



Empowering Small and Medium Enterprises through English Language Training: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini meneliti kemahiran bahasa Inggris karyawan di perusahaan kecil dan menengah (UKM), dengan fokus pada tantangan dan peluang penerapan program pelatihan bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, penelitian ini menggabungkan analisis kuantitatif skor tes TOEIC dari 227 karyawan dengan wawasan kualitatif dari wawancara dan diskusi kelompok terfokus yang melibatkan pemilik UKM, manajer SDM, dan karyawan.

Hasil kuantitatif mengungkap variasi signifikan dalam tingkat kemahiran bahasa Inggris, dengan perbedaan mencolok berdasarkan lokasi geografis dan jenis perusahaan. Karyawan di daerah pedesaan dan perusahaan domestik menghadapi tantangan yang lebih signifikan. Data kualitatif menyoroti hambatan terhadap pelatihan bahasa yang efektif, seperti kendala keuangan, keterbatasan waktu, dan akses terbatas ke program berkualitas, yang sering kali menghalangi UKM untuk membekali tenaga kerja mereka dengan keterampilan bahasa Inggris yang diperlukan untuk meraih kesuksesan dalam ekonomi global. Meskipun menghadapi tantangan ini, studi ini juga mengungkap peluang yang dapat muncul dari peningkatan kemahiran bahasa Inggris, termasuk peningkatan daya saing bisnis, komunikasi yang lebih baik baik secara internal maupun eksternal, retensi karyawan yang lebih tinggi, dan peningkatan inovasi. Kesimpulannya, meskipun peningkatan kemampuan bahasa Inggris di UKM menghadirkan tantangan, mengatasi hambatan ini penting untuk membuka manfaat pelatihan bahasa. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa investasi strategis dalam pelatihan bahasa, yang didukung oleh sumber daya eksternal dan penjadwalan yang kreatif, dapat meningkatkan pertumbuhan dan daya saing global UKM secara signifikan.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the English language proficiency of employees in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), focusing on the challenges and opportunities of implementing English language training programs. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a quantitative analysis of TOEIC test scores from 227 employees with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions involving SME owners, HR managers, and employees.

The quantitative results reveal significant variations in English proficiency levels, with notable differences based on geographic location and company type.

Employees in rural areas and domestic companies face more significant challenges. The qualitative data highlight barriers to effective language training, such as financial constraints, time limitations, and limited access to quality programs, which often hinder SMEs from equipping their workforce with the necessary English skills for success in a globalized economy.

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovers opportunities that could arise from improved English proficiency, including enhanced business competitiveness, better communication both internally and externally, higher employee retention, and increased innovation.

In conclusion, while improving English proficiency in SMEs presents challenges, overcoming these barriers is essential to unlocking the benefits of language training. The findings suggest that strategic investments in language training, supported by external resources and creative scheduling, could significantly enhance the growth and global competitiveness of SMEs.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Overview of SMEs and their Economic Role

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital to the global economy, driving economic growth, innovation, and employment. Their significance varies by country and region, but they consistently play a crucial role in shaping the economic landscape. In the European Union, for example, SMEs represent about 99% of all businesses and contribute more than half of the total value added to the economy. In developing economies like Vietnam, SMEs make up over 90% of all enterprises and are responsible for a substantial portion of GDP. According to the World Bank, SMEs in Vietnam contribute approximately 40% of the GDP and account for more than half of total employment.

SMEs are also the largest employers in many countries, providing about 70% of all jobs globally, particularly in developing nations. In Vietnam, SMEs employ about 70% of the workforce, playing a pivotal role in job creation and income generation for a large portion of the population. Furthermore, SMEs are often at the forefront of innovation, thanks to their flexibility and ability to quickly adapt to market changes. This innovation spans technology, processes, products, and business models, driving competitiveness and economic development.

In addition to their economic contributions, SMEs promote regional and local development by spreading economic activity across different parts of a country. Unlike large corporations that may concentrate operations in major urban areas, SMEs often operate in smaller towns and rural areas, helping to balance regional economic development and reduce disparities between urban and rural regions. In Vietnam, where rural areas still dominate, SMEs play an especially significant role in regional development.

Despite their importance, SMEs face numerous challenges, including limited access to finance, markets, and technology. These challenges are often more pronounced in developing economies, where institutional support may be weaker. For instance, access to finance remains a significant barrier for many SMEs in Vietnam, limiting their ability to grow and compete effectively on both national and global stages.

In summary, SMEs are indispensable to the economic fabric of most countries. Their role in economic growth, employment, innovation, and regional development underscores the need for supportive policies that address the unique challenges they face. By enabling SMEs to thrive, governments and other stakeholders can foster more inclusive and sustainable economic development.

1.2. Research Problem

1.2.1. Gaps in English Language Proficiency within SMEs

The English language proficiency of employees in Vietnamese SMEs is generally low, reflecting broader national trends. According to the EF English Proficiency Index, Vietnam has consistently ranked in the low to moderate proficiency categories in recent years, with the country dropping to 66th place globally in 2021. This decline in English proficiency poses a significant challenge for SMEs, as these businesses increasingly interact with international markets, necessitating higher levels of English proficiency among employees.

Despite efforts by the Vietnamese government and companies to improve English skills within the workforce, such as adopting role-specific English training in sectors like Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), a significant gap remains, especially compared to other countries in Asia. The World Bank also highlights that the quality of English language education in Vietnam varies significantly between urban and rural areas, complicating efforts to uniformly improve proficiency across all regions.

Addressing these issues is crucial for the continued growth of Vietnam's SMEs. Improved English proficiency is essential for participating in the global economy and fostering more robust international business relations.

1.2.2. Challenges in Accessing and Implementing English Language Training

SMEs around the world, including in Vietnam, face several challenges in accessing and implementing English language training, broadly categorized as financial constraints, lack of access to quality training, and cultural barriers.

Financial Constraints: One of the primary challenges is financial. Unlike larger corporations, SMEs often operate on limited budgets, making it difficult to allocate resources for comprehensive language training programs. The cost of hiring qualified trainers, purchasing learning materials, and allowing employees time off to attend training sessions can be prohibitive, particularly in developing countries like Vietnam, where SMEs form a significant part of the economy but often lack the capital to invest in non-essential areas such as language training.

Access to Quality Training: Even when SMEs are willing to invest in English language training, accessing quality programs can be challenging. In many regions, especially rural areas, there is a scarcity of qualified English language trainers and institutions offering specialized training tailored to business needs. This lack of access is compounded by the uneven distribution of educational resources, where urban areas might have better facilities and trainers compared to rural regions.

Cultural Barriers: Cultural attitudes toward language learning can also pose significant challenges. In some regions, there may be resistance to learning English due to national pride or the perception that it is unnecessary for local business operations. In Vietnam, where the national language is strongly emphasized in education, English is often viewed as secondary or even optional. Additionally, employees, particularly older ones, may lack the motivation to learn English if they do not see an immediate need or benefit.

Lack of Tailored Programs: Another challenge is the lack of tailored language training programs that meet the specific needs of SMEs. Many available programs are generic and do not focus on the specific vocabulary or business communication skills required in various industries. This lack

of industry-specific training makes it difficult for SMEs to find relevant and effective courses for their particular business context.

Implementation Challenges: Even when SMEs manage to access English language training, implementing these programs can be challenging. Employees may have varying levels of language proficiency, making it difficult to design a program that suits everyone. Additionally, SMEs may struggle to maintain employee engagement and consistent attendance, especially if the training is seen as an additional burden rather than a beneficial investment. Moreover, the effectiveness of the training is often limited by the lack of opportunities for employees to practice their English skills in real-life business scenarios, leading to low retention and application of the language learned.

1.3. Research Objectives

The research objectives of the current study include a comprehensive approach to understanding the role of English language proficiency within SMEs and its impact on their operations and growth. Firstly, the study attempts to assess the current level of English language proficiency among SMEs in Vietnam. By establishing a baseline understanding of employees' English proficiency, the research provides valuable insights into how well-equipped SMEs are to engage in international business, communicate with global partners, and operate in markets where English is dominant.

Secondly, the study seeks to identify the challenges SMEs face in implementing English language training. These challenges may include financial constraints, lack of access to quality training programs, limited time for employees to attend training sessions, and cultural resistance to learning English. By identifying these challenges, the research aims to understand why some SMEs struggle to improve their English language capabilities and what can be done to overcome these obstacles. Finally, the study aims to explore the opportunities that English language training can provide to SMEs. This forward-looking objective seeks to highlight the potential benefits of English language training, including enhanced competitiveness, greater access to international markets, improved communication with global clients and partners, and the ability to participate in international trade and investment.

Together, these research objectives provide a holistic view of the importance of English language proficiency within SMEs. By assessing current proficiency levels, identifying challenges, and exploring opportunities, the research can inform policy recommendations and practical strategies for enhancing language skills within this critical sector.

1.4. Research Questions

The research questions are designed to guide the study effectively. The first question establishes the current English proficiency levels in SMEs, providing a baseline. The second identifies the challenges SMEs face in implementing language training, which is crucial for proposing solutions. The third explores the potential benefits of English training, highlighting the strategic advantages for SMEs. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. *What is the current state of English language proficiency among employees in SMEs?*
2. *What are the main challenges SMEs encounter in accessing and implementing English language training?*
3. *What opportunities can be unlocked through improved English language skills within SMEs?*

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study carries significant implications for policymakers, business owners, and language educators, as it sheds light on the vital role of language training in small and medium-sized

enterprises (SMEs). By delving into the specific language needs of employees in these businesses and evaluating the effectiveness of current training programs, this research offers insights that could shape better policies, smarter business strategies, and more impactful educational practices.

1.5.1. Importance for Policymakers, Business Owners, and Language Educators

For policymakers, this study could be transformative, providing grounded recommendations that can help develop language training policies tailored to boost productivity and enhance global competitiveness among SMEs. By identifying where the gaps are and what challenges businesses face in training their staff, this research could lead to more effective policies that truly support SMEs in their language training efforts, ultimately contributing to broader economic growth.

Business owners, especially those running SMEs, can gain practical insights from this study. It highlights how improving language skills among their employees can lead to better communication, stronger customer relationships, and smoother operations overall. Armed with this knowledge, business owners might be more inclined to invest in language training, knowing that it could directly affect their bottom line and help them thrive in international markets.

For language educators, this study is particularly relevant. It provides a clearer picture of the language demands within SMEs, enabling educators to tailor their programs more closely to what the business world actually needs. By aligning their teaching with these real-world requirements, educators can play a crucial role in preparing a workforce ready to meet the linguistic challenges of today's global economy.

1.5.2. Contribution to Existing Literature on Language Training in SMEs

This research also contributes to the existing literature on language training, particularly within the context of SMEs—a sector often overlooked in academic studies. While previous research has focused on larger corporations or educational settings, this study zeroes in on the unique environment of SMEs, offering a fresh perspective on the challenges and opportunities that exist. Additionally, by exploring how language training intersects with business performance, this study adds depth to our understanding of how language education can directly impact economic success. The findings provide not just theoretical insights but also practical advice applicable in real-world SME settings. In doing so, this research enriches the conversation around language training and offers solutions grounded in the actual needs of businesses today.

In summary, the significance of this study lies in its potential to influence decision-making at multiple levels—policy, business, and education—while contributing meaningful insights to the academic community. It's a study that aims to make a real difference in how we approach language training in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Literature Review

2.1. Overview of SMEs and their Economic Significance

Small and medium-sized enterprises, commonly known as SMEs, are often referred to as the backbone of the global economy—and for good reason. These businesses, which typically employ fewer than 250 people, make up the vast majority of companies worldwide. In fact, SMEs account for more than 90% of all businesses and generate over half of global employment, according to recent statistics from the World Bank (2023). Their role is not just limited to providing jobs; they also contribute significantly to innovation, economic diversity, and community development.

One of the key reasons SMEs are so vital is their ability to drive economic growth from the ground up. Unlike large corporations that may have a more centralized structure, SMEs are often deeply rooted in their local communities. This connection means they are more responsive to local needs

and can adapt quickly to changes in the market. This flexibility allows them to innovate, creating new products and services that can cater to niche markets or even drive new industries.

SMEs are also crucial players in the global supply chain. They often serve as suppliers and service providers to larger companies, contributing to the overall efficiency and competitiveness of entire industries. For example, in manufacturing, SMEs might provide specialized components or services that are essential to the production processes of larger firms. This interdependence between SMEs and larger enterprises fosters a dynamic economic environment where both can thrive.

Moreover, SMEs are instrumental in job creation. According to the International Labour Organization (2022), SMEs generate around 70% of global employment, particularly in developing economies where they are often the primary source of income for many families. The ability of SMEs to create jobs at a local level helps reduce poverty and drives economic development in these regions. This is particularly important in areas where large corporations might be less inclined to invest due to perceived risks or lower profit margins.

However, SMEs also face unique challenges that can hinder their growth. Access to financing is a common hurdle, as these businesses often struggle to secure loans or investments, especially in developing countries. Additionally, SMEs may lack the resources to compete with larger firms in terms of technology, marketing, and economies of scale. Despite these challenges, the resilience and adaptability of SMEs have allowed them to continue playing a pivotal role in the global economy.

In summary, SMEs are not just important—they are essential to economic stability and growth. They provide jobs, foster innovation, and contribute to the economic fabric of communities around the world. Their significance is increasingly recognized by policymakers and economists, who see supporting SMEs as a key strategy for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development (OECD, 2023).

2.2. The Importance of English Language in Global Business

English has firmly established itself as the lingua franca of global business. In today's interconnected world, the ability to communicate in English is not just an asset—it's often a necessity. Whether it's negotiating contracts, managing international teams, or marketing products to a global audience, English plays a central role in enabling businesses to operate across borders. One of the primary reasons English is so crucial in global business is its widespread use. English is spoken by approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide, making it the most commonly spoken second language (British Council, 2023). This widespread adoption means that in many international business settings, English is the default language, even when no native speakers are present. For example, a business meeting between a German and a Japanese company is likely to be conducted in English because it serves as a common ground for communication.

Moreover, the dominance of English in global business is reinforced by its presence in key industries. For instance, the tech industry is heavily Anglophone, with much of the world's leading software, research, and development being conducted in English. The same is true for finance, where English is often the language of choice in international banking and trade (Crystal, 2019). This means that proficiency in English opens doors to opportunities in these lucrative and influential sectors.

Another significant aspect is the role of English in multinational corporations (MNCs). Many MNCs have adopted English as their official corporate language to streamline communication across their global operations. Companies like Airbus, Nokia, and Samsung use English as a common language to facilitate smoother collaboration among their diverse teams (Neeley, 2020).

For employees, this means that fluency in English is often a prerequisite for career advancement, especially in roles that require interaction with colleagues or clients from different countries.

English also plays a vital role in international marketing and branding. Global companies need to communicate effectively with consumers from various cultural backgrounds, and English often serves as the bridge. Advertising campaigns, product information, and customer service are frequently delivered in English to ensure they reach the widest possible audience. This not only helps companies expand their market reach but also strengthens their brand presence globally.

However, the importance of English in global business is not without its challenges. For non-native speakers, the need to operate in English can create a barrier to entry in the global market. It requires significant investment in language training, and there can be a steep learning curve. Additionally, the dominance of English sometimes leads to the marginalization of other languages, which can affect cultural diversity in business practices.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of English proficiency in global business far outweigh the drawbacks. In many ways, English has become the language of opportunity—a tool that enables companies to compete on the global stage, access new markets, and foster international partnerships. As globalization continues to shrink distances and dissolve borders, the role of English in global business is likely to grow even more pronounced.

In conclusion, English is more than just a language; it's a key that unlocks doors in the world of global business. Its role as the common language in international trade, corporate communication, and marketing underscores its significance in driving economic growth and fostering international collaboration (British Council, 2023; Neeley, 2020).

2.3. English Language Training for SMEs

English language training has become a critical asset for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) looking to expand their reach in today's globalized world. For businesses that want to engage with international customers, suppliers, and partners, having employees who can communicate effectively in English is often a game-changer. In many ways, investing in English language skills is not just a nice-to-have but a must-have for SMEs that aspire to compete on the global stage.

The reason English is so important for SMEs is pretty straightforward: it's the language of global business. Whether it's negotiating deals, managing contracts, or providing customer service, English is the go-to language in many international settings. For SMEs aiming to break into new markets, having employees who can navigate these interactions smoothly can make all the difference (British Council, 2023). Without strong English skills, businesses may find themselves at a disadvantage, missing out on opportunities simply because they can't communicate effectively.

But it's not just about external communication. English language training can also play a big role in improving how things work inside the company. Many SMEs operate across borders, with teams that are spread out over different countries. When everyone speaks a common language, like English, it helps to reduce misunderstandings, improve collaboration, and get things done more efficiently. This is particularly important for SMEs involved in international supply chains or those that need to coordinate work across different regions. By training employees in English, businesses can create a more unified and productive workplace (OECD, 2023).

In today's digital world, the importance of English is even more pronounced. The internet has opened up huge opportunities for even the smallest businesses to reach customers all over the world, but English is often the default language for online communication. Whether it's engaging with customers on social media, managing an e-commerce site, or dealing with international clients

via email, having a good command of English is crucial. SMEs that invest in English language training are better positioned to tap into these global opportunities and grow their business online (World Bank, 2023).

Of course, implementing English language training in an SME isn't always easy. Smaller companies often have tighter budgets and might find it challenging to allocate resources to training programs. Plus, the needs within an SME can vary widely—some employees might just need basic conversational skills, while others might need more specialized training in business English or industry-specific jargon. This means that a one-size-fits-all approach to language training isn't going to cut it. Instead, SMEs need to find ways to tailor their training programs to fit the specific needs of their staff (Eurofound, 2023).

Fortunately, there are more options than ever for SMEs looking to improve their employees' English skills. Online courses, mobile apps, and flexible learning platforms offer affordable and accessible ways for employees to learn at their own pace. These tools can be a great fit for SMEs, allowing staff to fit language learning into their busy schedules without needing to step away from their day-to-day work. Additionally, SMEs can look into partnerships with local educational institutions or language training providers to get more tailored and comprehensive training solutions (International Labour Organization, 2023).

In conclusion, English language training is an essential strategy for SMEs that want to succeed in the global marketplace. While there are certainly challenges involved, the benefits—such as improved communication, greater market access, and a more cohesive workplace—make it a smart investment. As the global business landscape continues to evolve, the ability to communicate in English will only become more important, making effective language training a crucial part of any SME's growth strategy.

2.4. Challenges in Language Training for SMEs

While it's clear that English language training is crucial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) looking to thrive in a global market, actually making it happen is often easier said than done. For many SMEs, the road to implementing effective language training programs is filled with challenges that can be tough to navigate.

Primarily, there is the issue of money. SMEs typically operate on much tighter budgets than large corporations, which mean there's less wiggle room for things like employee training (OECD, 2023). Language training can be expensive, especially if you're looking to bring in quality instructors or purchase the latest software. For many small businesses, these costs can be a real barrier. They might want to improve their team's language skills, but the financial reality often means having to make tough decisions about where to spend limited resources.

Another big challenge is that employees within an SME often have very different language needs. Some might just need to get by with basic conversational English, while others might need to master business-specific vocabulary or technical jargon (Eurofound, 2023). This makes it hard to design a one-size-fits-all training program. Tailoring the training to fit each employee's role and responsibilities can be both complex and time-consuming, but it's necessary if the training is going to be truly effective.

Time is also a major factor. Employees in SMEs are often wearing multiple hats, which means they're juggling a lot of responsibilities already. Finding time to fit in language training can be a real struggle. In a small business, taking time away from work for training can feel like a luxury they simply can't afford (International Labour Organization, 2023). This is especially true when there's constant pressure to meet deadlines and keep the business running smoothly.

Additionally, there's the issue of finding the right people to deliver the training. Not all SMEs have access to high-quality language trainers, especially if they're located in more remote areas (World Bank, 2023). Without access to experienced instructors who understand the specific needs of their industry, SMEs might have to settle for more generic training options that don't fully meet their needs. This can lead to frustration and lower the overall effectiveness of the training.

Furthermore, cultural and linguistic diversity within the workforce can add another layer of complexity. Employees who speak different native languages may approach learning English in different ways, and what works for one group might not work for another (British Council, 2023). Additionally, cultural differences can influence how comfortable employees feel participating in training or even how they prefer to learn. Addressing these differences requires a thoughtful approach that takes into account the unique backgrounds of the employees.

Finally, there's the challenge of getting employees on board. Not everyone sees the value of language training, especially if they're already feeling overwhelmed with their current workload. Some employees might be hesitant to engage in training because they're self-conscious about their language skills, or they simply don't see how it will benefit them in their day-to-day job (Neeley, 2020). Overcoming this resistance often requires clear communication from management about the long-term benefits of language training, not just for the business but for the employees' own career growth.

In conclusion, all these challenges can make implementing language training in SMEs seem like an uphill battle, but that doesn't mean it's not worth the effort. With the right approach—one that's flexible, tailored to specific needs, and mindful of the realities SMEs face—these challenges can be managed. By investing in language training, SMEs can equip their employees with the skills they need to succeed in the global marketplace, ultimately driving the business forward.

2.5. Opportunities Created by English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency offers numerous opportunities for individuals, businesses, and nations in today's globalized world. These opportunities span across various domains, including education, employment, business, and international relations.

Boosting Career Prospects

Knowing English can be a game-changer when it comes to finding a job. In today's global job market, many multinational companies, especially in fields like technology, finance, and customer service, look for employees who can communicate effectively in English. This is particularly true in places like Vietnam, where being fluent in English can be the key to landing a job with an international company or thriving in sectors like tourism and hospitality, where interaction with foreign clients is a daily task (World Bank, 2024).

Access to Excellent Education

English is the gateway to higher education opportunities abroad. Universities in countries like the United States, the UK, and Australia often require English proficiency as a prerequisite for admission. If you want to study in one of these top-tier institutions, being proficient in English is non-negotiable. This not only opens doors to quality education but also to the kind of international exposure that can significantly boost your career down the line (EF Education First, 2023).

Helping Businesses Go Global

For businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), English can be the ticket to global markets. Imagine being able to negotiate deals, communicate with international clients, and understand global market trends—all because your team is proficient in English. This can help companies from countries like Vietnam expand their reach beyond local markets and tap into the global economy (World Bank, 2024).

Fostering Cultural Exchange

English is more than just a language; it's a bridge between cultures. Being proficient in English allows people to engage in cross-cultural exchanges, participate in international conferences, and build relationships with people from different parts of the world. It's the language of diplomacy, international cooperation, and cultural understanding, helping to bring people and nations closer together (British Council, 2023).

Unlocking Access to Information

In the digital age, English is the language of the internet, science, and technology. Whether it's accessing the latest research, understanding cutting-edge technology, or simply staying updated with global news, knowing English gives you access to a vast pool of information that would otherwise be out of reach. This is essential for staying competitive and innovative, no matter what field you're in (British Council, 2023).

In short, English proficiency doesn't just help individuals get ahead—it can also drive business success and foster global connections. Whether you're looking to advance your career, expand your business, or simply broaden your horizons, English can open the door to countless opportunities.

Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

For the present research, which aims to assess the current level of English language proficiency in SMEs, identify the challenges they face in implementing English language training, and explore the opportunities that proficiency in English can provide, a mixed-methods research design would be highly appropriate. This approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

3.2. Research Approach

The mixed-methods design allows the study to benefit from both the depth of qualitative insights and the breadth of quantitative data. This approach is particularly useful for this research because it seeks to both quantify the levels of English proficiency and explore the contextual factors that influence these levels and the associated challenges and opportunities.

3.3. Quantitative Component

The objective of the quantitative component is to assess the current level of English language proficiency among employees in SMEs, both domestic and foreign invested companies. A survey will be conducted using standardized English proficiency tests (TOEIC) among 227 respondents. This will provide measurable data on the proficiency levels across different SMEs and sectors. A stratified random sample of SMEs across various industries will be selected to ensure that the data represents a wide range of businesses. The sample will include SMEs from both urban and rural areas to capture any geographical disparities in proficiency levels.

3.4. Qualitative Component

The qualitative component is used to identify the challenges SMEs face in implementing English language training and explore the opportunities that proficiency in English provides. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions will be conducted with key stakeholders, including SME owners, HR managers, and employees. These methods will allow for an in-depth exploration of the specific barriers to language training, such as financial constraints, time limitations, and access to quality training programs. The qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the challenges and opportunities associated with English language proficiency in SMEs.

3.5. Integration of Data

The quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated during the analysis phase to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. For example, quantitative data on proficiency levels will be cross-referenced with qualitative insights into the challenges faced by SMEs, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the issues.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

The use of multiple data sources (surveys, interviews, focus groups) will help triangulate the findings, enhancing the validity of the research. The survey instruments and interview guides will be pilot tested with a small group of SMEs to ensure clarity and relevance.

Findings and Discussion

4.1. Current English Proficiency Levels in SMEs

4.1.1. Mean score of the English proficiency by the TOEIC test results

The descriptive statistics for the TOEIC test scores among 227 participants reveal that the scores range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5, with a mean score of 2.85. The assigned numbers correspond to specific TOEIC score ranges: 1 represents scores under 300, 2 represents scores between 301-400, 3 corresponds to 401-450, 4 corresponds to 451-550, and 5 represents scores over 550. The mean score of 2.85 suggests that, on average, participants fall within the 301-400 and 401-450 score ranges, indicating a moderate level of English proficiency. The standard deviation of 1.244 indicates that there is a moderate spread of scores around the mean, reflecting variability in the participants' proficiency levels. While the majority may be close to the average, the range of scores highlights that there are participants with both lower and higher levels of English proficiency within the group. This distribution could be influenced by factors such as educational background, exposure to English, or the specific language demands of their professional roles. (table 1)

Table 1: Means of participants' TOEIC test results

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TOEIC test	227	1	5	2.85	1.244
Valid N (list-wise)	227				

4.1.2. Variation of English proficiency by working time

The cross-tabulation of TOEIC test scores across different working time categories reveals interesting patterns in English language proficiency among employees. For those with less than one year of experience, the majority of TOEIC scores fall within the 301-400 range, with only a small number scoring above 450. This suggests that new employees typically start with lower levels of English proficiency, possibly because they are recent entrants into the workforce and may not have had as much exposure to English in a professional context.

As employees gain more experience, particularly in the 1-5 years range, their TOEIC scores begin to spread more widely across different levels, with a noticeable increase in scores above 450. This trend indicates that English proficiency tends to improve with experience, likely due to greater exposure to English in the workplace and the necessity of using the language more frequently in their roles.

For employees with 6-10 years of experience, there is a more balanced distribution of TOEIC scores across all ranges, including a significant number of employees scoring in the higher brackets (451-550 and over 550). This suggests that by the time employees reach this stage in their careers,

many have developed strong English language skills, potentially through continuous learning and professional development.

Interestingly, for those with more than 10 years of experience, the TOEIC scores tend to plateau, with most employees scoring between 301-450 and fewer individuals achieving scores above 550. This pattern may indicate that long-term employees do not continue to improve their English proficiency as much as those earlier in their careers, possibly due to a decreased focus on language development as they advance in their roles.

Overall, the data highlights a general trend of improving English proficiency with increasing work experience, particularly within the first 10 years. However, it also suggests a potential plateau in language development for employees with more than 10 years of experience. This finding underscores the importance of providing ongoing language training and development opportunities throughout an employee’s career to ensure that proficiency continues to improve or is maintained at a high level.

Table 2: Variation of English proficiency by working time

		Count					Total
		TOEIC test results					
		Under 300	301-400	401-450	451-550	Over 550	
Working time	Less than 1 year	3	11	8	2	5	29
	1-5 years	10	35	19	21	12	97
	6-10 years	15	18	14	11	11	69
	More than 10 years	2	11	11	6	2	32
Total		30	75	52	40	30	227

4.1.3. Variation of English proficiency by types of company

The cross-tabulation of TOEIC test scores by company types (foreign vs. domestic) provides insights into the English language proficiency of employees working in different corporate environments (table 3).

Employees in Foreign Companies

Employees working in foreign companies generally exhibit higher TOEIC scores compared to their counterparts in domestic companies. A significant portion of employees in foreign companies scores in the higher TOEIC brackets, with 34 employees scoring between 451-550 and 21 employees scoring over 550. This suggests that employees in foreign companies tend to have stronger English language skills, likely because these companies may prioritize English proficiency due to their global operations and the need for effective communication in an international context.

Employees in Domestic Companies

In contrast, the majority of employees in domestic companies have lower TOEIC scores. Specifically, 72 employees score between 301- 400, and 26 score under 300. Only a small number of employees in domestic companies achieve scores above 451, with just 6 employees scoring between 451-550 and 9 scoring over 550. This pattern indicates that English proficiency is generally lower in domestic companies, possibly because these companies operate primarily in local markets where English may not be as essential.

Overall Trends

The data reveals a clear divide in English language proficiency between employees in foreign and domestic companies. Foreign companies tend to have employees with higher TOEIC scores,

suggesting a stronger emphasis on English skills, which could be due to the international nature of their business. On the other hand, domestic companies seem to have a larger proportion of employees with lower TOEIC scores, reflecting possibly less emphasis on English proficiency in their operations.

Table 3: Variation of English proficiency by types of company

		Count		Total
		Types of company		
		Foreign companies	Domestic companies	
TOEIC test	Under 300	4	26	30
	301-400	3	72	75
	401-450	20	32	52
	451-550	34	6	40
	Over 550	21	9	30
	Total	82	145	227

4.1.4. Variation of English proficiency by areas of working

The cross-tabulation data of TOEIC test scores by area (urban vs. rural) reveals distinct differences in English language proficiency between employees based on their geographical location (table 4).

Employees in Urban Areas

Employees residing in urban areas tend to have higher TOEIC scores compared to those in rural areas. A significant number of urban employees score in the higher TOEIC brackets, with 37 employees scoring between 451-550 and 21 employees scoring over 550. Additionally, a relatively smaller portion of urban employees scores in the lower ranges, with only 9 employees scoring under 300. This pattern suggests that employees in urban areas generally have better English language skills, which could be attributed to greater access to educational resources, exposure to English, and possibly more opportunities to use English in professional settings.

Employees in Rural Areas

Conversely, employees in rural areas exhibit lower TOEIC scores, with a substantial portion scoring in the lower brackets. Specifically, 21 employees in rural areas score under 300, and 31 score between 301- 400. Only a small number of rural employees achieve scores above 450, with just 3 scoring between 451-550 and 9 scoring over 550. This indicates that English proficiency is generally lower in rural areas, likely due to limited access to quality language education, fewer opportunities to use English in daily life, and possibly less emphasis on English proficiency in local job markets.

Overall Trends

The data shows a clear disparity in English language proficiency between urban and rural areas. Urban employees are more likely to have higher TOEIC scores, reflecting the advantages of living in areas with more resources and opportunities for language development. In contrast, rural employees tend to have lower proficiency levels, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals in these areas in accessing and developing English language skills.

Table 4: Variation of English proficiency by areas of working

Count		
Area of working		Total
Urban area	Rural area	

	Under 300	9	21	30
	301-400	44	31	75
TOEIC test	401-450	43	9	52
	451-550	37	3	40
	Over 550	21	9	30
Total		154	73	227

4.2. Challenges in Implementing English Language Training

The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted with SME owners, HR managers, and employees reveal several significant barriers to implementing effective English language training in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). One of the primary challenges identified was financial constraints. Many respondents highlighted the limited budgets available for training programs, with one HR manager noting, "We simply don't have the funds to invest in high-quality language training programs, especially when we need to prioritize other operational costs" (Respondent 3). This sentiment was echoed by several others who pointed out that the high cost of training often prevents SMEs from providing regular or comprehensive language training to their employees.

Time limitations also emerged as a major barrier to language training. Participants frequently mentioned the difficulty of finding time for training amidst the demands of daily business operations. An SME owner explained, "We are a small team, and everyone is already stretched thin with their work. It's challenging to allocate time for training without affecting productivity" (Respondent 7). Another respondent noted that seasonal peaks in workload further complicate scheduling, making it hard to maintain consistent training sessions throughout the year (Respondent 10). These challenges indicate that time management is a critical factor that needs to be addressed if language training is to be successfully integrated into SMEs.

Access to quality training programs was another common theme. Several respondents expressed concerns about the availability and quality of English language training in their areas, particularly in rural or less developed regions. One HR manager mentioned, "We struggle to find good training programs locally, and the ones available don't always meet our needs in terms of quality or relevance to our industry" (Respondent 5). This lack of access to effective training resources limits the ability of SMEs to improve their employees' language skills, further exacerbating the proficiency gap between employees in different regions or sectors.

Employee motivation and engagement in language training were also discussed extensively. While some employees are eager to improve their English skills, others lack the motivation, often due to the perception that English is not essential for their current roles. "Many of our employees don't see the immediate benefit of learning English, especially if their job doesn't require it daily," explained one HR manager (Respondent 9). This lack of motivation presents a significant challenge in ensuring consistent participation in training programs, despite the potential long-term benefits.

Finally, respondents suggested several potential solutions to these barriers. Many emphasized the need for external support, such as government-funded programs or industry partnerships, to alleviate the financial burden on SMEs. "If there were more affordable or subsidized training options, we could definitely encourage more of our employees to participate," suggested one SME owner (Respondent 2). Others recommended flexible scheduling and integrating training into regular work hours to address time constraints. Additionally, offering incentives, such as

certifications or career advancement opportunities linked to language proficiency, was suggested as a way to boost employee engagement (Respondent 8).

In conclusion, the findings from the interviews and focus groups highlight significant barriers to English language training in SMEs, including financial constraints, time limitations, and access to quality programs. However, the respondents also provided valuable insights into potential strategies to overcome these challenges, such as external support, flexible training schedules, and motivational incentives. Addressing these barriers will be crucial for improving language proficiency in SMEs and enabling them to compete more effectively in the global market.

4.3. Opportunities from Improved English Proficiency

The interviews and focus group discussions with SME owners, HR managers, and employees also highlighted several opportunities that could arise from improved English language proficiency within their organizations. A recurring theme was the potential for enhanced business competitiveness. Many respondents noted that higher English proficiency could enable their companies to engage more effectively in international markets. "If our employees were more fluent in English, we could explore business opportunities outside of our local market and engage with a broader range of clients," explained one SME owner (Respondent 2). This sentiment was echoed by another participant who emphasized that English proficiency could open doors to partnerships with foreign companies, thereby expanding business opportunities (Respondent 5).

Another significant opportunity identified was the improvement in internal and external communication. Several HR managers highlighted that better English skills would facilitate clearer and more effective communication within the company, particularly in firms where documentation and communication with stakeholders are conducted in English. "Improving our employees' English proficiency would reduce misunderstandings and errors in communication, especially when dealing with international clients or partners," one HR manager noted (Respondent 8). This improvement in communication was also seen as a way to enhance teamwork and collaboration among employees who may need to work on projects involving English-language materials or partners.

Moreover, respondents pointed out that enhanced English proficiency could lead to better employee retention and career advancement opportunities. Employees who develop strong language skills are more likely to feel confident in their roles and see clear pathways for career progression within the company. "Employees who are proficient in English are often better positioned for promotions and leadership roles, which can increase their job satisfaction and loyalty to the company," commented one HR manager (Respondent 3). This perspective was supported by employees who acknowledged that improving their English could lead to new job opportunities and a clearer career trajectory within the company (Respondent 6).

Finally, the discussions revealed that improved English proficiency could lead to greater innovation and adaptability within SMEs. Respondents suggested that employees with better language skills are more likely to access and understand global trends, research, and best practices, which can foster innovation. "With stronger English skills, our team could stay updated with the latest industry trends and apply new ideas more effectively," an SME owner mentioned (Respondent 1). This ability to innovate and adapt was seen as crucial for staying competitive in a rapidly changing global market.

In summary, the opportunities arising from improved English proficiency in SMEs are substantial. These include increased business competitiveness, improved communication, better employee retention and career advancement, and enhanced innovation. These benefits underscore the

importance of investing in language training, as they can significantly contribute to the long-term success and growth of SMEs.

4.4. Discussion

This study aimed to assess the current level of English language proficiency among employees in SMEs, identify the barriers to implementing English language training, and explore the opportunities that improved proficiency could offer. The research utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of TOEIC scores with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of both the statistical trends and the contextual factors influencing English language training in SMEs.

The quantitative findings reveal a broad range of English proficiency levels among SME employees, with a significant portion scoring in the lower ranges (301-400) and fewer employees reaching higher proficiency levels (over 550). This distribution highlights the challenge many SMEs face in ensuring their workforce is equipped with the necessary language skills to compete in global markets. The data also suggest that while employees in urban areas and foreign companies tend to have higher TOEIC scores, those in rural areas and domestic companies often lag behind, reflecting disparities in access to quality language education and training resources.

The qualitative data complement these findings by shedding light on the specific barriers SMEs encounter in providing effective language training. Financial constraints emerged as a major obstacle, with many SMEs unable to afford high-quality training programs. Time limitations were also frequently cited, as SMEs struggle to balance the demands of business operations with the need for continuous employee development. Additionally, the lack of access to quality training programs, particularly in rural areas, further exacerbates the proficiency gap. However, the interviews and focus groups also revealed significant opportunities that could arise from improved English proficiency. Enhanced business competitiveness, better communication, increased employee retention, and greater innovation were all identified as potential benefits, underscoring the strategic value of investing in language training.

4.5. Conclusion

The study concludes that while there are considerable challenges to improving English language proficiency within SMEs, the potential benefits make it a critical area of focus. The quantitative analysis highlights the need for targeted interventions to address the proficiency gaps, particularly in rural areas and domestic companies. The qualitative insights emphasize the importance of overcoming financial and time-related barriers to make language training more accessible and effective. Furthermore, the study suggests that improving English proficiency is not just a matter of individual employee development but a strategic necessity for SMEs looking to expand their market reach, enhance their operations, and foster innovation.

To address these challenges, SMEs may need to explore cost-effective training solutions, leverage external support, and integrate language training more seamlessly into their business operations. Policymakers and industry leaders could also play a crucial role by providing subsidies, creating partnerships, and promoting initiatives that support language training for SMEs. Ultimately, by enhancing English language proficiency, SMEs can unlock new opportunities for growth and success in an increasingly globalized economy.

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