

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIAGNOSTIC TESTS IN ENGLISH LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF AWARENESS GAP IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the perceptions of vocational high school students regarding diagnostic tests in English language learning, highlighting the limitations of previous studies that have focused solely on pedagogical functions without exploring how students interpret and utilize the test results. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design involving 15 tenth-grade students from three departments (Mechanical Engineering, Accounting, and Hospitality) at SMK Negeri 1 Limboto, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 10–15 minutes, recorded, and transcribed verbatim, then analyzed using thematic analysis through a systematic coding process. The results indicate that students hold positive perceptions of diagnostic tests, particularly regarding their role in enhancing awareness of English language proficiency and motivating learning. However, the primary finding of this study is the existence of an “awareness gap,” wherein the majority of students do not yet understand how test results are utilized in the learning process. This finding indicates that the effectiveness of diagnostic tests depends not only on their administration but also on students’ engagement in understanding and utilizing test results. Theoretically, this study reinforces the assessment for learning framework by emphasizing the importance of student awareness, while practically, it implies the need for more structured and transparent feedback regarding the use of test results.

Keywords: *formative assessment, English language learning, vocational education, student perceptions, diagnostic tests*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, diagnostic tests have garnered increasing attention in educational assessment, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction (Hidayati & Andriyanti, 2025). Generally, diagnostic assessment is used to identify students’ prior knowledge, strengths, and weaknesses before instruction begins (Bearman, 2023). In line with this, Grau and White (2024) emphasize that information regarding students’ initial abilities is crucial for tailoring learning strategies to be more effective; thus, diagnostic tests serve not only as measurement tools but also as a foundation for designing instruction that better aligns with students’ needs. In the context of Indonesian education, this principle is reflected in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages teachers to identify students’ readiness and learning profiles from the very start of instruction. Therefore, the use of diagnostic tests has become increasingly

relevant in supporting student-centered learning. However, although diagnostic tests play a conceptually important role, in practice, not all students necessarily understand the purpose and benefits of these tests in depth.

Previous studies have highlighted the important role of diagnostic assessment in supporting effective learning. Ramdhani (2024) links this to the concept of assessment for learning, which emphasizes the use of assessment to provide feedback that improves the learning process. In line with this, Mohammed (2023) demonstrates that diagnostic assessment can identify specific language skills, such as lexical-grammatical competence, inferential ability, and reading strategies like skimming and scanning. These findings are reinforced by Sholihah and Miranty (2025), who affirm that diagnostic assessment results help teachers provide more targeted instruction while enhancing students’ understanding of their learning progress. Overall, these studies indicate that diagnostic

assessment serves not only as a measurement tool but also as a means of supporting the learning process. However, most research still focuses on pedagogical aspects, while how students perceive the role of diagnostic tests in their learning experiences remains largely unexplored.

Despite these various benefits, the effectiveness of diagnostic assessment is determined not only by the technical quality of the test but also by how students perceive and interpret it. Lee (2022) emphasizes that students' perceptions play a crucial role in shaping their responses to assessment practices. Positive perceptions can enhance motivation, engagement, and willingness to utilize feedback constructively, whereas negative perceptions may lead students to view assessment as an additional academic burden (Nguyen & Truong, 2021). In line with this, Menggo and Gunas (2022) demonstrate that a positive attitude toward assessment is associated with higher levels of participation and skill development. Thus, students' perceptions become a key factor in determining whether diagnostic tests are viewed as meaningful learning tools or merely evaluation requirements (Putri & Meisuri, 2025).

Within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, diagnostic assessment is designed to support differentiated instruction by helping teachers identify students' readiness and learning needs at the beginning of the learning process (Anggreana, 2022). Theoretically, this approach should enable teachers to design learning experiences that are better aligned with students' abilities and learning goals (Tomlinson and Moon, 2023). Thus, diagnostic assessment serves not only as an initial identification tool but also as a foundation for making more adaptive instructional decisions. However, in practice, the implementation of diagnostic assessment does not always align with these objectives. Students may not fully understand the role and function of diagnostic assessment in the learning process; consequently, when test results are not clearly communicated or utilized, such assessments tend to be viewed merely as formal evaluation activities rather than as meaningful tools to support improved learning (Rahimi & Fathi, 2024).

Although previous research has examined the functions and benefits of diagnostic assessment in language learning, studies that specifically focus on students'

perceptions remain relatively limited, particularly in the context of vocational education. In fact, vocational high school students possess distinctive characteristics, such as varying language proficiency levels and a learning orientation that is more focused on the needs of the workforce (Rafi & Pourdana, 2023). These differences in characteristics suggest that how students interpret diagnostic assessment may not always align with the context of general education. Therefore, it is important to explore how students interpret the role and benefits of diagnostic assessment within their specific learning environment. Furthermore, understanding students' cognitive and affective responses to diagnostic tests can provide deeper insights into how assessment practices influence their engagement and learning development (Anisah & Amreta, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to examine students' perceptions of the role and benefits of diagnostic tests in English language learning in vocational high schools. By focusing on the students' perspective, this study seeks to understand whether diagnostic assessments are viewed as tools that support the learning process or, conversely, as an additional academic burden. Based on these objectives, this study is grounded in the following research questions:

How do students perceive the role and benefits of diagnostic tests in their English learning process?

This study is based on the perspective that students' perceptions are a key factor in determining how assessment practices are interpreted and utilized in the learning process. Within this framework, perception is understood as a cognitive and affective process that influences how students understand the purpose of assessment and use its results to support learning. Summa Ekasuci and Lestari (2023) emphasize that students' awareness of the purpose and benefits of diagnostic tests influences their responses to assessment, feedback, and learning progress. In line with this, Remesal and Lluch (2024) demonstrate that positive perceptions encourage active participation and the utilization of test results. In contrast, negative perceptions lead to assessments being viewed as an academic burden (Brown & Harris, 2023). Thus, student perceptions serve as a conceptual foundation for understanding the effectiveness of diagnostic tests in learning.

Thus, this study makes an academic

contribution to the literature on formative assessment and student perceptions by highlighting the importance of students' awareness of the function and use of diagnostic tests in learning (Brandmo & Gamlem, 2025). Specifically, this study enriches previous research by demonstrating a gap between students' understanding of the purpose of diagnostic tests and their actual use in the learning process. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have implications for teachers and schools to not only administer diagnostic tests but also to communicate the results more clearly and integrate them into learning strategies. Thus, assessment practices can be more meaningful and support student-centered learning in vocational English classes.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore in depth students' perceptions of the role of diagnostic tests in English language learning. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand students' experiences and perceptions within a specific context (Aspers & Corte, 2022), while a case study design was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in a real-life context (Viera, 2024).

This study was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Limboto and involved 10th-grade students from three departments: Computer Networking and Telecommunications (TJKT), Accounting, and Hospitality. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they had direct experience taking an English diagnostic test at the beginning of the learning process (Palinkas, 2022). Overall, this study involved 15 students as interview participants, consisting of 5 students from each major, with selection based on their participation in the diagnostic test and their willingness to participate voluntarily.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually in the school setting following the administration of the diagnostic test, lasting approximately 10–15 minutes. The interviews focused on students' experiences taking the test, their understanding of the test's purpose and function, the perceived benefits, and the impact of test results on their motivation and learning strategies. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research objectives. The entire interview process was recorded using a recording device

(smartphone) with the participants' permission to ensure data accuracy, and then transcribed verbatim as the basis for analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through several stages, namely transcription, repeated reading, systematic coding through open coding, grouping codes into categories, and deriving themes to identify patterns in students' perceptions. The resulting themes included understanding the purpose of diagnostic tests, experiences taking the test, the benefits of the test, the impact on learning motivation, the relevance of the test to the major, understanding the use of test results, and the utilization of test results in learning. The final stage involved interpreting these themes to explain students' perceptions of the role and benefits of diagnostic tests in English language learning (Saunders, 2023). Data validity was ensured through triangulation by comparing response patterns across majors to identify consistency and variation in perceptions (Carter, 2022). Ethically, this study obtained permission from the school and involved informed consent from participants, while maintaining the confidentiality of identities through the use of participant codes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents research findings based on interviews with 15 tenth-grade students from three majors: Computer Networking and Telecommunications Engineering (TJKT), Accounting, and Hospitality. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which yielded several main themes related to students' perceptions of diagnostic tests in English language learning. The findings are presented in tabular form to summarize the main patterns, while the textual description focuses on the interpretation and significance of these findings.

Students' Awareness of Their English Language Proficiency

Table 1. Students' Awareness of the Purpose of Diagnostic Tests

Department	Key Findings
TJKT	Aware of basic abilities but find the test quite difficult
Accounting	Understand their strengths and weaknesses in English
Hospitality	Understand their level of English proficiency

The findings indicate that students have a basic understanding of the function of diagnostic tests as a tool for assessing their English proficiency. This understanding is consistent across all majors, although it does not

yet demonstrate the same depth of understanding.

As stated by the participant:

“The diagnostic test is designed to assess basic skills so that we are better prepared.” (P11 – Hospitality)

Another participant also stated:

“Diagnostic tests are very helpful in identifying our weaknesses.” (P7 – Accounting)

These findings suggest that diagnostic tests play a role in fostering students’ initial awareness, but this understanding remains limited to general functions and has not yet led to a more reflective understanding of the learning process.

The Benefits of Diagnostic Tests for Students

Tabel 2. Persepsi Manfaat Tes Diagnostik

Department	Key Findings
TJKT	Identifying areas that need improvement
Accounting	Helping to identify strengths and weaknesses
Hospitality	Helping to understand areas for improvement and supporting learning goals

The findings indicate that students view diagnostic tests as a tool that is beneficial to the learning process, particularly in helping them reflect on their own abilities.

As one participant stated:

“This test is very helpful for identifying my strengths and weaknesses in English.” (P6 – Accounting)

Another participant added:

“Now I know which parts need to be fixed.” (P3 – TJKT)

Nevertheless, the relatively uniform pattern of students’ responses suggests that their understanding of the benefits of the test remains general. This indicates that test results have not yet been fully utilized as a basis for making independent learning decisions.

The Effect of Diagnostic Tests on Learning Motivation

Table 3. The Effect of Diagnostic Tests on Motivation

Department	Key Findings
TJKT	Motivation has increased but hasn’t yet led to a change in study strategy
Accounting	Motivated to study harder
Hospitality	Motivated and starting to change the way I study

Diagnostic tests are also linked to increased student motivation. Interview results indicate that students view test results as an incentive to improve their skills.

One participant stated:

“Motivated to keep learning.” (P12 – Hospitality)

In addition, there are students who are

beginning to adjust their study strategies:

“More on the practical side.” (P2 – TJKT)

However, these findings indicate that there is variation in students’ responses. Not all students changed their learning strategies, so the motivation that emerged was not always followed by concrete actions in the learning process.

Limited Understanding of How to Use Test Results (Awareness Gap)

Table 4. Understanding of the Use of Test Results

Department	Key Findings
TJKT	Lack of understanding regarding how teachers use test results
Accounting	Limited understanding of how test results are used
Hospitality	Unfamiliarity with how test results are used

Although students tend to view diagnostic tests positively, most of them do not yet understand how the test results are used in the learning process.

As one of the participants stated:

“I don’t know what the test results are used for.” (P5 – TJKT)

These findings reveal an awareness gap between the administration of diagnostic tests and their instructional function. This suggests that the effectiveness of diagnostic tests depends not only on their administration but also on the extent to which test results are communicated and utilized in the learning process.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that students from various majors generally have a positive perception of diagnostic tests in English language learning. Students view diagnostic tests as a tool that helps them identify their initial abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. This not only confirms previous findings that diagnostic tests serve to identify students’ learning needs (El Zerk, 2025; El Zerk & Boulaine, 2025), but also indicates that this awareness tends to be at a basic level. That is, students understand the general function of the tests but are not yet fully able to relate them to a more reflective and continuous learning process.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that diagnostic tests contribute to increased student learning motivation. The responses of students who felt motivated to learn after learning their test results suggest that assessment can serve as

a trigger for intrinsic motivation. These findings align with previous research (El Zerk, 2025; Tay & Kee, 2023), yet the results of this study reveal that increased motivation is not always accompanied by significant changes in learning strategies. This indicates that while students are emotionally motivated, they do not yet fully possess the ability or guidance to independently alter their learning approaches.

In terms of relevance, students felt that diagnostic tests were more meaningful when the tested material aligned with their major. This reinforces the view that contextualized assessment can enhance student engagement (Levy-Feldman, 2025). In the context of vocational education, this relevance is particularly important because students tend to have a more practical learning orientation focused on the needs of the workforce. Therefore, the alignment between test content and students' fields of expertise plays a role in fostering a positive perception of assessment.

However, the most significant finding in this study is the existence of an awareness gap regarding the use of diagnostic test results. Although students understand the general purpose of the tests, the majority are unaware of how those results are utilized in the learning process. This finding not only supports the views of Brown & Andersson (2023) but also expands upon them by demonstrating that a lack of transparency in the use of test results can limit the potential of diagnostic tests as learning tools. In this regard, diagnostic tests have not yet fully functioned as part of continuous formative assessment; rather, they are still perceived as evaluative activities separate from the learning process.

These findings also need to be understood in the context of teaching practices in vocational schools in Indonesia. In practice, limited communication between teachers and students regarding the use of assessment results can influence how students interpret diagnostic tests. This suggests that the effectiveness of assessment is determined not only by the design of the instrument but also by how the results are integrated and communicated within the learning process. Thus, the institutional context and pedagogical practices play a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions of assessment.

Theoretically, this study contributes by emphasizing that students' perceptions of diagnostic tests are influenced not only by their diagnostic function but also by the level of student engagement in understanding and

utilizing test results. These findings expand our understanding of formative assessment by demonstrating that transparency and communication of test results are essential components in enhancing the effectiveness of assessment. Therefore, diagnostic tests must not only be well-designed but also accompanied by pedagogical practices that support students' interpretation of the results.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that vocational high school students from various majors generally have a positive perception of diagnostic tests in English language learning, particularly in raising awareness of their initial proficiency and fostering motivation to learn. These findings confirm that diagnostic tests play a crucial role in helping students understand their starting point in the learning process.

However, the findings of this study not only confirm the diagnostic function of diagnostic tests but also reveal limitations in their implementation, namely the existence of an awareness gap regarding the use of test results in the learning process. This situation indicates that the effectiveness of diagnostic tests is not solely determined by their administration but also by how test results are communicated and integrated into teaching practices.

Theoretically, this study contributes by expanding our understanding of formative assessment, particularly by emphasizing that students' perceptions are influenced by their level of engagement in understanding and utilizing assessment results. Practically, these findings imply that teachers need to develop more structured follow-up practices, such as providing specific feedback, openly discussing test results, and guiding students in developing learning strategies based on those results.

However, this study has limitations due to the small number of participants and its focus on a single school context, so the findings cannot yet be widely generalized. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more diverse contexts and explore in greater depth how the use of diagnostic test results can be effectively integrated into learning.

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