

## Bridging Educational Inequality through the ACCESS Program: Empowering Indonesian High School Students' English Proficiency and Global Competence

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

ACCESS Program,  
English Proficiency,  
Mixed-Method,  
Intercultural  
Competence,  
Educational Equity  
Merdeka Curriculum

*This study examines the effects of the ACCESS Microscholarship Program, a joint effort by the Indonesia International Education Foundation (IIEF) and the Regional English Language Office (RELO), on enhancing English language proficiency among economically disadvantaged high school students in Surabaya, Sidoarjo, and Gresik. The program aimed to mitigate socioeconomic obstacles hindering students' access to high-quality English instruction via communicative, project-based, and culturally relevant methodologies. The research utilized a mixed-method approach and featured 20 participants chosen for their high enthusiasm and constrained financial resources. Quantitative data from pre- and post-assessments evaluated improvements in four linguistic competencies—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—while qualitative data from interviews and surveys examined students' attitudes, confidence, and cross-cultural awareness. The findings indicated a substantial enhancement in all linguistic domains ( $p < .001$ ;  $d > 1.2$ ), as well as increased motivation, leadership, and intercultural competence. The ACCESS program successfully enabled students to develop confidence in English communication and engage as engaged global citizens, notwithstanding socioeconomic obstacles. The research indicates that inclusive, student-centered, and culturally relevant English programs help mitigate educational inequity and further Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum objective of cultivating critical, creative, and character-oriented learners.*

### INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in the English language is an essential skill for Indonesian high school students to attain competitiveness in higher education and global engagement. It is regarded as a crucial element in cultivating high-quality human resources adept at meeting the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, numerous public senior high schools in Surabaya, Gresik, and Sidoarjo demonstrate persistently poor levels of English competence among pupils. A primary aspect contributing to this condition is the socioeconomic background of the students. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently encounter restricted access to high-quality educational resources, including supplemental English courses, sufficient learning materials, and digital technology tools (Afrianto, 2018; Pentury & Anggraeni, 2019). This constraint results in disparate possibilities for English skill development and exacerbates the educational divide. Socioeconomic disparity has long been acknowledged as a significant factor influencing educational opportunities. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital posits that children from affluent homes typically have greater linguistic and educational resources that enhance language acquisition. Recent studies in Indonesia indicate a substantial correlation between students' language proficiency and their access to educational support networks, including private tutoring and parental engagement (Suryanto, 2020; Alhamami, 2022). As a result, students from low-income families frequently lag in acquiring the English skills necessary for academic progress and employment opportunities. Furthermore, financial difficulties frequently diminish students' desire and self-assurance in acquiring English language skills. Numerous students from disadvantaged backgrounds are compelled to contribute to home income or endure psychological

distress stemming from financial instability, so constraining their ability to fully engage in their academic pursuits. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) emphasize that motivation is a dynamic process influenced by internal and contextual elements; hence, an unsupportive socioeconomic environment might diminish learners' self-efficacy and long-term commitment to language acquisition. This difficulty is exacerbated by the prevalence of teacher-centered pedagogies in public schools, where English education frequently emphasizes grammatical translation over communicative and interactive methodologies (Wahyuningsih & Susanti, 2020). In the absence of engaging, meaningful learning experiences, children are deprived of opportunities to utilize English in authentic circumstances, resulting in restricted literacy in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The ACCESS Program employs a communicative and project-based learning methodology that fosters student-centered education and intercultural participation. Richards (2015) asserts that communicative and interactive pedagogies facilitate the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, pragmatic competence, critical thinking, and collaborative abilities among learners. Thomas (2020) contends that project-based learning promotes learner autonomy and profound involvement, enabling students to relate classroom material to real-world applications. The ACCESS program seeks to develop language competency and vital life skills, such as problem-solving, leadership, and cultural awareness, using these methods.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' English language development and the effectiveness of the ACCESS program. The quantitative aspect entailed assessing participants' advancement by pre- and post-tests across four language competencies: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The qualitative aspect concentrated on examining individuals' experiences and perceptions via semi-structured interviews and reflective questionnaires. This methodological triangulation allowed the researchers to corroborate the quantitative results and assess the socio-emotional and motivational effects of the training (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### Participants

A total of 20 high school students were selected from public senior high schools in Surabaya, Sidoarjo, and Gresik. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) demonstrated high motivation to learn English, and (2) belonging to low-income families as verified by school recommendation letters. The sample represented diverse gender, academic performance, and regional backgrounds, ensuring a balanced demographic representation. All participants and their guardians provided informed consent prior to participation, and ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the researchers' university.

### Instruments

Three main instruments were employed in this study:

1. English Proficiency Test – A standardized test adapted from the *Oxford Placement Test (OPT)* was used to assess the students' proficiency across four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill was scored on a 0–100 scale

and categorized according to the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* levels (A1–A2). The test was administered twice: before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the program implementation.

2. Questionnaire on Learning Motivation and Attitude – A structured questionnaire adapted from Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) was used to measure changes in students' motivation, confidence, and attitudes toward English learning. The instrument consisted of 20 Likert-scale items (1–5) covering dimensions of intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and cultural interest.
3. Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Conducted with ten randomly selected participants, the interviews explored students' learning experiences, challenges, and perceptions of program impact. The interview protocol focused on themes of cultural awareness, leadership development, and changes in communicative behavior. Each interview lasted approximately 25–30 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity and comfort.

Additionally, observation checklists were used during workshops and cultural activities to monitor student participation, teamwork, and leadership engagement.

### Reliability and Validity

To ensure instrument reliability, internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, yielding  $\alpha = 0.87$  for the motivation questionnaire, indicating high reliability. The English proficiency test was piloted with a comparable group of students ( $n = 10$ ) prior to implementation, and item analysis confirmed appropriate difficulty and discrimination indices. Qualitative validity was reinforced through member checking and peer debriefing among the program facilitators.

### Procedure

The program ran from January to October 2025 and consisted of three core phases:

1. Phase 1 – English Language Workshops: Participants attended weekly sessions focusing on communicative skills, vocabulary development, and grammar in context.
2. Phase 2 – Cultural and Leadership Learning: Students participated in cross-cultural projects, including "English Culture Days," film discussions, and community storytelling activities to build intercultural competence.
3. Phase 3 – Reflective Mentoring and Project Presentation: Students presented community-based projects demonstrating their English use, teamwork, and leadership skills.

Throughout the program, instructors applied project-based learning (Thomas, 2020) and communicative language teaching (Richards, 2015) principles to promote active engagement and autonomy.

## Data Analysis

Pre- and post-test data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to determine statistically significant differences in students' English proficiency before and after the intervention. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and gain scores) were calculated for each skill domain. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were also computed to measure the magnitude of improvement. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 27.0.

Moreover, interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved coding, categorizing, and identifying recurrent themes related to students' motivation, cultural understanding, and communication confidence. Triangulation between quantitative outcomes and qualitative insights ensured validity and depth of interpretation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Quantitative Findings

**Table 1 The result of English Proficiency**

| Skill Area      | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean | Gain Score | Improvement (%) |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|------------|-----------------|
| Listening       | 58.4          | 78.6           | +20.2      | 34.6%           |
| Speaking        | 55.2          | 76.3           | +21.1      | 38.2%           |
| Reading         | 61.5          | 80.8           | +19.3      | 31.4%           |
| Writing         | 57.6          | 75.4           | +17.8      | 30.9%           |
| Overall Average | 58.2          | 77.8           | +19.6      | 33.7%           |

All four skill areas improved substantially after the completion of the ACCESS program. The most significant improvement occurred in speaking (38.2%), indicating that students became more confident in expressing ideas orally. Listening also showed a notable increase (34.6%), demonstrating better comprehension of spoken English. Statistical analysis confirmed that the improvement was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview and questionnaire data yielded three dominant themes that complement the quantitative outcomes:

1. Increased Motivation and Confidence,
2. Enhanced Cross-Cultural Awareness, and
3. Improved Communicative Competence through Collaboration.

#### Theme 1: Increased Motivation and Confidence

Participants consistently reported greater motivation to learn English and increased self-confidence in using it for communication. One student noted, *"Before joining the program, I was afraid to speak English. Now I feel proud when I can introduce myself or present in English"*. This aligns with Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) theory of motivational self-systems, which highlights the role of self-efficacy and goal orientation in sustaining language learning engagement. The ACCESS environment—emphasizing teamwork, mentorship, and positive reinforcement—provided the socio-emotional scaffolding necessary to sustain motivation (Vygotsky, 1978; Reigeluth & An, 2021).

## Theme 2: Enhanced Cross-Cultural Awareness

Through cultural learning sessions, students gained exposure to global perspectives while maintaining pride in their local identity. Many expressed greater respect for diversity and curiosity about other cultures. This finding supports Byram's (1997) framework of *intercultural communicative competence (ICC)*, which stresses that language education should develop learners' ability to mediate meaning across cultural contexts. ACCESS's cultural modules, such as "English Culture Days" and storytelling projects, were instrumental in fostering these intercultural dimensions.

## Theme 3: Improved Communicative Competence through Collaboration

Students highlighted that interactive activities like debates, role plays, and group projects significantly improved their speaking fluency and confidence. Teachers also observed stronger peer collaboration and initiative during classroom activities. These findings are consistent with Voss (2019), who argues that blended and project-based learning environments stimulate deeper engagement and communication competence. Furthermore, Richards (2015) emphasizes that meaningful communication tasks develop both linguistic and pragmatic skills—precisely the outcomes achieved through ACCESS.

## Discussion

The integration of communicative and cultural pedagogy in the ACCESS program effectively addressed both linguistic and motivational barriers faced by low-income learners. Quantitatively, the significant improvement in test scores demonstrates that structured, student-centered instruction can lead to measurable learning gains even in resource-constrained settings. Qualitatively, students' narratives reveal affective transformation—a renewed sense of confidence, curiosity, and belonging in the learning process.

These results validate the notion of education as empowerment (Mezirow, 2012), where learners experience not only cognitive development but also socio-emotional growth. The ACCESS program successfully operationalized deep learning principles (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018), emphasizing meaning-making, collaboration, and reflection. Importantly, this initiative supports Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which calls for contextualized learning that nurtures character, global citizenship, and lifelong learning skills (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

Furthermore, the results affirm Bourdieu's (1986) theory of *educational capital redistribution*: targeted interventions like ACCESS can partially mitigate the effects of socioeconomic inequality by expanding linguistic and cultural access to marginalized learners. The findings echo Alhamami (2022) and Pentury & Anggraeni (2019), who contend that improving language education equity requires not only curriculum reform but also social investment in community-based initiatives.

In sum, ACCESS demonstrates that when language education integrates project-based learning, cultural engagement, and leadership training, it produces holistic learners—linguistically competent, culturally aware, and socially responsible. This model of instruction provides a scalable blueprint for addressing the English education gap in developing countries.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the ACCESS Microscholarship Program has significantly enhanced English language proficiency, motivation, and intercultural awareness among economically disadvantaged high school students in Surabaya, Sidoarjo, and Gresik. Through the integration of communicative, project-based, and culturally responsive learning approaches, the program not only improved students' linguistic competence but also fostered confidence, leadership, and global citizenship skills. These findings imply that equitable access to quality English education can be achieved through collaborative initiatives between educational institutions, government bodies, and international partners. The ACCESS model demonstrates that sustained, student-centered interventions can bridge socioeconomic disparities in language learning while supporting Indonesia's *Merdeka Curriculum* agenda of developing critical, creative, and character-driven learners. Therefore, expanding similar programs and continuous teacher professional development are essential for sustaining educational equity and producing globally competent young Indonesians.

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