAAN, n.d.) as follows:

1. A score of 717–900 indicates *Exceptional (Highly Proficient or Outstanding)* mastery.
2. A score of 593–716 indicates Very Good (Proficient) mastery.
3. A score of 466–592 indicates Good (Intermediate) mastery.
4. A score of 247–465 indicates Fair (Marginal or Moderate) mastery.
5. A score of below 247 indicates *Poor (Limited)* mastery.

The UKBI test administered to SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students focused on three sections only listening, grammar response, and reading following the model proposed by (Furnes & Norman, 2015). This study focused on receptive language skills, namely listening, grammar response, and reading (Winiasih, 2018).

Results

Distribution of Indonesian Language Competence Levels

The majority of students were categorized as “Semenjana” (Moderate), totaling 28 students (60.87%). Meanwhile, 8 students (17.39%) were in the Marginal category, 6 students (13.04%) were in the Intermediate (Madya) category, 3 students (6.52%) were in the Excellent (Unggul) category, and 1 student (2.17%) was categorized as Limited.

Table 1. Overall UKBI Results Distribution

Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Excellent (Unggul)	3	6.52
Intermediate (Madya)	6	13.04
Moderate (Semenjana)	28	60.87
Marginal	8	17.39
Limited	1	2.17
Total	46	100

Based on the distribution of Indonesian language competence levels among SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students, the results show that the majority fall under the Moderate (Semenjana) category, with 28 students (60.87%). This finding indicates that most students possess average-level proficiency in using the Indonesian language. They can understand and use Indonesian in specific contexts, yet still face limitations in terms of depth, accuracy, and fluency. This condition aligns with findings by (Sukenti et al., 2020), who emphasize that students often exhibit uneven competence across language domains, necessitating more systematic efforts to strengthen language mastery.

Meanwhile, 8 students (17.39%) were categorized as Marginal, indicating that they face significant limitations in mastering Indonesian, whether in listening, reading, or grammatical response. These students likely struggle with understanding complex texts and expressing ideas coherently. This may stem from low motivation to learn Indonesian and limited literacy habits. As (Costello, 2012) notes, low student engagement in literacy programs directly correlates with weaker language skills in classroom contexts.

In the Intermediate (Madya) category, 6 students (13.04%) achieved better results than those in the Moderate and Marginal groups. These students operate at an upper-intermediate level, demonstrating greater effectiveness in using Indonesian, though inconsistencies remain in grammatical and analytical skills. This group reflects the

potential for further competence development, particularly if supported by contextual and practice-based learning approaches.

The Excellent (Unggul) category includes only 3 students (6.52%), showing that only a small portion of students have reached a superior level of Indonesian proficiency, both in receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Students in this category can understand complex texts, respond appropriately, and use proper and accurate Indonesian grammar. However, the limited number of high-achieving students highlights a significant proficiency gap, underscoring the urgent need to equalize the quality of Indonesian language education across students.

Finally, only one student (2.17%) was categorized as Limited. Although this represents a small percentage, it still warrants special attention. Students in this category typically face serious barriers to mastering Indonesian, both in comprehension and practical use. Such difficulties are likely influenced by socioeconomic background, family literacy environment, and language use in daily communication, which may lean toward regional dialects or informal language. As (Nugroho et al., 2024) suggest, limited exposure to proper Indonesian language usage in daily life negatively impacts students' UKBI performance.

Overall, the UKBI results distribution shows a tendency toward lower-to-intermediate proficiency levels among SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students. With the dominance of the Moderate (Semenjana) category, it can be concluded that students' Indonesian language competence is not yet optimal and still requires reinforcement through literacy development, practice-based learning, and the integration of relevant teaching strategies suited to vocational students' needs. This finding also supports (Pratama, 2021), who found that language clinic programs and adaptive UKBI training can significantly enhance students' linguistic proficiency and overall communication skills.

Distribution by Skill Domain

Table 2. UKBI Results Distribution by Skill Domain

Domain	Very Excellent	Excellent	Intermediate	Moderate	Marginal	Limited
Listening	1	18	17	9	1	0
Responding to Language Rules	0	4	9	11	14	8
Reading	0	1	4	14	14	13

The UKBI results distribution by skill domain provides a detailed overview of students' language competence across three aspects: listening, responding to language rules, and reading. The results show significant variation among these domains, making it worthwhile to analyze them more deeply.

Listening Domain

The listening results show relatively higher achievement compared to the other two domains. There is 1 student in the Very Excellent category, 18 in Excellent, 17 in Intermediate, 9 in Moderate, 1 in Marginal, and none in Limited.

This finding indicates that most students possess strong receptive abilities in understanding spoken language. The high scores in listening can be attributed to the dominant exposure to audiovisual media in daily life—such as television, social media, and video-based digital platforms. This exposure enhances students' receptive skills even without intensive formal instruction.

This aligns with (Massitoh, 2021), who states that listening skills improve when learners are frequently exposed to varied auditory stimuli. However, students' listening proficiency needs to progress toward critical listening, involving the ability to grasp implied meanings, assess the accuracy of information, and formulate analytical responses.

Responding to Language Rules Domain

In the domain of responding to language rules, students' performance is relatively lower. The distribution shows 4 students in Excellent, 9 in Intermediate, 11 in Moderate, 14 in Marginal, and 8 in Limited, with no students in Very Excellent.

This indicates that language rule mastery including spelling, grammar, and sentence structure remains the weakest area. Several contributing factors include:

1. Teaching methods that are overly theoretical, making it difficult for students to apply rules in real contexts.
2. Interference from daily language use, such as regional dialects and slang, which reduces practice in using standard Indonesian.
3. A lack of intensive practice in formal writing and speaking.

According to (Ismadi, 2015), weak grammatical mastery is a long-standing issue in Indonesian language learning and must be addressed through communicative approaches. Therefore, practical pedagogical interventions such as writing articles, composing reports, or engaging in formal speaking exercises are crucial for improving achievement in this domain.

Reading Domain

Reading results show the lowest achievement among all domains. There is 1 student in Excellent, 4 in Intermediate, 14 in Moderate, 14 in Marginal, and 13 in Limited, with no students in Very Excellent.

This indicates that the majority of students struggle with reading comprehension skills. Many fall into the Marginal and Limited categories, suggesting weaknesses in identifying main ideas, summarizing texts, and connecting explicit and implicit information. This issue is likely linked to low reading interest and limited access to quality reading materials.

(Sasmayunita, 2014) found that poor mastery of main ideas and sentence structure directly affects students' reading comprehension. Similarly, (Destiyanti, 2020) confirmed that reading habits strongly correlate with comprehension ability. Thus, the low reading results reflect a weak literacy culture among vocational students.

Comparison Across Domains

When compared, a significant discrepancy appears across skill domains:

1. The listening domain dominates with higher proportions in Excellent and Intermediate categories.
2. The responding to rules domain sits in the lower-middle range, dominated by Moderate and Marginal categories.
3. The reading domain ranks lowest, with most students in Marginal and Limited categories.

These differences show that students find it easier to understand spoken language than written language or grammatical rules. This supports (Prihatin, 2017), who observed that listening skills develop faster than reading because they are receptive and closely tied to daily interactions.

The distribution of SMK students' UKBI results carries several implications for Indonesian language education:

1. The need to strengthen reading literacy through reading programs, contextual materials, and critical reading strategies.
2. The importance of integrating grammar instruction with real communication practice, enabling students to apply language rules in academic and professional contexts.
3. The necessity to develop critical and analytical listening skills, so that students not only hear but also interpret and evaluate information.

Thus, UKBI results not only portray students' linguistic abilities but also provide a foundation for curriculum evaluation and the development of more effective, relevant, and contextual Indonesian language teaching strategies.

Analysis of Influencing Factors

The distribution pattern indicates that students' Indonesian language competence tends to be below the intermediate level, with only a few reaching the Excellent category. Several factors influence this condition:

Suboptimal Learning Motivation

Most students fall into the Moderate category because their motivation to learn Indonesian is low. Many prioritize vocational subjects deemed more relevant to the job market, giving less attention to Indonesian language learning. This low motivation results in poor engagement, particularly in critical reading and writing tasks, which require greater effort than receptive skills like listening.

Limited Literacy Exposure

Low reading habits outside school contribute to the high number of students in the Moderate and Marginal categories. Limited literacy exposure makes it difficult for students to understand long texts, identify main ideas, and connect information between text parts. Consequently, their competence stagnates at the middle level and struggles to progress further.

Theoretical Teaching Methods

The dominance of theoretical instruction in Indonesian language classes also affects competence distribution. A heavy focus on memorizing rules, spelling, and grammar results in normative knowledge rather than practical ability. Students understand linguistic concepts but cannot apply them effectively in writing or reading comprehension. This limits the number of students who reach the Excellent category.

Socio-Academic Background Differences

Variations in students' socioeconomic and academic backgrounds influence their language competence. Those with better access to learning facilities—such as books, the internet, and family support—tend to perform higher, as seen in the Intermediate and Excellent categories. Conversely, students with fewer resources are more likely to fall into Marginal and Limited categories, creating a competence gap among individuals.

Daily Language Habits

Many students are more accustomed to using regional or informal languages than standard Indonesian in daily communication. This habit weakens their command of

formal grammar, keeping them in the Moderate or Marginal categories. Only a small portion of students who regularly use standard Indonesian can reach the Excellent category.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the level of Indonesian language competence among students at SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi is still predominantly in the Moderate (Semenjana) category, with 28 students (60.87%) falling into this group. This condition shows that most students are at a lower-intermediate level, meaning their language skills are not yet sufficient to meet academic or workplace demands. This finding aligns with (Humaira et al., 2024), who revealed that reading competence among SMA Muhammadiyah students also remains at the intermediate level. Thus, the UKBI results consistently reflect the low level of language proficiency across Muhammadiyah schools, both at the high school and vocational levels.

In other categories, only 3 students (6.52%) achieved the Excellent level and 6 students (13.04%) reached the Intermediate (Madya) level. These numbers are relatively small compared to Marginal (17.39%) and Limited (2.17%) categories. This indicates a considerable disparity in students' language competence. (Yanti, 2015) emphasizes that one contributing factor is the underutilization of UKBI as a diagnostic tool in schools, where teachers have yet to use the test results as a basis for reflection or improvement in instructional strategies.

When analyzed by skill domain, there are noticeable differences in achievement. The listening domain shows relatively good results, with 35 students achieving in the Excellent and Intermediate categories. This demonstrates that most students are fairly capable of understanding spoken information. This finding is consistent with (Elitasari et al., 2019), who stated that UKBI-based exercises can enhance receptive language skills, particularly listening. However, 9 students remain in the Moderate category and 1 student in Marginal, suggesting that listening proficiency is not yet evenly distributed among the entire student population.

In contrast, the responding to language rules domain reveals fundamental weaknesses. A total of 14 students are in the Marginal category and 8 students in Limited, reflecting low proficiency in understanding formal linguistic rules, including morphology and syntax. (Prihatin, 2017) notes that such weaknesses often stem from learning methods that are too theoretical and lack practical application. Teaching approaches that emphasize rote memorization of grammar without real usage context prevent students from internalizing linguistic structures naturally.

The reading domain also shows concerning results. 14 students are in the Marginal category and 13 students in Limited, meaning that more than half of the students still struggle with reading comprehension skills. This aligns with (Sasmayunita, 2014), who found that weak mastery of main ideas and sentence structure directly impacts reading comprehension. Likewise, (Destiyanti, 2020) asserts that reading habits have a strong correlation with text comprehension, while the reading culture among vocational students remains low due to the lack of literacy encouragement in both home and school environments.

Critically, the low level of Indonesian language competence can be explained through the interrelation of several key factors:

Low Learning Motivation

According to (Massitoh, 2021), motivation is a primary determinant of language skill achievement, especially in listening and reading. The low intrinsic motivation of vocational students to master formal Indonesian results in learning processes that lack emotional and cognitive engagement.

Limited Literacy Exposure

Insufficient exposure to literacy activities outside the classroom leads to reduced linguistic stimulation. The absence of reading habits and unsupportive family environments for literacy, as noted by (Costello, 2012), hinder the development of students' linguistic and critical thinking abilities.

Theoretical Learning Approaches

The tendency of Indonesian language teaching to focus heavily on theory results in limited direct experience for students to develop comprehensive language skills—particularly in critical listening, reading, and reflective writing. This suggests that classroom learning still emphasizes declarative knowledge (definitions and grammar rules) over applied practice that nurtures critical and expressive abilities. (Nurhayati, 2016) highlights the importance of implementing practice-based learning strategies so students can actively participate as learners rather than passive recipients of information.

Diverse Socio-Academic Backgrounds

The variation in students' social and academic backgrounds also contributes to differences in language competence. Factors such as family economic conditions, access to learning resources, and availability of literacy facilities (libraries, books, or digital devices) influence students' exposure to language and frequency of practice. (Renandya et al., 2018) explain that limited learning facilities reduce motivation and restrict opportunities for communicative competence development, especially in vocational schools where the focus leans toward practical skills.

Daily Language Habits

The dominance of regional or colloquial language use in daily communication also affects students' mastery of standard Indonesian. (Mukti et al., 2017) and (Syahrir, 2017) report that linguistic interference from non-standard varieties causes structural and lexical shifts in formal communication, making it difficult for students to adapt to academic contexts or standardized tests like UKBI. This phenomenon also reflects a disconnect between the language used in classrooms and the language practiced in daily life.

From these factors, it can be concluded that the language competence problem among SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi students is multidimensional, encompassing pedagogical, social, and linguistic aspects. Although listening ability appears stronger, the weaknesses in reading and responding to language rules indicate an urgent need to reformulate Indonesian language teaching approaches in vocational schools.

Literacy-based instruction, contextual learning, and the sustained use of UKBI as a diagnostic evaluation tool can serve as effective solutions (Pratama, 2021); (Zalmansyah, 2018). Therefore, this study underscores the significant role of UKBI not only as an assessment instrument but also as a strategic foundation for designing literacy-strengthening programs and enhancing students' linguistic competence in vocational education settings.

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Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that most students at SMK Muhammadiyah Sukabumi demonstrate Indonesian language proficiency at a moderate level, with 60.87% categorized as intermediate. Among the assessed skills, listening ability outperforms reading and language rule response. These results are influenced by several factors, including motivation, exposure to literacy activities, teaching methods, socioeconomic conditions, and language use habits. Therefore, the UKBI results emphasize the importance of literacy-based learning, contextual learning, and the implementation of practical strategies to enhance students' Indonesian language competence.

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