



Keeping Up with the English Proficiency Tests; the Voice of Adult Women Test Takers

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Abstract

A lot of studies reported that female learners' capability in mastering second language is better than that in male learners (Lasekan , 2018) and female students tend to be more successful than male students (Hamsinah, 2017), adult female test takers experience bigger challenges in dealing with EPT since they are usually multi-roles women i.e. working women, students, wives, and even mothers with babies. The objectives of the study were to analyze the voices of adult women test takers on the challenges of English proficiency test related to the most difficult skill that they have to take and how they cope their problems. The study applied mixed method study with descriptive quantitative and phenomenology approach. The data were taken through questionnaire and structured interview for 77 respondents of the study. Based on the result of the data analysis on 77 respondents, the questionnaire data show that the most difficult part of EPT was listening (58.4%). The respondents provided many strategies for raising their EPT scores. The most popular method of learning EPT was autonomous learning (50.6%), which was followed by taking a course, studying with friends, and not trying to improve EPT at all. These methods received 35.1%, 7.8%, and 6.5% of the total votes, respectively.

Keywords: *EPT; Adult Women; Challenges; Coping Mechanism*

Introduction

English proficiency testing is still a crucial component in evaluating students' English fluency in academic contexts. While hearing, reading, and structuring are unproductive aspects of language competence, speaking and writing are productive parts of language proficiency. To function well in a language, it is necessary to master both productive and non-productive skills. However, due to a number of restrictions on performing those productive skills, such as a lack of time for administering the tests, insufficient human capital to serve as the examiners, and difficulties in determining the aspects of rubric assessment, a number of English proficiency tests do not assess the productive skills. Due to its time

efficiency, English proficiency tests with non-productive skills—which are primarily paper-based—are still employed in a variety of settings, including academic settings and professional settings, despite the fact that they cannot properly analyze a person's language competency. Since a significant number of books and other information resources pertaining to modern knowledge are written in English, it is necessary to master English (Lauder, 2008).

English proficiency test still “haunts” test takers because generally they have to achieve a particular required score based on the standard regulated by the institution. Language achievement tests are viewed as a powerful means of control and dominance by test takers from various institutions, genders, and proficiency levels (Razavipour, 2014). Although English has been taught almost in all primary schools, not all skills of EPT are taught at school, so it still becomes a challenge for those who do not master it. According to empirical studies, a significant number of students performed poorly on the EPT (Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah, 2020). English proficiency test becomes a “big” problem for them because it is not only merely a proficiency test of English which stand alone in its subject but also a test which can be the requirement of other academic achievements. Sometimes, a required English proficiency test becomes a prerequisite condition to conduct proposal seminar, to enroll the graduation ceremony, or to continue their further study. These “burdens” are actually the cause why EPT becomes a very challenging matter.

Although a lot of studies reported that female learners' capability in mastering second language is better than that in male learners (Lasekan, 2018) and female students tend to be more successful than male students (Hamsinah, 2017), adult female test takers experience bigger challenges in dealing with EPT since they are usually multi-roles women i.e. working women, students, wives, and even mothers with babies. Women are assumed in home making, care giving, and subvervient roles (Rahmi, 2015). Thus, they tend to lay aside their need to spare their particular time to prepare the test in order to obtain the required score. Those roles for sure bring impacts to women's strategy to obtain the required EPT scores. Gender stereotypes in language learning are a real factor influencing learners' success and attitudes toward language learning (Tran, 2021). On the other hand, gender disparities may also be related to the cultural, social, and educational context in which a foreign language is learned. (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Hence, the researcher wishes to find the answer of several questions related to adult women's challenges of English proficiency test based on the cultural, social, and educational context namely:

1. What is the most difficult skill of English proficiency Test? Why?
2. What are women's respondents strategies to combat their problem(s) in doing EPT?

The objectives of the study were to analyze the voices of adult women test takers on the challenges of English proficiency test related to the most difficult skill that they have to take. The study also answered the question why the skill became the most difficult for them. In addition, the study also determined the women test-takers strategies to combat their problems in taking English Proficiency Test considering their multi-roles as mothers, wives, students, and employees.

The study is significant by considering that previous studies mostly discussed the correlation between gender and language learning (Zoghi, Kazemi, & Kalani (2013), Tran (2021), Hamsinah (2017), Radwan (2011), Glowka, (2014)), gender and language use (Rahmi (2015), Montero-SaizAja (2021)), gender and a mono-skill test such as vocabulary and reading (Montero-SaizAja (2021), Danuwijaya & Roebiyanto (2020), Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah (2020)). Among those researches, none of them discussed about the problems faced by adult women in performing EPT. This study becomes a novel matter because the researcher discusses about the image of adult women in combatting their problem in performing EPT.

Method

The study employed mixed-method research combining qualitative and quantitative research design. Qualitative research with phenomenology approach was chosen to deeply analyze the respondents' perspectives related to the most difficult skill of English proficiency test. Structured interview was used to collect significant data on superficial matters, and in depth interview was continuously applied to 3 respondents to dig deeper on the studied case. The research data can be obtained in the form of word, sentences, expressions, and paragraphs of the respondents, and it will be analyzed qualitatively. In addition, quantitative research design with descriptive study approach was employed to analyze the breath of the study. Research data in the form of numbers within tables or diagrams were obtained as the the main source of quantitative data analysis.

The study was conducted in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Yogyakarta was chosen as the location of the study by considering that Yogyakarta is a center of students in Indonesia. Students from all over cities in Indonesia come to Yogyakarta continuing their study in the city. It is assumed that the diversity of students can represent the real condition of the society in Indonesia. The respondents were students of Magister program as many as 78 respondents taken by total sampling. Why? All respondents were female, hence the study did not consider gender matters.

The first step done by the reseracher in conducting the research was by determining the survey questions given to the respondents. Secondly, the qestionaires were distributed to the respondents, and the researcher made sure if all the respondents fullfilled the survey. Questionnaires consisted of two types of questions namely closed questions and open questions. Closed questions was used to generate qualitative data in the form of tables or diagrams, and open questions were applied as a structured interview to obtain data in qualitative matter. Also, in-depth interview was conducted to get deeper answer of the repondents. Next, after obtaining data through questionnaires, the researcher sorted and classified data based on the most appropriate classification. Meanwhile, the data taken from structured were categorized in data sheets to ease the analysis process. After that, data analysis process was employed. Then, conclusion can be drawn after all.

Data collecting technique was employed through online questionnaire to obtain quantitative data which were analyzed based on decriptive quantitative method. Qualitative data were obtained through structured interview and in-dept interview. Structured interview was conducted to all respondents, and in-depth interview was given to 5 respondents randomly.

After obtaining data both in the form of tables and diagrams as quantitative data and in the form of words, sentences, and utterances as qualitative data, the researcher sorted and classified the data into several categories. Then, analysis was conducted based on those categories. Quantitative data were analyzed by using descriptive method, and qualitative data were analyzed by employing phenomenology approach.

Result and Discussion

The study was analyzed based on several significant aspects determining the challenges of participating English Proficiency Test namely the most difficult part of the EPT and the steps of test takers coping their problem related to English Proficiency Test. Before analyzing deeply the result of the study, the characteristics of respondents can be explained below:

Table 1. Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age		
20 – 24 year	54	70.1%
25 – 29 year	10	13%
30 – 34 year	10	13%
35 – 39 year	1	1.3%
>40 year	2	2.6%
Learning English Duration		
1 year	11	14.3%
2 year	1	1.3%
3 year	6	7.8%
4 year	5	6.5%
5 year	8	10.4%
5-10 year	23	29.9%
>10 year	23	29.9%
Number of taking EPT test		
1x	20	26%
2x	21	27.3%
3x	18	23.4%
More than 3x	18	23.4%

The respondents of the study were female students of a magister program in a university in Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta was chosen as the representative of all cities in Indonesia because the city is also called as students city in which all students from all over Indonesia come to the city to study. Yogyakarta city has more than 20 universities, and the city also offers hospitality and relatively cheap living cost. Hence, a lot of students from all over Indonesia come to the city continuing their higher study. Students of a magister program was selected as the population of the study because the respondents were considered as adult women. Moreover, the study program chosen became a multi-steps educational degree which started from Diploma 3 Degree, Bachelor Degree, and Master Degree. It was assumed that the some or most of the students of the major had obtained their professional path.

Meanwhile, the frequency of test takers in taking EPT varied. The classification varies from once, twice, three times, and more than three (3) times, and respectively it obtained almost even results with 26%, 27.3%, 23.4%, and 23.4%. All respondents stated that they took English Proficiency Test because the EPT score was used as the requirement of continuing their study, enrolling any scholarship, or finishing their study. None of them took EPT to know their English capability. It can be inferred that if the test was not a requirement given by the educational institutions, respondents would never take any test anyway. A language test can bring intended and unintended consequences for its shareholders including students given to the fact that their test performance might have effects on their occupational and educational promotion (Rezaeian, Seyyedrezaei, Barani , & Seyyedrezaei, 2020).

The total respondents of the study were 77 respondents who took English Proficiency Test. All respondents were female students of post-graduate degree ranging from 20 years old until more than 40 years old. Moreover, based on the data, it can be known that the duration of test takers learning English varied ranging from 1 year until more than 10 years. There were 11 test takers (14.3%) studying English

for 1 (one) year; only 1 student (1.3%) had learnt English in 2 (two) years, and the most dominant duration of learning English was more than 5 years (46%). Based on the respondents' learning English duration, they should have been able to master English well. Time learning spent by a student is directly relevant to an academic outcome (Fisher, et al., 2015). However, the satisfactory level of the respondents was relatively low.

The satisfaction of respondents to take EPT simulation was dominated by the respond that 68.8% of respondents were not satisfied with their pretest results. Based on the interview, it can be known that the reason why test takers were not satisfied with the results of their test was due to various reasons. One most dominant reason was that test takers could not achieve the required score of the EPT simulation. It can be inferred that self-acceptance became the most dominant determinant of the test takers' satisfaction level (Bavani & Mohan, 2015) in performing their EPT. The respondents mentioned that they had to obtain 500 of the score to pass the requirement, but their score was lower than that (82.7%). Some respondents admitted that they had fulfilled the required score, but they had not done their maximum efforts in doing the test (13.5%); they believed that they could get more if they had more struggle. Another critical component influencing respondents' achievement is the effort they are willing to put into learning process (Giladi, Koslowsky, & Davidovitch, 2022). Once they put great effort in their EPT, they will have good self-satisfaction. One test taker admitted that she was satisfied with result, but she still had concern that she real test would give her lower score.

For this EPT exercise, I am quite satisfied with the results, however, I still feel lacking because during the exam later the processing time is clearly more conditional and I am afraid that if I cannot take advantage of the time available and my suspension will not reach what was targeted, and according to I personally still have a lot to learn more to be able to get a better score for the next test (Respondent 17).

Different respond was stated by one respondent mentioning that EPT score was not merely a parameter to determine someone to master English. Base on her opinion:

Alhamdulillah, (I'm) satisfied with the score, because it meets the minimum requirements for the EPT score requested by the campus, but I want to increase this score even more to hone the knowledge I have gained and not only rely on the numbers obtained but to understand more about English materials (Respondent 52).

Difficult Task on English Proficiency Test

Based on the result of the data analysis on 77 respondents, the questionnaire data show that the most difficult part of EPT was listening (58.4%). The result of the study also supports a study conducted by Wahyuni, Zamzam, & Khotimah (2020) stating that listening for TOEFL was reported as the most challenging. Respondents stated that the problem in listening was mostly due to limited time to follow the conversation. They think that the conversation was too fast to follow. Some respondents admitted that they did not get enough English exposure. The respondents realized if they wanted to understand the speakers pronunciation well, they had to get used to hear or listen the way native English speakers spoke. Another problem related to respondents' listening skill problem was that their vocabulary mastery. According to one of the students another problem in listening is also the similarity of the pronunciation.

For me, listening is the most difficult part of the test because some of the words sound similar, especially when I need to choose the most correct answer. It's really confusing (Respondent 30).

Another respondent shared her personal problem related to her focus of concentration.

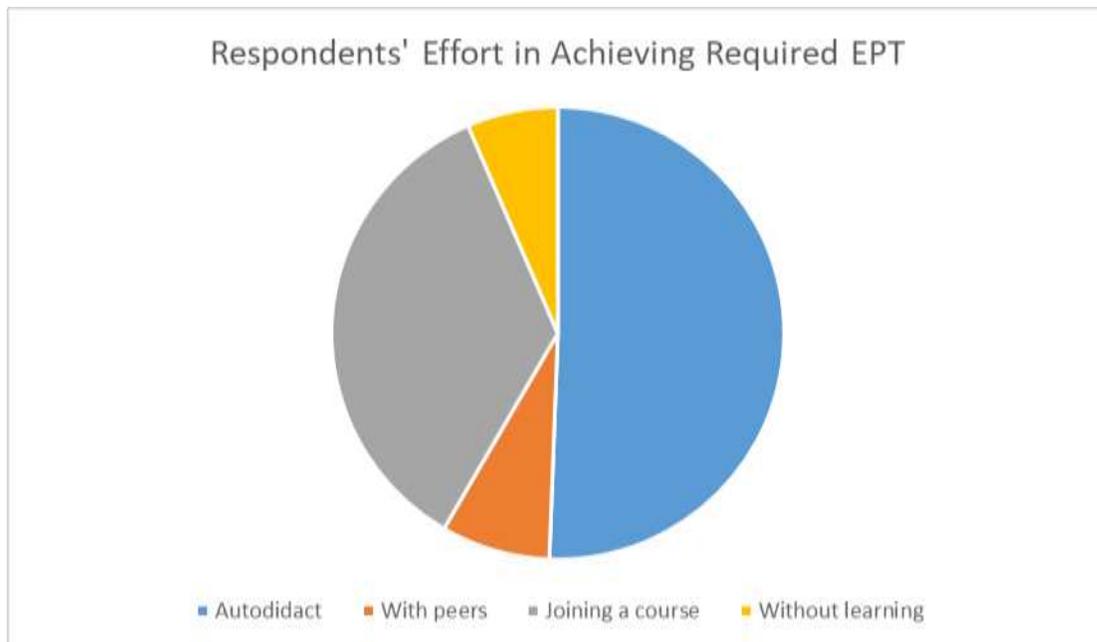
I think I have a personal problem in doing listening test because I cannot follow the conversation. It takes me much time to choose the answer while listening to the conversation. I feel so frustrated once I was left by the listening the conversation, and it eventually will make everything worse (Respondent 60).

On the other hand, some other respondents (36.5%) disagreed that listening became the most difficult skill in English Proficiency test. They stated that structure and written expression was the most difficult ones. The most dominant reason stating that structure was the most difficult part was because test takers had to both memorize and understand grammars in sentences (78%). Respondents stated that it is hard for them to put the formulas of sentence structures. Somehow English learners still heavily depend of their teachers or peers in learning grammar or structure because they need somebody to discuss about any formula presented in it (Rahayu, 2019). Besides, other test takers indicated that the choices of the answers seemed similar (20%), so they found it difficult to determine the most correct answer.

Nevertheles, based on the interview data, only did 4 (5.2%) respondents report that reading was the most difficult part of English Proficiency Test. In this skill, vocabulary mastery became the highest problem of the respondents. One respondent shared that the most difficult part of EPT was when she had to find the synonym of any words. She admitted that she needed to improve her vocabulary mastery to improve her EPT score. Indeed, vocabulary size is one important that enhances reading comprehension (Ibrahim , Sarudin, & Muhamad, 2016).

Coping Mechanism of EPT Problems in Adult Female Test Takers

The fact that most respondents were not satisfied in their EPT score, they had to cope their problem to get the required one. There were several ways that the respondents shared regarding how they improved their EPT score. Four main ways were stated; the most dominant way to learn EPT was by doing autonomous learning (50.6%), and it was followed by joining a course, studying with friends, and having no effort in increasing EPT; each of the learning way obtained 35.1%, 7.8%, and 6.5% respectively. Through autonomous learning, language learners set targets and objectives within the framework of the class, as well as outside of the class (Budianto & Mason, 2022). The following pie chart describes respondents' effort in achieving the required EPT.

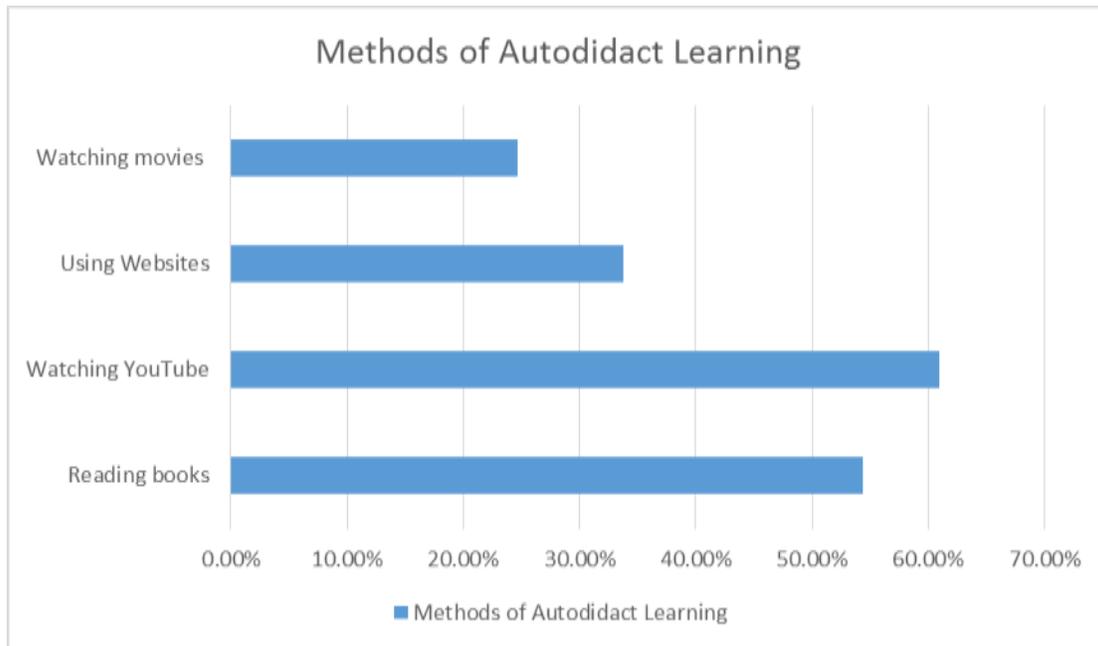


Some respondents stated their reason why they chose to study autonomously because they found it difficult to study outside their house due to multiple roles burden in their daily life. They had to take care of their family (Respondents 2, 7, 18, 23, 31, 44, 45, 52, 63, 69, 70, 72, 77) especially those who still had a little baby (Respondents 7 and 31); they needed to work (Respondent 23, 45, 70); and they had to do campus' assignments (all respondents). Their multiple roles made them difficult to add

more activities especially activity to join an English course to prepare their EPT. Hence, autonomous learning was chosen as respondents' effort to struggle with their EPT. One respondent stated that

Well, for me the most draining energy is to take care of my little baby and to do all campus' activities. I can't even think other elses or spend more time to take course for this. This EPT really burdens me so much because my English is not good, but I have to get the required score. What I have done so far is to individually learn from the module that has been given by the teachers (Respondent 31).

Respondents who preferred having outodidact learning mentioned several ways that they had done to improve their EPT score. The following graph shows several ways of learning the material independently.



Based on the data, it can be inferred that watching YouTube became the most favorite autonomous learning method; it was followed by reading books, learning through websites, and watching movies respectively. Watching YouTube became the most dominant way of learning EPT because it provides easy access and available everywhere and everytime (Rahayu , 2020). Moreover, they respondents can also adjust what materials they want to find in YouTube easily (Rahayu, 2018). One of the respondents mentioned:

I prefer to watch EPT materials through YouTube videos because I can do it whenever and wherever I want. I usually learn EPT by watching YouTube when all my children have slept or while I am waiting for them to have extracurricular activities. Whenever I have little free time, I will watch YouTube to learn EPT (Respondent 52).

Other respondents thought that reading book was better for them to learn EPT because they could do the exercises and make notes directly in the book (Respondents 3, 14, 23, 25, 35, 37, 40, 48, 52, 77). The more they practice their English, the more capable they will be (Rahayu, 2021). Some other respondents prefer to use websites to learn English especially materials related EPT. In websites, respondents could ask all questions they wanted to know. All information was available in websites; they just needed to type the keywords, and all explanations would be presented (Respondents 6, 7, 18, 20, 42, 55, 61, 63, 74). Although female respondents use language learning significantly more than males, there is significant difference between them regarding productive vocabulary (Montero-SaizAja, 2021).

Conclusion

Adult women had more challenges in performing EPT to achieve their required score. The study concludes that based on adult women's opinion, the most difficult task of the EPT test taken by paper-based test was listening skill because respondents had limited time to follow the conversation. There were several ways that the respondents shared regarding how they improved their EPT score. Four main ways were stated; the most dominant way to learn EPT was by doing autonomous learning and it was followed by joining a course, studying with friends, and having no effort in increasing EPT. Some respondents stated their reason why they chose to study autonomously because they found it difficult to study outside their house due to multiple roles burden in their daily life. They had to take care of their family especially those who still had a little baby; they needed to work; and they had to do campus' assignments (all respondents). Their multiple roles made them difficult to add more activities especially activity to join an English course to prepare their EPT. Hence, autonomous learning was chosen as respondents' effort to struggle with their EPT.

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