

**FROM ART EDUCATION TO ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: SENDRATASIK
GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF TOEFL AS A GRADUATION
REQUIREMENT AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN JAMBI**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigated how two Sendratasik graduates perceived the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a graduation requirement at a public university in Jambi. It examined the value they attributed to the requirement, the challenges they encountered, the strategies they used to prepare, and the institutional support they expected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings reveal two related but distinct views of the requirement. Both participants regarded English as valuable for employment, postgraduate study, access to references, international workshops, and artistic collaboration. However, they also reported anxiety because English had not been consistently integrated into their arts-based academic training. Their main challenges involved unfamiliar test items, the required score, repeated attempts, and additional testing costs. Preparation was primarily self-directed and relied on online videos, sample questions, vocabulary searches, and basic English materials. Although the requirement increased their awareness of the importance of English, it also created pressure when comprehensive institutional preparation was unavailable. The study recommends that TOEFL policies for arts students be supported by early and contextualized English instruction, clear test orientation, regular practice, and affordable assistance for students who need multiple attempts.

Keywords: *TOEFL, graduation requirement, arts education, non-English majors, student perceptions.*

A. Introduction

English proficiency has become an increasingly important part of university education because graduates are expected to participate in academic, professional, and digital settings that extend beyond their local environment. English provides access to scholarly publications, professional networks, postgraduate opportunities,

and international information. Li (2025) argues that academic English in higher education should be viewed not simply as a general subject, but as a practical competence that broadens students' access to knowledge and improves graduate competitiveness. This wider role has encouraged universities to establish minimum

English-proficiency standards as a graduation requirement.

A common form of this policy is a TOEFL requirement. From an institutional standpoint, the requirement is intended to ensure that graduates possess a measurable level of English proficiency. Similar graduation benchmarks have been introduced in several Asian higher-education systems, although the test format, required score, and student-support mechanisms differ across institutions (Chu & Yeh, 2017; Hsieh, 2017; Wudthayagorn, 2022). A score-based requirement offers a clear academic target, but it can also become a high-stakes experience because students may see the result as directly tied to their ability to graduate.

Students do not experience such policies in the same way. Their responses are shaped by previous English learning, confidence, academic discipline, financial circumstances, and familiarity with the test. Wu and Lee (2017) found that graduation benchmarks were associated with students' motivation, perceived test value, anxiety, and performance. Pham and Bui (2019) likewise showed that students' voices are essential when evaluating an English graduation policy, since the same requirement may motivate one group while placing considerable pressure on another. More recent research has also emphasized assessment literacy and self-efficacy: students who understand the purpose, format, and strategies of an exit test

tend to approach it with greater confidence (Sae-Ong, 2025).

These concerns are particularly relevant to non-English-major students. Although they may recognize the practical importance of English, their curriculum may offer only limited and discontinuous exposure to language learning. Lai and Tu (2020) reported different attitudes toward English graduation benchmarks among English majors and non-English majors, suggesting that disciplinary background influences how students judge a policy's fairness and relevance. Huang and Tsai (2025) similarly showed that students interpret an English benchmark in relation to the demands and expectations of their own professional field. Consequently, a test that appears reasonable at the institutional level may be experienced quite differently across study programs.

The present study focuses on Sendratasik, an Indonesian field of study that combines drama, dance, and music education. Sendratasik students spend much of their academic time developing artistic knowledge, performance skills, creativity, cultural interpretation, and the ability to produce or present works of art. Fitri and Indrayuda (2024) identify the connection between theoretical understanding and artistic creation as an important element of Sendratasik learning. This practice-oriented environment differs from programs in which students engage more frequently with English texts or academic writing. As a result, TOEFL

may be viewed as relevant to future artistic opportunities while still feeling distant from students' everyday academic experience.

The relevance of English to the arts should not be underestimated. Dancers, musicians, drama educators, and other arts graduates may use English to follow international performances, read artistic references, join workshops, communicate with visiting artists, apply for scholarships, or collaborate across countries. Even so, recognizing these benefits does not automatically make a standardized test easy. When students encounter the requirement late in their studies, have little familiarity with the test, or must pay for repeated attempts, the policy may produce anxiety and short-term test preparation rather than sustained language development. Luxia (2005) describes this influence as washback, or the effect of a high-stakes test on learning behavior and stakeholder decisions. Washback can be positive when a test encourages meaningful learning, but negative when preparation is driven mainly by fear, administrative pressure, or repeated testing.

Previous studies have investigated English graduation benchmarks among general university populations, English and non-English majors, medical students, and students within national policy contexts. The experiences of arts-based students, however, have received less attention. Their perspectives deserve consideration because the value of English may be

closely connected to artistic mobility and international collaboration, while the test itself may seem disconnected from a performance-oriented curriculum. Examining this tension can inform the development of a more context-sensitive approach to English-proficiency policies.

Accordingly, this study investigates how two Sendratasik graduates perceived the TOEFL graduation requirement at a public university in Jambi Province. It addresses the central question: "How did the participants interpret the benefits, challenges, relevance, preparation, and institutional support associated with the TOEFL requirement?" The study does not aim to generalize its findings to all Sendratasik students. Rather, it provides an in-depth account of two graduates' experiences and identifies practical considerations for English support within an arts-based study program.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case-study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand how participants interpreted a graduation requirement through their own experiences rather than measure how widely a particular opinion was held (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The case was bounded by one arts-based study program, one institutional English-proficiency requirement, and two graduates who had completed the requirement before graduation.

The participants were selected purposively. To be included, they had to be graduates of the Sendratasik study program, have personally prepared for and taken TOEFL as part of the graduation process, and be willing to discuss the experience in detail. Both participants had arts-focused academic backgrounds, but their accounts reflected different levels of confidence, preparation, and change in attitude toward English. To protect their identities, they are referred to as Participant 1 and Participant 2.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide covered five areas: the participants' initial understanding of the TOEFL requirement, perceived benefits, academic and emotional difficulties, preparation strategies, and expectations of institutional support. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia so that the participants could describe their experiences naturally and provide detailed examples. Relevant excerpts were translated into English for publication. The English wording was lightly edited for readability while preserving the intended meaning of the original statements.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the general stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interview data were read repeatedly to build familiarity with each participant's account. Second, meaningful statements were assigned initial codes, including perceived value, fear

of failure, limited exposure to English, difficulty with test questions, score pressure, retesting costs, self-study, international opportunities, and requests for guidance. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes. The themes were reviewed against the full interview data, compared across the two cases, refined, and named. Differences between the participants were retained rather than forced into a single interpretation.

Trustworthiness was supported by keeping the analysis close to the participants' words, using direct quotations, checking the themes against the complete interview data, and reporting both shared and contrasting views. Participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms were used in the manuscript. Because the study involved only two participants, the findings are presented as context-bound qualitative insights rather than claims that can be generalized to all Sendratasik students.

C. Findings and Discussion

The analysis generated five interconnected themes. Together, they show that the participants did not simply accept or reject TOEFL. They saw it as useful preparation for the future, yet also experienced it as a high-stakes requirement that demanded skills beyond their main academic focus. The following discussion presents each theme and relates it to previous research.

1. TOEFL as a useful but demanding graduation requirement

Both participants initially described TOEFL as an important requirement because English proficiency could support their lives after university. Their positive view did not come from enjoyment of the test itself. Instead, they associated English with employment, postgraduate study, access to information, and wider professional opportunities. Participant 1 described English as an additional competence, while Participant 2 linked it to both the workplace and further education.

Participant 1: *"My perception is actually positive because TOEFL gives me an additional reason to understand English, which is not my first language. English can open many paths, especially for work."*

Participant 2: *"I think TOEFL is important as a graduation requirement because English can help in the workplace. It will also be useful if I continue to a master's degree."*

These statements show that non-English-major students can recognize the instrumental value of English even when language learning is not central to their degree. This finding supports Li's (2025) view that English functions as an academic and professional resource rather than merely a general university subject. It also reflects the perceived test value discussed by Wu and Lee (2017). The participants were more willing to accept the requirement when they could connect it to opportunities beyond graduation.

Their acceptance, however, was not unconditional. TOEFL was also

described as demanding because it was tied to graduation. The participants therefore viewed the requirement through two lenses: English as a valuable skill and TOEFL as a formal hurdle that had to be managed. This distinction matters. A university policy may have a reasonable objective, but students' experience of that policy depends on whether they are given adequate opportunities to develop the competence being assessed.

2. Anxiety shaped by limited English exposure

The second theme concerns confusion, fear, and limited self-confidence. Both participants understood that English was useful, yet neither considered themselves a proficient user of the language. Their arts-based curriculum had focused mainly on dance, performance, and creative practice, while English received far less sustained attention. As graduation approached, the gap between their academic preparation and the demands of the test became more apparent.

Participant 1: *"At first, I was confused because I am an arts student and I did not study English deeply. I only had English in the early semesters, so I worried that my result would not be good enough."*

Participant 2: *"I felt burdened because I could not speak English confidently. I was afraid that I would not understand the test, would not meet the requirement, and might have difficulty graduating."*

The anxiety described here did not mean that the participants rejected English. It arose from a perceived gap

between the level expected by the test and the preparation available in their program. This pattern is consistent with Lai and Tu (2020), who found that disciplinary background influenced students' attitudes toward an English graduation benchmark. It also supports Wu and Lee's (2017) conclusion that test value and test anxiety can exist at the same time. A student may believe that a test is important while still feeling threatened by it.

For Sendratasik students, the problem is not that arts education and English are incompatible, but that language learning lacks continuity. English courses offered only in the early semesters may not provide sufficient preparation for a high-stakes test taken near the end of the program. When a long gap separates formal language instruction from the graduation test, students may interpret their lack of readiness as a personal weakness, even though it is also influenced by the structure of the curriculum. Regular, low-pressure exposure to English could reduce this sense of distance.

3. Questions, score expectations, and the cost of retaking the test

The participants' difficulties extended beyond vocabulary and grammar. They also mentioned unfamiliar test questions, the score expected by the institution, and the practical consequences of taking the test more than once. Participant 1 explained that the first attempt was the most confusing, while later attempts became more manageable because

the format was no longer completely unfamiliar.

Participant 1: *"The questions and the expected score were difficult for me. The first attempt was very confusing, but in the second and third attempts I understood the pattern better, although some questions were still difficult."*

Participant 2: *"The score and the cost had a strong effect. When the result was below the target, I had to take the test again and pay again. For students with limited English, repeating the test can be difficult financially."*

These comments show why assessment literacy matters. Sae-Ong (2025) emphasizes that students are better prepared when they understand a test's purpose, structure, and strategies. Participant 1's growing familiarity across attempts suggests that part of the difficulty came from limited orientation rather than language proficiency alone. A structured introduction to TOEFL sections, sample tasks, time management, and score interpretation could help students approach their first attempt with greater confidence.

The financial issue also adds an equity dimension to the policy. A retest fee may seem administratively routine, but repeated payments can become burdensome for students who need several attempts. The policy may therefore have unequal consequences even when the same score target applies to everyone. From a washback perspective, the requirement encouraged the participants to study, which represents a positive effect. At the same time, concerns about payment and graduation created

negative pressure. As Luxia (2005) argues, the effects of a high-stakes test are shaped by the interests and circumstances of different stakeholders. Positive washback is more likely when preparation and retesting arrangements are accessible.

4. Self-directed preparation and limited institutional guidance

Both participants prepared mainly through independent learning. Their strategies included watching videos, looking for sample questions, using Google to check unfamiliar words, and reviewing basic English materials. These efforts demonstrate initiative, but they also show that preparation was fragmented and depended on the students' ability to find useful resources on their own.

Participant 1: *"I mostly studied by myself. I reviewed basic English and tried to understand as much as I could before taking the test."*

Participant 2: *"I watched sample questions on YouTube, searched for clues on Google, and looked up the meanings of words. I learned little by little, and that made me more confident, although not completely confident."*

Self-directed learning can be productive, especially because online resources allow students to practice flexibly. However, not all online materials are reliable or suitable for a student's level. Independent preparation may also encourage students to focus on isolated test-taking tricks rather than develop transferable language skills. The participants' experiences suggest that the university should not assume that

announcing a score requirement is enough. A graduation benchmark becomes educationally meaningful only when students are given a realistic pathway to achieve it.

Regular support could include diagnostic testing in the early semesters, brief TOEFL orientation sessions, guided practice, vocabulary development, listening activities, reading strategies, and consultation for students who receive low scores. Importantly, this support should begin before the final year. When students start preparing only as graduation approaches, the test is likely to feel like an emergency. Earlier preparation could strengthen self-efficacy and shift learning away from short-term compliance toward gradual development.

5. English as part of artistic mobility and professional growth

The final theme concerns the relationship between English and the arts. Although the participants initially viewed TOEFL as outside their main field, they did not consider English irrelevant to Sendratasik. They associated it with international dance activities, workshops, references, inspiration, and collaboration. English was therefore understood as a supporting competence that could extend an artist's reach.

Participant 1: *"English is needed for future opportunities, access to references, and work. The more I understand it, the more possibilities I will have."*

Participant 2: *"If I join an international dance activity and can speak English, I will not always need someone to translate. English can*

also help me find inspiration, attend workshops, and collaborate with people from other countries.”

This finding is important because it moves the discussion beyond the assumption that English is mainly relevant to language-based programs. In the arts, English can support artistic exchange, mobility, professional communication, and access to global cultural production. The participants' comments also show that a graduation requirement can create positive awareness. Participant 1 developed a stronger appreciation of English after taking the test. Participant 2's view changed less noticeably, but the participant still acknowledged that English could complement dance skills in the future.

The difference between the two cases supports Pham and Bui's (2019) argument that students do not respond uniformly to English benchmark policies. The same requirement may lead one student to reconsider the value of English while remaining largely an administrative obligation for another. This variation should not be treated as failure. Instead, it suggests that English support should connect with students' disciplinary identities. For Sendratasik students, materials based on performance announcements, artist biographies, workshop communication, cultural tourism, music and dance terminology, and international collaboration may feel more meaningful than generic exercises alone.

6. Institutional implications

Taken together, the findings point to the need for a more supportive implementation of the TOEFL requirement. The participants did not ask for the standard to be removed; they asked for preparation that recognized unequal starting points. A fair policy should combine a clear target with opportunities to learn, understand the test, practice regularly, and receive feedback before the result becomes critical for graduation.

For the Sendratasik program, English instruction could be spread across several semesters rather than concentrated in a single course early in the program. General language foundations could be introduced first, followed by contextualized materials related to arts education and TOEFL preparation. Collaboration between the study program and the university language unit could also make the requirement more coherent. The study program understands students' disciplinary needs, while the language unit has expertise in assessment and test preparation. Working together could reduce the current separation between arts learning and English assessment.

Financial accessibility should also be considered. Possible measures include reduced fees for repeated attempts, a limited number of subsidized retests, free practice tests, or targeted assistance for students with documented financial need. Such support would not lower academic expectations. Instead, it would help ensure that the opportunity to meet the

requirement is not determined by a student's ability to pay repeatedly.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. It involved only two graduates from one study program, so the findings cannot represent all Sendratasik students or all non-English majors at the university. The data were based on retrospective interviews and may have been influenced by memory. The study also did not include test documents, classroom observations, lecturers, or language-unit administrators. Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of arts students, compare experiences across study programs, and examine how institutional stakeholders understand the purpose, scoring, cost, and support mechanisms associated with the TOEFL requirement.

D. Conclusion

The two Sendratasik graduates in this study perceived TOEFL as both valuable and demanding. They recognized the importance of English for employment, postgraduate education, access to references, international workshops, and artistic collaboration. At the same time, they experienced confusion and anxiety because English had not been a sustained part of their arts-based academic training. Their difficulties involved unfamiliar questions, score expectations, repeated attempts, and the cost of retaking the test. Preparation was mostly independent and relied on online videos, sample

questions, vocabulary searches, and basic English materials.

The findings show that a graduation requirement can increase students' awareness while also creating considerable pressure. TOEFL encouraged the participants to see English as a useful competence, but limited preparation made the requirement feel more like a high-stakes administrative hurdle. The policy should therefore be supported by early diagnostic assessment, regular guidance, clear test orientation, contextualized English learning, and accessible practice opportunities. English materials for Sendratasik students should also connect with performance, arts education, cultural events, and international collaboration so that students can see a direct relationship between language learning and their professional identity.

Because the study was based on only two cases, its conclusion is deliberately limited to the participants' reported experiences. Even so, their accounts highlight a broader principle: an institutional proficiency standard is more educationally meaningful when students are given a fair and realistic pathway to achieve it. The purpose of TOEFL should therefore extend beyond certifying a score. It should form part of a gradual process that strengthens students' confidence, awareness of English, and readiness to participate in wider academic and artistic communities.

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