

Bridging Language Barriers: The Role of English Proficiency in Supporting Indonesian MSMEs' International Success

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ABSTRAK

This study explores the significance of English language proficiency among Indonesian micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) exporters, focusing on its role in enhancing international business success. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five MSME actors from South Sulawesi. Findings indicate that English proficiency enables cross-border communication, fosters customer trust, and supports business expansion. However, entrepreneurs face barriers such as vocabulary limitations, pronunciation challenges, and anxiety in real-time interactions. Recommendations include context-based English training tailored to business practices, mentorship programs, and technology-enhanced communication tools to bridge linguistic gaps.

Keywords:

English Language, Entrepreneurship, Export, Business Communication, Non-Native Speakers

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized economy, English functions not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic key to unlocking international business opportunities. As the lingua franca of global commerce, English proficiency supports broader market access, strengthens digital marketing strategies, and enhances intercultural negotiation (Charles, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006). For Indonesian micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), particularly those engaged in export, English fluency is closely tied to professionalism, credibility, and sustainable business growth.

Despite the availability of high-quality products, many Indonesian entrepreneurs continue to face challenges in entering international markets due to limited English competence. Previous studies have emphasized the crucial role of English in crafting business proposals, managing negotiations, and conducting international marketing campaigns (Nickerson, 2005). Moreover, in today's digital landscape, English proficiency is central to operating within global e-commerce and social media platforms, enabling entrepreneurs to expand their customer reach (Evans, 2010).

From the perspective of entrepreneurial internationalization, the ability to communicate across cultures—particularly through English—provides entrepreneurs with a competitive advantage in expanding to global markets (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). Effective communication, therefore, is not only an operational necessity but also a foundation for

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establishing trust and long-term international partnerships (Holden, 2002). However, research also shows that non-native English speakers frequently struggle with linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary, misinterpretation of messages, and communicative anxiety (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Neeley, 2012). These barriers often reduce self-confidence, hinder negotiations, and contribute to missed opportunities in international business.

While existing literature highlights the importance of English in global entrepreneurship, most studies focus on large corporations or multinational enterprises. There is still limited scholarly attention on how export-oriented MSMEs in developing contexts, such as Indonesia, use English in daily business practices and how language barriers specifically affect their capacity to compete in international markets. Furthermore, the majority of English training models examined in prior research are classroom-based and theoretical, leaving a gap in understanding how context-specific, practical English skills are applied by entrepreneurs in real-world export activities.

This study offers novelty by presenting empirical evidence from a qualitative case study of Indonesian MSME exporters in South Sulawesi. Unlike prior research that tends to generalize the role of English in business, this study captures localized entrepreneurial experiences—how small-scale exporters adapt, strategize, and innovate despite language limitations. It also highlights the integration of digital tools (e.g., translation apps, online training, and AI-assisted grammar checkers) as emerging strategies in bridging linguistic gaps, which has not been sufficiently explored in earlier works. Based on the identified gaps, this study aims to:

1. Examine how non-native Indonesian entrepreneurs utilize English in international business practices.
2. Explore the specific challenges faced by MSME exporters in using English for cross-border transactions.
3. Analyze how English proficiency impacts entrepreneurial success, particularly in terms of trust-building, professionalism, and global market penetration.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to both theoretical discussions on entrepreneurial internationalization and practical strategies for enhancing MSMEs' competitiveness in global markets.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to enable an in-depth exploration of entrepreneurial experiences in using English within international business contexts (Sugiyono, 2019). The participants consisted of five purposively selected MSME exporters from South Sulawesi, representing diverse sectors such as bamboo crafts, peanut snacks, textiles, furniture, and spices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The collected data were then examined using thematic analysis, in which codes were developed around recurring themes such as English language usage, communication barriers, and business strategies adopted by the entrepreneurs.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The interviews revealed that English plays a pivotal role in export-related communication. All participants reported using English on international platforms like Etsy, Amazon Handmade, and Alibaba. They also relied on English for writing product descriptions, negotiating with buyers, and coordinating shipments.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Findings

No	Business Sector	Use of English	Challenges	Adaptation Strategies
1	Bamboo Craft	Emails, video calls, product descriptions	Limited vocabulary	Took "English for Exporters" training
2	Peanut Snacks	Auto-translations, message templates	Inaccurate translations	Learned key terms, adapted marketplace templates
3	Handmade Textiles	Packaging documents, price negotiation	Lack of technical terms	Hired part-time translator
4	Furniture	Business proposals, shipment coordination	Speaking anxiety	Practiced formal expressions via video
5	Spices	E-commerce communication, product catalogs	Formal email comprehension	Used grammar tools and editing support

The data presented in Table 1 illustrates the diverse ways in which export-oriented MSME entrepreneurs in South Sulawesi utilize English in their international business operations, the linguistic and psychological challenges they encounter, and the adaptive strategies they employ to overcome these barriers.

The findings of this study highlight the strategic role of English language proficiency in the internationalization of Indonesian MSMEs. Based on interviews with five entrepreneurs representing different sectors—bamboo crafts, peanut snacks, textiles, furniture, and spices—it becomes evident that English is not merely a communication tool but also a determinant of credibility, trust, and competitiveness in the global market.

3.1 English Usage Across Sectors

All participants reported using English in their daily business practices, albeit with varying levels of proficiency and confidence. English was applied in multiple contexts, such as responding to buyer inquiries on international e-commerce platforms (e.g., Etsy, Amazon Handmade, Alibaba), writing product descriptions and catalogs, coordinating shipments, and negotiating prices. These findings affirm that English is embedded in both operational and strategic functions of MSMEs, from marketing and branding to documentation and regulatory compliance (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Evans, 2010). The sectoral differences demonstrate how language use is shaped by industry-specific demands. For example, the bamboo craft entrepreneur relied on email and video calls to clarify product specifications, while the spices exporter emphasized the ability to write persuasive and accurate product catalogs. This confirms Oviatt and McDougall's (1994) internationalization theory, which argues that cross-cultural communication competence provides businesses with a competitive edge in penetrating global markets.

3.2 Challenges Faced by Entrepreneurs

Despite the strategic value of English, participants encountered significant linguistic and psychological barriers. The bamboo craft entrepreneur struggled with limited vocabulary, making it difficult to respond to detailed requests. The peanut snacks entrepreneur faced inaccuracies in machine translations, which sometimes altered the intended message. The textiles entrepreneur noted difficulties with technical terminology, while the furniture

entrepreneur reported speaking anxiety during live negotiations. Similarly, the spices entrepreneur expressed challenges in comprehending formal email correspondence. These barriers reflect broader issues faced by non-native English speakers in global business contexts. Research has shown that linguistic limitations can lead to miscommunication, hinder negotiations, and reduce self-confidence in cross-border transactions (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Neeley, 2012). In some cases, misunderstandings may even have financial consequences, such as incorrect product specifications or missed shipping deadlines.

3.3 Adaptation Strategies and Innovation

In response to these challenges, entrepreneurs adopted a variety of adaptive strategies, as summarized in Table 1. Some engaged in formal training programs such as the "English for Exporters" initiative, while others pursued self-directed learning by memorizing key business vocabulary and adapting template-based communication. Outsourcing was another common strategy, with entrepreneurs hiring part-time translators or editors to handle critical correspondence. Meanwhile, others leveraged technology, using grammar tools and AI-driven translation apps to enhance accuracy and professionalism in their communication. Interestingly, the furniture entrepreneur adopted a practice-based strategy by rehearsing formal expressions through video simulations. This reflects a growing recognition that overcoming communicative anxiety requires both linguistic knowledge and psychological preparation. Such adaptive practices suggest that English proficiency is not static but rather a dynamic process shaped by context, necessity, and innovation.

3.4 English as a Strategic Resource

The findings also underscore the broader role of English as a strategic resource in global entrepreneurship. Beyond its function as a communication medium, English shapes customer perceptions of professionalism and trustworthiness. Well-written product descriptions and accurate correspondence enhance the credibility of MSMEs, increasing the likelihood of repeat transactions and stronger partnerships. This resonates with Holden's (2002) assertion that effective communication builds sustainable international relationships. Moreover, several entrepreneurs reported using English-language content on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to expand their brand visibility globally. In doing so, they not only marketed products but also communicated cultural narratives that distinguished them from

competitors. This highlights the dual function of English in both transactional and symbolic domains: as a tool for negotiation and as a medium for storytelling and identity-building (Rahman, 2020).

3.5 Implications for Entrepreneurial Training

A critical insight from the findings is the mismatch between conventional English training and the real-world needs of MSMEs. Entrepreneurs frequently expressed that classroom-based English courses were overly theoretical and insufficiently aligned with business practices. Instead, they required training tailored to specific entrepreneurial tasks, such as writing proposals, managing e-commerce communication, and responding to technical buyer inquiries. This finding supports Widodo's (2018) argument that language learning in applied contexts should adopt problem-based and needs-oriented approaches. The evidence from this study thus emphasizes the importance of context-driven, flexible, and practice-oriented training models for enhancing MSME competitiveness in international markets. By addressing both linguistic competence and communicative confidence, such programs can empower entrepreneurs to engage more effectively in global trade.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that English language proficiency plays a crucial and strategic role in supporting the internationalization of Indonesian MSMEs, particularly those engaged in export-oriented activities. The findings reveal that English is not only a medium of communication but also a strategic resource that enables entrepreneurs to access broader markets, negotiate effectively, and build credibility in cross-border transactions. Despite significant challenges such as limited vocabulary, inaccurate translations, technical terminology gaps, and communicative anxiety, MSMEs in South Sulawesi have shown resilience and adaptability by employing diverse strategies, including formal training, self-learning, outsourcing, and the use of digital tools.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends the discourse on entrepreneurial internationalization by focusing on the lived experiences of MSME exporters in a developing country context, thereby filling the gap in existing literature that has predominantly examined large corporations or Western-based enterprises. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on *localized entrepreneurial adaptation*, highlighting how non-native English

speakers integrate language use into both transactional and symbolic aspects of global business practices.

Practically, the study underscores the urgent need for context-based and task-oriented English training programs that align more closely with the real demands of global trade, such as writing business proposals, managing e-commerce communication, and handling international negotiations. Moreover, the integration of peer mentoring and digital technology can further support entrepreneurs in overcoming linguistic barriers and strengthening their communicative confidence.

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