The Use of English in Empowering Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMES) in Southeast Sulawesi

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A B S T R A C T

English proficiency has become a pivotal skill for the growth and sustainability of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Southeast Sulawesi, especially in the context of accelerating digitalization and the ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Indonesia is home to approximately 66 million MSMEs, which account for 61% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employ over 97% of the country's labor force. Despite their significant economic role, only around 26% of these enterprises have embraced digital platforms, limiting their potential to reach broader markets and engage in cross-border commerce. A major contributing factor to this digital lag is the low level of English language proficiency among business owners, which impedes their ability to create multilingual content, respond to international customers, and navigate global trade opportunities. This paper examines the strategic role of English literacy in empowering MSMEs through improved digital communication, enhanced marketing capabilities, and greater access to international networks. Drawing on recent studies, field observations, and stakeholder interviews, the paper identifies key barriers to English adoption and proposes actionable solutions, including tailored business English training and the integration of language education within entrepreneurial support programs. The study underscores the need for a holistic approach that combines language acquisition with digital literacy and capacity building to equip MSMEs for sustainable global engagement.

Keywords: English Proficiency; Digitalization; Business English; Language Training; Entrepreneurship Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and rapidly advancing digitalization, English proficiency has become a crucial skill in entrepreneurship. English is not only used as a medium of international communication but also serves as a strategic tool to expand market reach, build global networks, and enhance the competitiveness of local products in international markets. For Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the ability to communicate in English is essential for accessing digital platforms, responding to foreign customer inquiries, creating multilingual product descriptions, and participating in international trade fairs.

Indonesia currently hosts approximately 66 million MSMEs, which contribute to 61% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employ more than 97% of the country's workforce. In Southeast Sulawesi Province, MSMEs form the backbone of the local economy, particularly in sectors such as fisheries, handicrafts, and agricultural processing. As technology and internet access improve, MSMEs in the region are increasingly encouraged to market their products through digital platforms such as marketplaces, social media, and websites. However, recent reports indicate that only around 26% of MSMEs in Indonesia have fully adopted digital platforms.

One of the main obstacles to this transition is the low level of English proficiency among MSME actors. Many entrepreneurs feel insecure using English in business-related activities, especially when communicating with foreign customers or creating marketing content. The lack of exposure to English in local business environments further limits MSMEs' ability to adapt to global market demands. Therefore, improving English literacy among MSME players has become a critical issue that must be addressed through contextual and practical solutions.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to explore the role of English proficiency in empowering Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Southeast Sulawesi. A qualitative design was considered most appropriate because it allows for an in-depth and contextualized understanding of entrepreneurs' experiences, challenges, and perceptions in using English for business purposes. At the same time, quantitative elements were incorporated in the form of survey data to complement the qualitative findings with measurable trends, thereby strengthening the reliability of the results.

The primary instruments used in this research included semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected MSME owners and managers to gather detailed insights into their experiences in applying English for business communication, marketing, and digital engagement. Questionnaires were distributed to a wider group of respondents in order to capture general patterns, such as the frequency of English use, preferred platforms, and previous training experiences. Document analysis was also carried out by reviewing English-language business materials produced by participants, such as product descriptions, social media posts, and promotional content. The combination of these instruments enabled data triangulation and provided both depth and breadth in understanding the phenomenon.

The population of this study consisted of MSMEs operating in Southeast Sulawesi, particularly those engaged in fisheries, crafts, culinary industries, and agricultural processing. From this population, participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting entrepreneurs who had either attempted to engage with international markets or expressed a strong interest in incorporating English into their business operations. Both urban-based MSMEs in Kendari and rural enterprises in surrounding areas were included to capture diverse linguistic and technological contexts. A total of 30 MSME actors participated in in-depth interviews, while around 100 respondents completed the survey.

Data collection followed several stages. The researcher began with preliminary observations to identify MSMEs with potential exposure to English-language business practices through local directories and online platforms. This was followed by interview sessions conducted either in person or through virtual platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp video calls to ensure accessibility. Surveys were disseminated using both digital forms and paper-based formats during community business forums and MSME workshops. Additionally, business documents provided by participants were collected and analyzed to assess the extent of English usage in their entrepreneurial activities. Throughout the process, ethical considerations were prioritized, with informed consent obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

The analysis of data combined qualitative thematic analysis and basic descriptive statistics. Interview transcripts and business documents were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring themes related to perceptions, barriers, and applications of English in business. The quantitative survey data were processed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency distributions, providing a broader overview of general trends among MSMEs. By integrating these two approaches, the study achieved triangulation, thereby offering a comprehensive and holistic perspective on the ways in which English proficiency influences the empowerment and global engagement of MSMEs in Southeast Sulawesi.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that English proficiency plays a pivotal role in the empowerment of MSMEs in Southeast Sulawesi, particularly in digital transformation and international engagement. Survey data show that while 90% of entrepreneurs acknowledge the importance of English, only 25% feel confident using it in business operations. This gap highlights a disparity between awareness and practical application, reflecting the challenges MSMEs face in adopting English as a tool for business growth.

In terms of digital adoption, only 30% of MSMEs surveyed have utilized e-commerce platforms. Those with higher levels of English proficiency were more capable of creating multilingual product descriptions, responding to international customers, and securing cross-border transactions. By contrast, MSMEs with limited English proficiency struggled with content creation, correspondence, and customer engagement. These findings confirm previous studies (Thamrin et al., 2024; Barat & Talukder, 2023) that stress the direct correlation between Business English literacy and improved marketing, communication, and operational outcomes.

The challenges identified through interviews include limited access to contextualized training, low self-efficacy, and financial barriers. Many rural entrepreneurs, for instance, lack affordable opportunities to learn business-focused English. This aligns with Gebhard's (2000) perspective that curriculum and materials should be adapted and simplified according to learners' occupational needs. Without accessible and practical instruction, MSMEs are unlikely to fully integrate English into their operations.

Nevertheless, several emerging best practices were observed. MSMEs that adopted mobile learning applications, community workshops, or peer mentoring initiatives showed improved confidence and performance in digital marketplaces. These practices support Johnson's (2009) framework of functional language education, emphasizing real-world business communication tasks such as negotiation, email correspondence, and social media marketing.

Overall, the results and discussion underscore that English proficiency cannot be separated from digital literacy and entrepreneurial training. It should be seen as a strategic business skill, not merely an academic subject. A holistic approach that integrates language acquisition with digital tools and entrepreneurial capacity-building is essential to prepare MSMEs in Southeast Sulawesi for sustainable engagement in global markets.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English proficiency is a crucial factor in empowering Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Southeast Sulawesi, especially in the context of digital transformation and global market participation. The findings demonstrate that while the majority of entrepreneurs recognize the importance of English for business growth, only a minority are confident in applying it within their daily operations. This gap between awareness and practice reflects deeper structural challenges, including limited access to contextualized training, financial constraints, and low self-efficacy among business owners.

The research also reveals that MSMEs with higher levels of English proficiency are better equipped to create multilingual product descriptions, communicate effectively with international customers, and participate in cross-border transactions. By contrast, those with limited English skills face significant barriers in digital engagement, particularly in utilizing e-commerce platforms and managing online marketing. These findings affirm that English proficiency must be integrated with digital literacy to enable sustainable participation in global markets.

Furthermore, the study identifies practical strategies that have shown promise in addressing these gaps. Mobile learning applications, peer mentoring, and community-based workshops provide accessible and affordable ways for entrepreneurs to improve their English skills. Such approaches align with the principle of functional language education, emphasizing practical communication tasks relevant to business activities. When supported by institutional collaboration between governments, educators, and business associations, these strategies can create an enabling ecosystem for MSMEs to thrive.

In conclusion, English proficiency should be regarded not as an academic requirement but as a strategic business asset. A holistic approach that combines language learning with digital and entrepreneurial capacity-building is essential for preparing MSMEs in Southeast Sulawesi to compete in the global marketplace. With sustained commitment from entrepreneurs, educators, and policymakers, English literacy can become a driver of innovation, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability for local enterprises.

This study concludes that English proficiency is a key factor in supporting digital transformation and strengthening the competitiveness of MSMEs in Southeast Sulawesi. While awareness of its importance is relatively high among entrepreneurs, there remains a considerable gap between recognition and actual practice. Low confidence, limited access to relevant training, and cost-related issues represent major obstacles that hinder effective use of English in business. To overcome these challenges, context-specific and affordable English training programs are essential, ideally integrated within entrepreneurship support and digital literacy initiatives. Collaboration between government institutions, educational providers, and business associations will be critical in ensuring sustainable language learning opportunities.

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