NOVICE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF TAKING TOEIC PREPARATION CLASS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

Nurti Rahayu
English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: rahayu_nurti@upi.edu

Fuad Abdul Hamied
English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: fuadah@upi.edu

Didi Sukyadi
English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: dsukyadi@upi.edu

Fazri Nur Yusuf
English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: fazrinuryusuf@upi.edu

Abstract: This study aims to investigate how novice non-English department students in Indonesia describe their lived experiences of EFL learning in a TOEIC preparation class. The study included eighteen novice students from one vocational higher education in Jakarta who enrolled in a TOEIC preparation class using purposive sampling. Prior to the course, the participants took prediction tests, and their scores fell to the novice learners, and they were required to take a forty-hour preparation class. The participants have taken part in forty-hour TOEIC preparation classes. The primary source of data was semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to the findings, several themes were elaborated. The findings uncovered what students gained and learned from the class, their learning difficulties, their learning strategies, and their plan to improve their English. In this study, the themes were broken down into several sub-themes to better elaborate on the participant's lived experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences. The findings strongly suggest policymakers such as EFL teachers, program and curriculum developers, and other stakeholders pay more attention to the students' voices stating that EFL learning goes to a unique and complex process. Thus, successful English learning cannot be achieved unless their needs and voices are taken into consideration.
Keywords: *phenomenological case study; test preparation; TOEIC; vocational higher institution; washback.*

INTRODUCTION
Test preparation (TP) has sparked heated debate in the field of language testing and assessment. The term test preparation pertains to the activities that are performed to revisit the area of understanding or skill samples collected by a test (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons as cited in Knoch *et al*., 2020). In most educational practices, there are two types of preparation practices: preparation for general/scholastic tests and preparation for English language tests (O'Sullivan *et al*., 2021). English test preparation has been widely implemented in both formal and informal learning environments. This test preparation takes the form of various activities such as "cram school," later known as "shadow education," referring to any educational activities carried out outside of traditional schooling, and it gives students who participate an advantage over students who do not (O'Sullivan *et al.,* 2021). Students are becoming more aware of the importance of test preparation when taking a high-stakes tests like IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC. This is because the test results have serious consequences in their lives, such as university

selection, graduation requirements, career recruitment, and other future-related plans.

Test preparation is widely understood as a form of test washback, the impact of tests on teaching and learning (Saif *et al.*, 2019). Messick in Saif *et al.* (2019) defined TP as an "intervention" that aims to improve test scores and may or may not lead in learning. TP exerts advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, without any preparation, a candidate's performance may be unreasonably harmed by aspects of the testing procedure with which they are unfamiliar. In contrast, improper or overly narrowly focused preparation will either be ineffective in that it does nothing to improve language ability or risk artificially inflating the candidate's score for purposes unrelated to the skill the test is designed to measure (Ma & Cheng, 2018).

Dong (2021) expanded hypothesis stating that certain tests would exert different amount and types of washback for teachers and students. Thus, the washback effect of tests may have a different impact on different subgroups of teachers and students. In terms of test preparation, this program was claimed to be able to boost test-takers' scores without reliably improving their ability to do well on another English test (Hu & Trenkic, 2021).

Hughes as cited by Zou & Xu (2017) proposed a washback trichotomy model encompassing participants, process, and product in relation to this occurrence. Initial views and attitudes of participants regarding their teaching and learning tasks may be influenced by the type of a test. Then, these views and attitudes may influence what the participants do when performing their work (process), such as practicing the types of items that will be on the test, thereby affecting the learning outcomes and the result of that labor (Zou & Xu, 2017).

For the last five years, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate TP from various perspectives. In one study, TP is claimed to correlate with low quality of instruction (Blazar & Pollard, 2017). On the other hands, some studies explored how TP positively affect students' performances, such as listening performance (Winke & Lim, 2017), and score gains (Knoch *et al.*, 2020; Soler *et al.,* 2020).

Winke and Lim (2017) conducted an experimental study in which 63 students were divided into three groups and given the same listening practice tests. The first experimental group took four practice tests and was given explicit test-taking strategies instruction. The second group was given the same practice tests but no test-taking strategies. A third control group did not take practice tests but instead participated in conversation classes. Research findings reported that the test results were unaffected by the three types of instructions. Additionally, the finding inferred that the most effective use of test preparation appears to be familiarity with the format and types of test items, particularly those that are new or unfamiliar to the test taker. Test-taking anxiety was found to be inversely related to L2 listening test performance regardless of the type of instruction used (Winke & Lim, 2017).

When seeing from the learning performance, Knoch *et al.* (2020) reported that the effectiveness of various preparation techniques in relation to the participant score data is not strongly asserted. Out of other skills, TP has a more salient impact on speaking test, where the participants clearly stated specific methods such as speaking continuously without pausing and changing their voice quality and resulted in higher scores. As for reading, listening, and writing encountered fewer meaningful improvements, though some tasks with scores contributing to speaking and reading, such as the read-aloud task, appeared to benefit from the tricks that improved speaking scores (Knoch *et al.*, 2020). This finding is in line with another TP study in Columbian context, where TP was claimed to have modest impact on students' score gains. However, this minor effect could have a significant impact on students whose score is near to the passing grade (Soler *et al.*, 2020).

Research also revealed the negative impact of TP. TP can have a negative impact on students by restricting their English learning scope, forcing them to self-isolated learning, taking repeated tests, and purchasing predicted answers (Ma & Chong, 2022). Additionally, sellers of predicted answers are thought to be engaged in unethical practices since doing such test-taking strategies can help students achieve a score higher than their language proficiency may warrant (Hu & Trenkic, 2021). It is worth noting that students registered for TP mostly considered that attending preparation classes in a short amount of time, and using their materials will result in higher scores. At the same time, these actions may also prevent students from fully developing their English language proficiency (Hu & Trenkic, 2021).

For more than two decades, studies on test preparation mostly go around two points of view: teachers and students. Research reporting teachers' perspectives emphasizes differences in teaching preparation methods and activities (Wagner & Koch, 2021), teachers' beliefs and practices

(Gebril & Eid, 2017), and teachers' washback (Nguyen & Gu, 2020), and the effectiveness of test preparation; whether or not test preparation are able to raise students' test performance (Knoch *et al.*, 2020; Soler *et al.,* 2020).

In Indonesia, TP has been widely conducted by private tutoring course and college's language centers. The booming of TP is partly derived from the popularity of global English tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS. Some teacher education colleges require their student teachers to demonstrate proficiency before graduation, while others simply let their students exit the program despite the fact that they may not have met the proficiency standard to teach English in schools. For their graduation requirements, these universities typically use TOEFL as their preferred proficiency test. The typical benchmark score ranges from 450 to 525, though some prestigious universities may require a higher TOEFL score (Renandya *et al.,* 2018a). Similar policy has also been applied in some graduate degree in both public and private colleges. In addition to TOEFL, students in vocational education are also required to pass certain benchmark score as a graduation requirement. As a result, students with low English ability are greatly affected by this program (Azhari *et al.,* 2020).

Students registered for this TP to enhance their test score in accordance with the required passing grade, such as graduation requirement, scholarship application, promotion, and for college enrollment. Studies in this area mostly focused on variety of method as to enhance students' score gains. The methods range from blending learning (Komariah *et al.*, 2017), cooperative learning the enactment of Students Team Achievement Division (STAD) (Rionaldi & Saputra, 2019), low-cost videos (Asri *et al.*, 2022), and the implementation of TOEFL practicum class (Djamereng *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to the subject, other TP studies in Indonesia also investigated the teachers' and students' perspectives on the enactment of TP. Teachers were reported to encounter some challenges in TP courses. The problems range from students' high expectations on score gains, students' minimum effort, learning time constraints, teachers' experience, and big class size). To solve the problems, teachers need to implement teaching strategies (Wibowo, 2020. Those findings confirmed previous study on senior high schools teachers' challenges in teaching TP (Sari, 2019). Despite those obstacles in TP class the teachers encountered, they showed their highest approval on the introduction of TOEFL in senior high school to better prepare students' for the future careers through international English certification (Sari, 2019).

In addition to teachers' perspectives, several studies have investigated students' problem and strategies in doing the TOEFL test (Azhari *et al.*, 2022; Hampp *et al.*, 2021; Maulana *et al.*, 2022; Oroh *et al.*, 2021). Compared with TOEFL, studies on TOEIC are relatively fewer. Most studies in TOEIC were conducted in vocational high school context (Dari, 2021; Wijayanti *et al.*, 2022; Zahruni *et al.*, 2020). Satria & Zahraa (2018) investigated that students' internal and external factors do not affect students' achievement as seen from their score gain. Another study surveyed students' perception on online learning class toward their score gains (Wijayanti *et al.,* 2022). This study revealed that there was no positive correlation of the two variables. However, it was found that students' have positive perception on online learning class (Wijayanti *et al.*, 2022).

Although much of the literature has well elaborated the test preparation practices in varying contexts, most of these studies were quantitative in nature and sought the relationship among variables. Furthermore, the adoption of interviews and class observation serve as supplementary data to clarify the quantitative findings. Very little, if any, empirical research investigating the novice students' lived experiences of taking part in test preparation classes in a single study. In other words, novice students' experiences in this activity are not well-understood. All in all, the reported results on test impact on participants, processes, and products vary due to a number of affecting factors, and these phenomena need to be well-investigated from various perspectives, one of them from the experience of novice English learners.

Additionally, since 2020 the directorate of vocational education launched a program to boost vocational school students' (SMK) English competence by conducting TOEIC training for more than 75,000 students in grade XI and XII vocational school (Direktorat Pembinaan SMK, 2020). Having joined the training, students were required to take TOEIC test. This program is one of government effort to equip SMK students with English competency to win the global work competition. While English competency is crucial in all work employment, to our knowledge, there is no specific program from the government to provide English certification for vocational higher education (VHE) students. Based on the identified research gaps, the purpose of this study is to raise

the unheard voice of novice students' experiences who (have to) participate in the TOEIC TP class in VHE context.. From a theoretical standpoint, this study will provide a better understanding of how novice students' personal experiences in participating in class activities and how they perceive the benefit of the class in terms of improving their English performance, as evidenced by test scores. Understanding novice students' experience serves as the basis for enhancing the efficacy of TP classes which become crucial regarding the fact that more vocational higher institutions in Indonesia have adopted TOEIC score benchmark as one of graduation requirement (Rahayu, 2019),

METHOD

This study adopted phenomenology since it tries to understand the hidden meanings and essence of an experience together with how participants make sense of these experiences (Grbich in Demir & Qureshi, 2019). To this end, a phenomenological case study is adopted to understand subjective interpretations of the experiences (Miller *et al.*, 2018; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). In the study, novice students are regarded as the research subjects who have constructed meaning from their experiences of taking test preparation classes.

The study was carried out at a tourism vocational higher education institution in Jakarta's city center. The research site was chosen since this institution has long adopted English standardized test benchmark as a graduation requirement. This English exit policy is implemented by requiring students to achieve a certain benchmark score on the TOEIC test before registering for the thesis defense examination. To implement the policy, sophomore students must take a test prediction test with a minimum score of 400, and students who achieve below the standard must take a test preparation class for one semester at their own expense. The participants of the test preparation class are regarded as novice students due to their score gain in the prediction test upon acceptance into the college.

The authors adopted convenient purposive sampling to identify those participants of the study who experienced the phenomenon that was being investigated. Selection criteria were applied in that the participants belong to the test preparation class in the first year, and they agree to voluntary participate in them voluntarily. The study included eighteen (18) two male and sixteen (16) female students who took part in an English preparation class. The class was divided into twenty-four sessions, each lasting two hours, for a total of forty-eight hours. The first researcher was the test preparation class teacher. Students enrolled in the class took the TOEIC equivalent test prediction, with test scores ranging from 100 to 370, and are thus classified as having novice proficiency. Participation is entirely voluntary since, at the beginning of a course, the teacher-researcher explains the research objectives and asks if students are willing to participate. As many as 18 students (out of thirty-five) agreed to participate in the study.

Focus group and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore what was on the novice students' minds when they were in test preparation class. Focus group interviews were conducted with group discussion in which individuals offered their perspectives, listened to others' perspectives, and possibly refined their own perspectives in light of what they've heard. The interview has flexible questions or a mix of organized and unstructured inquiries. Usually, all respondents are asked for specific information. Thus, the interview is structured. They are also encouraged to explain their information in detail. In addition to interviews, class observation was conducted during the course. The teacher-researchers enable to observe students' behavior and later confirm it in the interviews. The interviews were conducted before the end of the course; due to the global pandemic, the classes were conducted online, and so were the interviews. The interviews were recorded online through the Zoom platform. To facilitate understanding, the interviews were conducted in Bahasa, and participants were free to respond either in Bahasa Indonesia or English.

First, the authors conducted pre-data analysis by transcribing the recorded data, reading and validating the data transcription, then converting the transcription into English, and the participants were given pseudonyms as "P1" for participants 1 through P18. Then, the final transcripts were read at least twice to achieve an intimate familiarity with the data. The data were analyzed for significant statements, invariant horizons, and recurring themes. The interviewees and their experiences under study were the units of analysis. Finally, thematic analysis was undertaken utilizing phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. Textual-structural descriptions clarified the phenomenon. Comparing participants' contexts and experiences revealed similarities and differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is structured according to the three primary themes that were uncovered by the data. The themes are (1) participants' experience of learning English, (2) participants' experience in the preparation class, and (3) participants' reflections on English learning. This theme is further elaborated in several sub-themes.

Theme 1. Experience in learning English

This theme elaborates on participants' experience of learning English and to be precise; it mostly covers their background experience of English learning. This theme is broken down into several sub-themes. They are (a) students' learning difficulties and (b) students' learning methods.

Students learning problems

English learning at secondary school i.e., senior and junior high school has directly or indirectly affected the participants' experience in this study. These experiences vary from person to person as they were from the varied region throughout the country. Although the country's English curriculum emphasizes the use of competency standards, the teaching methods implemented in these schools have not met the expectation. One of the factors derived from the teachers' difficulty in implementing the curriculum in the classroom so that the students are competent in their English.

The majority of participants thought that their low English proficiency was due to several factors, such as (1) linguistic factors, (2) personal factors, and (3) test factors. The linguistic factors were due to a lack of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Lacking in these areas resulted in some problems in understanding reading, listening, and other active skills such as speaking and writing. Most participants reported their inability to memorize the grammatical rules, such as tenses, parts of speech, and phrase construction. Memorization, in this case, is viewed as the key to mastering English and being unable to understand grammar worsens their English learning. P1 and P7, for example, are indicated in illustrative examples:

> What I find difficult is memorizing tenses. I find it difficult to distinguish tenses even though I've been studying since middle school but have a hard time remembering. Memorizing noun things, noun people, adverbs, and verbs also are not easy because I'm the type of person who easily forgets if I don't study it every day, but I am more able and interested in translating English to Indonesian than memorizing English

formulas (P7).

> In learning English, it is very difficult for me to learn and understand grammar, use the right words in sentences, and I have a hard time listening to a native speaker either because of the accent or what I don't know, but I understand Indonesian or local people speak or write English on social media (P1).

Participants explicitly agreed that they could not fully comprehend the mechanics of English, resulting in their inability to master the English skills. These resulted in some strategies, such as using the translation tool to facilitate them in understanding the passage. Additionally, personal factors add matters worse. Some participants reported their problems in time management for English learning. Due to several activities, they can not focus themselves on learning English, which even results in learning and test anxiety, such as the excerpt below:

> I find it difficult when I study English; for some reason, every time there is an English test, and I try to work on the questions, and I feel restless in the shadow of fear because I am afraid of getting a small score, and sometimes often find it difficult when working on questions (P5)

The excerpt evidenced how the test affected the students' feelings; students' fear of getting a low score and did not pass the benchmark. This fear of anxiety prohibited the participant from making progress. Furthermore, the test factors also present additional challenges, especially with the various distractors the test present and the test's limited duration.

Students learning method

Most participants share their informal digital learning of English (IDLE) through several media such as YouTube English channels, English learning websites, online language applications, and listening to music and watching movies or English vlogs. The participants reported the follow-up activities as taking notes of new expressions and difficult words and re-read and repeating the expressions to add fluency. Then, the difficult words are further consulted in the online dictionary. Besides IDLE, only a few participants performed the conventional ways of learning, such as taking notes in the class, doing some exercises, and watching the Zoom class recording for comprehension. It is also interesting to note that one participant reported conducting peer practice

and creating group work for English practice. The activities were conducted to enhance their vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading skills, as shown by the illustration below:

> In addition to taking a test preparation class, I also downloaded the Duolingo application on my cell phone, I was very enthusiastic about learning English in the application. I always take at least 30 minutes or more to fill out the quizzes in the application; I also learn tenses on YouTube, note important things in the tenses formula, improve listening skills by listening to listening test questions on YouTube, try to get used to speaking two languages or bilingually, increase my vocabulary every day, when my curiosity arises I often open Google translate to find out English, things around me, I often translate words that I just meet (P1)

> So far, the way I learn English is to find a partner to learn English together, I usually speak English with my friends who are also learning English via chat, if one of us says something wrong, of course, we correct each other. In addition, I also learn through playing games in English, and learning by watching western films with English and Indonesian subtitles. I also usually practice by learning to use English books or downloading applications such as Duolingo or Cake; I also download the Tandem app, which is an app that is useful for finding friends from abroad and talking to them. Besides that, I also created an English study group, and two of my friends will discuss the material that we will learn every week; we also try to speak English while chatting; even though we still lack vocab, we still speak with mixed speech. At home, sometimes I invite my father to speak in English. Every activity I do, if I find an English word that I don't know, I will immediately look up its meaning in the dictionary. I also took TOEIC lessons to help me learn English properly and was accompanied directly by an experienced TOEIC teacher (P11).

The pandemic, which turned most education into online learning, is contextualized with the adoption of IDLE. The participants spent most of their time online and engaged themselves in online activities by browsing media a lot. Participants' experiences with the English apps, channels, and websites signal the crucial role of IDLE to improve English learning.

Theme 2. Experience in a test preparation class
This section focuses on the perceived experience of participation in test preparation activities. The primary subthemes that emerged from the data were (a) lessons learned from the class, (b) favorite learning method, and (c) perceived learning outcome

Lesson learned from the class
Research participants shared their perceived experience of taking test preparation classes. The in-class experience ranged from (1) TOEIC knowledge, (2) learning strategies, and (3) test-preparation strategies. Most participants agreed that the class enabled them to understand about Test of English as a foreign language (TOEIC), what the test is for, its test format and scoring, and why the test is used as one of the graduation requirements in vocational higher education. This information is essential in that not all participants were familiar with the test, let alone the campus policy of using the English exit test. Having sufficient knowledge about the test, then participants also reported what they have gained in the test preparation class. First, they reported that the class aim is to provide a sufficient language foundation for the students to improve their English competency, as shown in the test score. To this end, the participants mentioned what they had learned from the class as the following illustrations:

> The new thing that I got was about TOEIC, such as basic knowledge, tips & tricks, strategies, calculating scores, and explanations of working on different questions. (P5)

> I learned many new words, improved my grammar, and learned how to pass the tests without wasting time by selecting the correct answer (P7)

> I learned about the test, as well as how to enhance my English proficiency by making use of several applications (P2)

Favorite learning method
As a rigorous class, the participants shared their favorite learning methods during the class. Most of them mentioned that they enjoy doing the drill practice in the form of a mini test. Doing the mini tests was interesting since they could see their score progress. After the test, there was a discussion to review the items so that participants can see why they could incorrectly answer the test items facilitated by the teacher. Here are some of the illustrations below:

> What I like most is the mini-test since I can see how far my English skills have progressed; the

explanation given after the test is also easy to understand and quite easy to digest. Moreover, this class introduced me to some useful apps, such as Duolingo, and YouTube channels for English learning. (P1).

I often ask things I don't understand to the teacher. Besides that, I enjoy learning from the basics; then every class is always recorded so that I can repeat the material outside class hours (P11).

Before this, I knew almost nothing about the TOEIC, let alone the test-taking strategy. The teacher was always there to help my friends and me. And this class is quite enjoyable. And, without putting us under any pressure, she encourages us to always learn in accordance with the basic objectives and standards. And it's obviously beneficial to us. (P12).

Overall, participants acknowledged that these types of learning situations provided them with valuable experiences as well as opportunities to learn new test-taking strategies. They could experiment with new applications and media. It was clear that in class and outside the class, learning activities increased participants' confidence and success in the classroom. P7 stated that he could see his friends' progress, and it motivated him to learn more.

Perceived learning outcome
Having participated in the class for twenty-four sessions, the participants also reflected on their perceived learning outcomes in the test preparation class, which were contextualized in varied forms, such as (1) increased mini test score, (2) increased motivation and confidence, and (3) changed beliefs about language learning. During the class, participants were exposed to exercises drilling in the form of mini tests of both listening and reading skills. The tests were administered with an online platform to enable them to see and record the score results for self-evaluation. At this stage, participants shared their progress as shown in the test results illustrated below:

I was surprised that my mini-test score increased and that there was an improvement as the test progressed, and I am happy about that (P15).

I felt that my listening skill improved. In the past, I actually couldn't listen in English, but when I entered the preparation class, I learned listening a lot (P8).

Some participants stated that doing lots of drilling was not their favorite; however, the more they did the practice tests, the more confident they were to select the answer among the distractors.

I hate doing exercises again and again, but later on, I felt like I knew the distractors, and that guided me to select the answers (P14).

This is a very different approach to learning. I did not take English seriously in school; now, I must master all of the fundamentals in order to develop my English skills, or I will never pass the score benchmark (P3).

The illustrations clearly showed how some of the participants expressed their progress, and that made them more confident with their ability as well as improved motivation. The preparation class has also made the participants change their beliefs about language learning. At the start of their course, research participants believed it was not easy to master pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. At the end of the language course, participants shared how they enjoyed the class and further described the class as "It turns out that learning here is very exciting, unlike learning English in class at school (P11), and "I love how we learn many test-taking strategies." (P9). Although the apparent shift of participants' learning interests still moves around the comprehension of form-focused rather than meaning-focused, this signals a good start to learning for novice learners.

Theme 3. Reflection on English learning
This theme reported the participants' responses when they were requested to reflect on several sub-themes, such as (1) preferred test-taking strategies and (2) perceived English improvement methods.

Preferred test-taking strategies
Participants reported varied test-taking strategies that they adopted to do the test. Most participants reported that they needed to work harder on reading since they scored lower in this section. In doing the reading tests, they shared to focus on the questions before scanning or to skim the answer in the passage, and they noted skipping the unfamiliar words in the passage to save time. Then, they learned how to identify the topic and main idea in the passages as stated by P7: "I would rather look at the question first, and then search the answer in the passage" In doing listening tests, the students would rather learn the distractors, and learn to enhance their pronunciation and intonation, and

identify the main ideas in listening as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Preferred test-taking strategies*

Listening section	Reading section
• Scanning & skimming for specific information	• Focus on the question
• Skip unfamiliar words	• Scanning & skimming for specific information
• Identify the topic and main idea	• Skip unfamiliar words
• Enhance pronunciation and intonation	• Identify the topic and main idea

(Source: participants' interviews)

It is interesting to note that most participants are not familiar with the test-taking strategies, as stated by P11. She shared that she never knew about what the test was, let alone the test-taking strategies. He further claimed that her score would have been better had she known about those strategies long before the test. It was a challenge for her to do the TOEIC test as it is new for her.

Perceived English improvement methods

At the end of the course, the participants reflected on ways to improve their English. This is significant to ensure the participants' long-term effort for English improvement after the class is over. Given the fact that the participants usually still struggled with the fundamentals of English, the majority stated their intention to learn form-focused English. Other participants also shared their affective strategies for improving their learning time and motivation, as stated by one participant below.

> If I study routinely and consistently, memorize more vocabulary, and review the lessons that have been taught to me, I believe I can improve my English competency (P14).

> Learning English requires a lot of practice. My English proficiency improves as I master the fundamentals and progress to the next level. Aside from learning to understand and apply in my life. For example, I speak English to those who are closest to me. Then learn how to use English apps or books (P11).

> I should always strive to improve my English skills. I believe that if you never try, you will never know. This is something I always do for myself in order to learn new things. You must persevere even if it is difficult at first. For example, there are some words that are difficult

to recognize when reading the news in English or listening to native speakers, but I'm sure you can. I also use the application to learn new skills, such as basic conversation (P12).

In general, the perceived English improvement methods cover improving form-focused English, meaning-focused English, and motivation and learning time. The methods depend on their perceived weaknesses in learning English. In addition to those strategies, some participants shared their expectation that in the near future, they would have a chance to have offline classes since they could not focus on online classes.

> I understand less in online classes, and it takes me a long time to catch the lesson due to connection problems. I find it very difficult to understand listening in online learning. Thus, I hope I can focus more on studying in offline classes. (P18).

In the last two decades, research on test preparation classes has primarily relied on quantitative measures of effectiveness and questionnaires about variable relationships. The lived stories of novice students in the current study, therefore, provide a qualitative perspective on this topic, yielding more rich, detailed, and contextualized data about their experiences with test preparation class within the context of preparing for the TOEIC test as an English exit test in a tourism vocational higher institution.

In this study, we revealed novice students' experiences and framed them in three themes that illustrate real-life stories about how they struggled to improve their English competence by enrolling in a test preparation class. The following themes were identified in particular (1) prior English experience, (2) experience in test preparation class, and (3) English learning reflection. The themes are further elaborated in sub-themes and key aspects, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. *Data visualization*

No	Themes	Sub-themes	Aspects
1	Experience in learning English	a) Learning problems	· Linguistic factors
			· Personal factors
			· Test factors
		b) Learning methods	· IDLE
			· Conventional learning
2	Experience	a) Lesson	·Test knowledge

	in a test preparation class	learned	
			·Learning strategies
			·Test-taking strategies
		b) Preferred learning method	· Drilling
			· Discussion
		c) Perceived learning outcome	·Increased score
			·Increased motivation and confidence
			·Change language learning beliefs
3	English learning reflections	a) Preferred test-taking strategies	·Reading test-taking strategies
			·Listening test-taking strategies
		b) Perceived English improvement methods	·Form-focused learning
			·Meaning-focused learning

This research uncovered several poignant aspects of the learning practices in the test preparation class in Indonesia. The test preparation is enacted as part of the institution's program to set English exit tests with TOEIC standards. The findings revealed that participants benefited, to some extent, from the test-preparation class they were involved with over a few months. Those benefits included the test knowledge together with the purpose of the language exit test policy, learning opportunities, and both pedagogical and content gains from the online classes. Along with their positive impacts, however, participants articulated how they could not make progress from the program, as seen from their English test scores. Lack of fundamental English from a previous level of education, limited study time, lack of test knowledge, lack of practice and motivation, and other connection issues undermined participants' enthusiasm, thus preventing them from achieving the desired outcomes. Participants' English backgrounds, which shaped their English learning and thus affected their competence, were also detrimental to the potential of the test preparation class. These observations, however, were not totally surprising. Previous research findings in Indonesia demonstrated the inadequacy of English education in secondary school (Renandya, 2018; Renandya *et al.*, 2018b; Zein *et al.*, 2020).

Amid the increasing importance of English both regionally and globally (Zein & Stroupe, 2017), low English language proficiency among undergraduate students has been one of the significant issues in education quality in Indonesia (English First, 2019). This issue is prevalent in developing countries with similar problems. Efforts have been made to overcome this problem, yet the result is not satisfying yet. Seeing to the global English proficiency survey, Indonesia still belongs to the low proficiency category (Renandya *et al.*, 2018b). While the country needs to prepare its workforce to win the global competition, English competency is seen as the gatekeeper of good future jobs. To this end, higher education adopted English exit tests to improve English teaching-learning at colleges. Test preparation class is enacted to prepare the students to pass the English exit test. Findings on participants' English learning experience strengthen the previous studies on English learning problems.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the global literature on test preparation as a form of test washback, especially in higher education contexts where students need to pass certain benchmark English test scores as one of the graduation requirements. The institution policy adds to the test's higher stake, which puts higher pressure on college students. Novice English learners have to work harder to keep up with their peers to pass the test. This situation put them in a dilemma when they had to struggle with English learning in test preparation classes. While students come from different English learning environments and deal with social and economic factors, being able to identify English learning experiences, along with test-taking strategies, serve as starting point to enable the students to improve their English competence, as reflected in their English test scores.

Despite its contribution, this study is not without a lack. The nature of qualitative research cannot justify the generalization of the research findings. However, the unique cases of the novice English learners' experience can add to the empirical database of how these beginner learners develop their learning strategies. Further research can investigate the learning and problem-solving strategies in detail with established theory. Additionally, novice learners' perspectives in learning could be taken into consideration when designing test preparation classes since curriculum

developers need to pay attention to the mostly unheard voice of novice learners. Taking these considerations to improve the program syllabus and teaching method can add to the program's effectiveness.

REFERENCES
Asri, A. N., Mubarok, F. U., & Imron, A. (2022). The implementation of low-cost educational videos to improve students' performance in TOEIC preparation test. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, *10*(2), 499–508.

Azhari, T., Sahputri, J., & Rasyimah. (2022). Analysis of student perceptions on the implementation of required TOEFL test before graduation. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Science, Political Science, and Humanities*, *648*(ICoSPOLHUM 2021), 125–130. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220302.019

Azhari, T., Sari, D. K., & Rasyimah, R. (2020). TOEFL requirement: Students' and lecturers' perspectives. *International Journal of Language Studies*, *14*(3), 67–84.

Blazar, D., & Pollard, C. (2017). Does test preparation mean low-quality instruction? *Educational Researcher*, *46*(8), 420–433. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17732753

Dari, A. L. W. (2021). *An analysis of the vocational high school students' problems in answering TOEIC reading and listening test* [Doctoral thesis, IAIN Bengkulu]. Repository IAIN Bengkulu.

Demir, K., & Qureshi, A. M. (2019). Pakistani science teachers' experiences of professional development: A phenomenological case study. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, *30*(8), 838–855. https://doi.org/10.1080/1046560X.2019.1607707

Direktorat Pembinaan SMK. (2020). *Pedoman pelaksanaan fasilitasi peningkatan kompetensi bahasa asing siswa SMK*. Direktorat Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Dirjen Vokasi Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.

Djamereng, J., Yusuf, F., & Nirwana. (2021). The implementation of TOEFL practicum class toward the result of students' TOEFL score in English and literature department. *Elstic-IJ*, *1*(2), 60–72.

Dong, M. (2021). Differential washback effects of a high-stakes test on students' English learning process: Evidence from a large-scale stratified survey in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1918057

English First. (2019). *English first: English proficiency Index 2019*. EF. www.ef.com/epiwww.ef.com/epiwww.efset.org%0Awww.ef.com/epi

Gebril, A., & Eid, M. (2017). Test preparation beliefs and practices in a high-stakes context: A teacher's perspective. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *14*(4), 360–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2017.1353607

Hampp, P. L., Kumayas, T. A., & Lengkoan, F. (2021). Synthesizing grammar and structure problems faced by Indonesian TOEFL participants. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Undiksha*, *9*(1), 64. https://doi.org/10.23887/jpbi.v9i1.33811

Hu, R., & Trenkic, D. (2021). The effects of coaching and repeated test-taking on Chinese candidates' IELTS scores, their English proficiency, and subsequent academic achievement. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *24*(10), 1486–1501. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1691498

Knoch, U., Huisman, A., Elder, C., Kong, X., & McKenna, A. (2020). Drawing on repeat test takers to study test preparation practices and their links to score gains. *Language Testing*, *37*(4), 550–572. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532220927407

Komariah, E., Hidayat, M., & Nurlaili. (2017). Improving students' TOEFL score through blended learning: A pilot study in teachers training and education faculty, Unsyiah. *Proceedings of the 1st National Conference on Teachers' Professional Development*, 280–288.

Ma, H., & Chong, S. W. (2022). Predictability of IELTS in a high-stakes context: A mixed methods study of Chinese students' perspectives on test preparation. *Language Testing in Asia*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-021-00152-3

Ma, J., & Cheng, L. (2018). Preparing students to take tests. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0321.

Maulana, R., Irwan, I., Hanum, M. C., Mujiburrahman, M., & Lidiana, L. (2022). The effectiveness of TOEFL app for final-year students of Marine and Fisheries Faculty Universitas Syiah Kuala, Indonesia. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *339*, 06005. https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202233906005

Miller, R. M., Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2018). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: A contemporary qualitative approach. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *57*(4), 240–254. https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12114

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, *8*(2), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2

Nguyen, H., & Gu, Y. (2020). Impact of TOEIC

listening and reading as a university exit test in Vietnam. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *17*(2), 147–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2020.1722672

Oroh, E. Z., Giroth, P. S., & Mamentu, A. C. (2021). TOEFL takers in Indonesia: Purpose, strategy, problem and expectation (A systematic review). *Virtual International Conference on English Language Teaching 2021*, 63–78. http://www.ufrgs.br/actavet/31-1/artigo552.pdf

Rahayu, N. (2019). Students ' perceptions on the application of standardized English language proficiency test as graduation requirement in tourism higher education in Indonesia (A case study at Trisakti School of Tourism). *Tourism Research Journal*, *3*(2), 153–166.

Renandya, W. A. (2018). English language proficiency in Indonesia: Issues and prospects. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, *15*(3), 618–629. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2018.15.3.4.618

Renandya, W. A., Hamied, F. A., & Nurkamto, J. (2018). English language proficiency in Indonesia: Issues and prospects. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, *15*(3), 6118–6629. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2022.19.1.10.163

Rionaldi, & Saputra, B. (2019). Improving students' TOEFL-like score through Student Team Achievement Division (STAD). *INOVISH Journal*, *4*(1), 38–47.

Saif, S., Ma, J., May, L., & Cheng, L. (2019). Complexity of test preparation across three contexts: Case studies from Australia, Iran and China. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, *28*(3), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2019.1700211

Sari, M. (2019). *English language teachers' self-reported perceptions on TOEFL preparation program in senior high school* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Satria, A., & Zahraa, S. A. (2018). The influence of internal factors and external factors toward TOEIC passing grades in TOEIC intensive course for final year students. *CelSciTech-UMRI 2018*, 20–24.

Soler, S. C. G., Nisperuza, G. L. B., & Idárraga, P. H. (2020). Test preparation and students' performance: The case of the Colombian high school exit exam. *Cuadernos de Economia (Colombia)*, *39*(79), 31–72.

https://doi.org/10.15446/cuad.econ.v39n79.77106

Sukyadi, D., Spolsky, B., & Sung, K. (2015). The teaching of English at secondary schools in Indonesia. In *Secondary School English education in Asia.* Taylor & Francis.

Wagner, I., & Koch, U. (2021). Differences in teachers' test preparation methods depending on their functional perception and acceptance of low-stakes performance testing. *Unterrichtswissenschaft*, *49*(3), 373–394. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42010-021-00096-w

Wibowo, A. H. (2020). The lecturers ' challenges and strategies to teach TOEFL preparation in the college for Qur ' an study and science Al-Ishlah, Sendangagung, Paciran Lamongan. *Lintang Songo: Jurnal Pendidikan*, *3*(1), 7–17. https://journal.unusida.ac.id/index.php/jls/article/download/212/194

Wijayanti, P. R., Suwartono, T., & Kusuma, L. (2022). Perception of vocational school students towards online learning and their TOEIC scores. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Studies*, *4*(1), 35-41. https://doi.org/10.29103/ijevs.v4i1.5734

Winke, P., & Lim, H. (2017). The effects of test preparation on second-language listening test performance. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *14*(4), 380–397. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2017.1399396

Zahruni, N. A., Fahmi, F., & Pratolo, B. W. (2020). The challenges of taking TOEIC test and how to overcome: Perception of Indonesian vocational students. *Ethical Lingua: Journal of Language Teaching and Literature*, *7*(1), 82–91. https://doi.org/10.30605/25409190.167

Zein, S., & Stroupe, R. (2017). English and language-in-education policy in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. *Asian Englishes*, *19*(3), 193–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2017.1389061

Zein, S., Sukyadi, D., Hamied, F. A., & Lengkanawati, N. S. (2020). English language education in Indonesia: A review of research (2011-2019). *Language Teaching*, *53*(July), 491–523. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000208

Zou, S., & Xu, Q. (2017). A washback study of the test for English Majors for Grade Eight (TEM8) in China—From the perspective of university program administrators. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *14*(2), 140–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2016.1235170