

MAXIMIZING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY THROUGH SHORT-TERM INTENSIVE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of a short-term intensive English course designed to improve English Proficiency Test (EPT) scores among postgraduate students at Universitas Islam Kadiri (UNISKA) Kediri. EPT at UNISKA mirrors the TOEFL structure and functions as a critical requirement for postgraduate academic standards. However, many students struggle to meet the required scores due to limited time and lack of targeted instruction. Drawing on theories of motivation (Goal Setting Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and Behavioural Goal Setting Theory) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, this research implements a five-session course focusing on listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The study uses a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design with 70 postgraduate participants. Findings show a significant improvement in students' EPT scores after completing the course. The results highlight the potential of well-structured, short-term interventions in enhancing academic English proficiency in a time-efficient manner, particularly when tailored to learners' needs and supported by motivational strategies. This study offers practical insights for higher education institutions aiming to support postgraduate students in meeting English language proficiency standards.

Keywords: English proficiency; English Proficiency Test (EPT) ; postgraduate students; short-term intensive course; TOEFL preparation

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency has been made a top prerequisite for postgraduate students in Indonesia, especially at Universitas Islam Kadiri (UNISKA) Kediri. This is where one's mastery of academic English is assessed through the English Proficiency Test (EPT), a standardized exam quite similar to TOEFL. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) — an international standard measurement test of the knowledge of the English language by non-native speakers, mainly for use in academics (Elmes & Kunishige, 2025; Fitria, 2021; and Maharani & Putro, 2021). According to Dalimunte et al. (2025), TOEFL examines language skills that are tailored to the academic and professional fields. These fields are packaged and divided into sections. TOEFL test usually consists of three sections with 140 questions. TOEFL includes three aspects, namely (1) Listening Comprehension, (2) Structure and Written Expression, (3) Reading Comprehension. The TOEFL test always starts with Listening Comprehension consisting of Part A, B, and C, then followed by

Structure and Written Expression consisting of Part A and B, and the last is Reading Comprehension (Fitria, 2022). Many students take TOEFL preparation courses not only to fulfill graduation requirements but also as part of their efforts to earn scholarships (Putri & Syarif, 2021). In response to this need, UNISKA provides TOEFL EPT preparation learning that adapts the local format of TOEFL so that the EPT used at UNISKA reflects this structure to evaluate students' readiness to face the demands of academic English.

The English Proficiency Test (EPT) and the instructional support are conducted and facilitated by UNISKA Kediri Language Center (UKLC) that has a central role in equipping postgraduate students with adequate English proficiency to fulfill academic standard requirements of the institution. The TOEFL EPT (English Proficiency Test) is a form of language assessment designed to meet specific operational needs within educational, social, and policy contexts by evaluating both the construct being measured ("what") and the method of assessment ("how"), while also considering the historical, ideological, and societal implications and consequences of language testing practices (Shohamy, 2008; Brooks, 2008 as cited by Darul Ihsan, 2023). As a committed arm of the university, UKLC has been entrusted not only with administering the EPT but also designing prep programs, conducting language workshops, and offering related consultative services to help students meet English Language Proficiency standards.

Still, large numbers of postgraduate students fall short of meeting the EPT score requirement. This inadequacy can be traced back to several interlinked factors; the most prominent one is that they do not have access to focused and sustained English instruction that orients them on the test format and requirements. Most of these students have heavy coursework and research obligations; they have little time outside academic work to engage in long-term or extra-English training. Existing instructional programs may not address components that relate to the linguistic abilities tested by TOEFL-like EPT; for instance, academic listening, reading for inference, and grammatical accuracy in formal writing. A strategic, effective, and time-efficient pedagogical intervention that fills these gaps and improves student outcomes on the TOEFL EPT is therefore needed. Such an intervention in the form of a targeted short-term intensive English course could be offered by institutions like UNISKA as practical solutions within students' limited time that directly addresses their learning needs in preparation for high-stakes English testing.

Thus, this clearly indicates that a TOEFL test preparation program is highly necessary to improve participants' scores in the actual TOEFL exam (Maharani & Putro, 2021). This statement is supported by Ma & Cheng (2016), who assert that taking a test preparation course is the most time-

efficient method for preparing for the TOEFL test. Therefore, this study proposes such a short-term intensive English course for UNISKA postgraduate students consisting of five sessions beginning with a pre-test followed by three focused instructional meetings covering the core TOEFL skills: listening, structure and written expression, and reading; then concluding with a post-test. This model draws inspiration from short-term study abroad programs, which have demonstrated significant gains in language proficiency and intercultural competence within brief timeframes.

Short-term intensive English programs have been increasingly recognized for their potential benefits despite their limited duration. McNair et al. (2020) observed that intensive English programs lasting between one to eight weeks provide valuable linguistic and socio-cultural experiences, even when compared to longer semester-long courses. Supporting this, Gaia (2015) found that students who participated in two- to three-week study abroad programs improved their cultural awareness and desire to interact with people from different backgrounds, while Llanes & Muñoz (2009) documented significant gains in speaking fluency and listening comprehension among Catalan/Spanish learners of English after three- to four-week immersion programs. Additionally, Hassal (2013) reported pragmatic improvements in language use occurring within just the first two weeks of a seven-week program. These findings are reinforced by Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014), who highlighted the crucial role of social networks formed during study abroad experiences in facilitating language learning, although the formation of such networks can be challenging, especially in short-term contexts (Isabelli-García, 2006 and Tanaka, 2007). While challenges remain, the evidence suggests that well-structured short-term programs can effectively foster linguistic development and intercultural competence in relatively brief periods. Humphreys (2020) also found that short-term exchange experiences can lead to significant developments in intercultural awareness, particularly when participants engage in multilingual and multicultural contexts that reflect the realities of English as a lingua franca. These advantages highlight why short-term intensive programs are increasingly valued not only for their impact on language skills and cultural understanding but also for their accessibility and targeted approach to learning.

Short-term intensive programs have also been recognized for their practical benefits, including affordability, flexibility, and focused pedagogy. These brief programs, typically lasting eight weeks or less, are less intimidating than longer semester- or year-long study abroad experiences, allowing students to “dip their toes into international waters” without the risk of being overwhelmed by cultural difference, making them a great entry point to international education (Kim et al., 2022). Such compact programs are especially attractive because they are often less

expensive and can be scheduled during breaks without disrupting academic progress, providing students with flexible options to gain global exposure (Grajales-Díaz, 2025). Ilqar (2025) and Douglas (2025) emphasized the effectiveness of well-designed immersion programs in boosting language proficiency even within an eight-week span, and Krantz (2024) highlighted how faculty-led, focused courses can facilitate transformational language learning by concentrating on essential skills. However, Serrano et al. (2016) caution that the success of these short-term programs depends heavily on thoughtful program design and the availability of meaningful social interaction opportunities, as many participants tend to avoid cultural engagement and retreat to familiar peer groups, limiting their growth (Vande Berg, 2007 and Chwialkowska, 2020). To maximize benefits, program leaders need to carefully balance students' comfort zones with sufficient challenge to foster personal transformation without causing overwhelm, by providing pre-departure orientation, in-country mentoring, and structured reflection activities that encourage cultural engagement (Prouty et al., 2007 and Santora & Major, 2012). Furthermore, the growing participation of community colleges in study abroad reflects an increasing institutional focus on affordability and accessibility, with consortia and partnerships creating diverse, practical short-term programs that prepare students for global citizenship while supporting their academic and financial constraints (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020 and Northern Virginia Community College, 2025). Taken together, these insights underscore the potential of short-term intensive programs to offer accessible, flexible, and impactful international learning experiences when thoughtfully designed and supported.

In the ever-evolving landscape of English language learning, short-term intensive courses have emerged as a practical and targeted approach for enhancing learners' proficiency in a limited time frame. However, the success of such programs does not solely rest on curriculum design or instructional methods; it is also significantly influenced by learners' motivation and goal orientation. To understand and maximize this potential, it is essential to consider several key motivation-related theories that explain how goals influence learning behavior and outcomes. One of the foundational frameworks is Goal Setting Theory (GST) developed by Locke & Latham (2006), which posits that a goal acts as a motivational force that directs individuals' behaviors toward a desired standard of performance. According to GST, goals that are specific, challenging, and time-bound enhance learners' self-regulation, persistence, and commitment (Cheng, 2023). Within the context of short-term intensive English programs, the clearly defined time limit and proficiency objectives align closely with the principle of GST. In parallel, Achievement Goal

Theory (AGT), rooted in a social-cognitive framework (Meece et al., 2006 and Maehr & Zusho, 2009), emphasizes the learner's purpose in engaging with a task—either mastery or performance-oriented—both of which have implications for learners' engagement and emotional response. Furthermore, Behavioural Goal Setting Theory (BGST) introduced by Rachmad (2022) underscores the behavioural aspects of goal achievement by promoting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals and ongoing self-monitoring, which are particularly beneficial in short, intensive learning contexts. These three theories collectively support the design of this study's intervention by aligning motivational principles with time-sensitive instructional delivery.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in research concerning short-term, skill-focused English courses designed explicitly for TOEFL preparation among Indonesian postgraduate students. Most previous studies examine longer-term immersion abroad or undergraduate cohorts, leaving an underexplored niche for intensive, localized courses targeting TOEFL EPT enhancement in a compressed format.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Molnar, 2025), which postulates that effective learning results from a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This course's design—emphasizing intensive skill practice and immediate application—is intended to optimize this learning cycle within a limited timeframe, maximizing proficiency gains.

Moreover, understanding the TOEFL test structure is critical. TOEFL assesses three fundamental skills: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension (Stirling, 2017). Learners frequently encounter difficulties in listening, including unfamiliar vocabulary, diverse accents, and implied meaning comprehension (Putri & Syarif, 2021). By targeting these specific areas through focused instruction, the short-term intensive course addresses key learner challenges directly.

This study employs a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design to investigate the effectiveness of the short-term intensive course in improving TOEFL EPT scores for UNISKA postgraduate students. By adapting the best practices of global short-term study abroad models into a domestic, academic context—and with program implementation by the UNISKA Kediri Language Center (UKLC)—this research aims to offer an innovative, time-efficient instructional approach to elevate English proficiency and academic success among Indonesian graduate learners.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative method using a pre-experimental approach, specifically the one-group pretest-post-test design as outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018). In this design, a single group of participants is tested before and after receiving a treatment to examine any changes in outcomes. The design is symbolized as $O_1 - X - O_2$, where O_1 represents the pretest (initial TOEFL-like EPT score), X is the treatment (a short-term intensive English training), and O_2 is the posttest (final EPT score after the training). This design was chosen to assess the effectiveness of the intensive English course in improving students' English proficiency.

The participants in this study were 21 postgraduate students from Universitas Islam Kediri (UNISKA) Kediri, selected from a total population of 70 students enrolled in the academic year 2024/2025. These students came from three study programs: Law, Agribusiness, and Management. A purposive sampling technique was applied, targeting students who had taken the university's institutional TOEFL-like English Proficiency Test (EPT), organized by the UNISKA Kediri Language Center (UKLC), and had not yet achieved the minimum required score for graduation. All selected students voluntarily joined the short-term intensive English course designed to help improve their test performance.

The main instrument used in this study was a standardized TOEFL-like English Proficiency Test consisting of three sections: Listening Comprehension (50 items), Structure and Written Expression (40 items), and Reading Comprehension (50 items). The test was administered twice—once before the course (pretest) and once after (posttest)—using the same format and level of difficulty. The test was validated and quality-assured by the UKLC assessment team and followed the TOEFL ITP format.

The training was conducted over five sessions within two weeks. The first session was the pretest, followed by three focused sessions on listening, structure, and reading comprehension respectively, and concluded with the posttest in the fifth session. Each session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and included guided practice, interactive tasks, and direct feedback from the instructor. The training content was tailored to each skill area and aimed to simulate real TOEFL test conditions.

Data collected from pretest and posttest scores were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to observe trends in performance. Furthermore, a paired sample t-test was conducted using SPSS version 25 to determine whether the differences in scores before and

after the training were statistically significant. This analysis was crucial to evaluate the impact of the short-term intensive English course on students' EPT performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

RESULT

Paired Sample Statistics

The results of the paired samples t-test were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a short-term intensive English course in improving participants' TOEFL scores. The test compared the pretest and posttest TOEFL scores of 70 participants before and after completing the program.

Table 1.
Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PRETEST	436.69	70	98.500	11.773
	POSTTEST	505.09	70	91.449	10.930

As shown in the Paired Samples Statistics table, the mean score on the pretest was 436.69 (SD = 98.50), while the mean score on the posttest increased to 505.09 (SD = 91.45). This indicates an average score increase of 68.40 points, suggesting a considerable improvement in English proficiency after attending the course.

Paired Samples Test

After checking the correlation between the two related scores, the Paired Samples Test table below shows whether there is a significant difference between their means.

Table 3.
Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PRETEST - POSTTEST	-68.400	112.237	13.415	-95.162	-41.638	-5.099	69	.000

Further statistical analysis using the Paired Samples Test showed that the difference in scores between the pretest and posttest was statistically significant, with $t(69) = -5.099$, $p < .001$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -95.162 to -41.638, which does not include zero, further confirming the significant improvement. The negative mean difference value (-68.400) reflects that the posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores.

DISCUSSION

The present study tested the following hypotheses:

- Null Hypothesis (H_0) : There is no significant difference in English proficiency scores before and after participating in the short-term intensive course.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H_a) : There is a significant increase in English proficiency scores after participating in the short-term intensive course.

In the conclusion, the results of the paired samples t-test strongly support the alternative hypothesis, demonstrating the effectiveness of the short-term intensive English course offered by the UNISKA Kediri Language Center (UKLC) in improving participants' performance on the TOEFL-like English Proficiency Test (EPT). This improvement is substantial and confirms that even a brief, focused pedagogical intervention can yield meaningful gains in English language proficiency, particularly when the program is structured around the core components of the TOEFL exam. Moreover, this outcome aligns with prior research which emphasizes that TOEFL preparation programs, especially those that target specific language skills tested in the exam—listening, structure, and reading—can lead to measurable improvements (Fitria, 2021; Maharani & Putro, 2021). It also reinforces the argument made by Ma & Cheng (2016) that such programs are among the most time-efficient and impactful strategies for TOEFL readiness.

The findings support the growing body of evidence in favour of short-term intensive programs as practical and effective tools for language development (McNair et al., 2020; Gaia, 2015). Despite their limited duration, these programs can produce significant improvements in listening comprehension, structural accuracy, and reading skills when implemented with clear learning objectives and targeted instruction. This result is particularly relevant in the context of postgraduate education in Indonesia, where English proficiency is both a prerequisite and a challenge for many students. As emphasized by Shohamy (2008) and Darul Ihsan (2023), standardized language assessments like the EPT must be matched with equally strategic

instructional responses—an imperative that UKLC's short-term course seems to have met effectively.

Furthermore, the structure and time-bound nature of the program resonate with Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 2006), which emphasizes that specific and challenging goals enhance motivation and performance. Participants likely responded positively to the clarity of the program's aim—to improve TOEFL scores in a short period—and this goal-directed environment may have stimulated greater engagement and effort. Similarly, Achievement Goal Theory (Meece et al., 2006) helps explain the motivational dynamics at play: students might have been driven by mastery goals (improving language skills) or performance goals (achieving the EPT score threshold), both of which can result in positive outcomes when supported by effective instruction.

Moreover, the course reflects principles from Behavioural Goal Setting Theory (Rachmad, 2022), as it offered SMART learning goals: specific (focused on TOEFL sections), measurable (via pre/post-test scores), achievable (delivered through structured sessions), relevant (linked to academic requirements), and time-bound (completed within five sessions). This design appears to have positively impacted learner behaviour, with quantifiable results to support its efficacy.

Despite its success, the moderate correlation between pretest and post-test scores also suggests that external factors—such as student motivation, attendance, and prior exposure to English—may have influenced individual outcomes. As noted by Serrano et al. (2016) and Vande Berg (2007), the impact of short-term programs often depends on how well they are implemented and whether they include elements like interaction, reflection, and guided support. While this study did not include qualitative data on learner experiences, future research may benefit from incorporating these elements to better understand which components of short-term instruction are most impactful.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that a well-structured short-term intensive English course can serve as an effective intervention for improving TOEFL scores among postgraduate students. This has strong implications for institutions like UNISKA Kediri, where many students must meet English proficiency benchmarks within a limited timeframe. By offering intensive, goal-oriented instruction that targets the key components of the TOEFL test, language centers can play a pivotal role in supporting student success and fulfilling institutional language policy mandates.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that short-term intensive English courses can effectively maximize learners' English proficiency, particularly when the instruction is structured, goal-driven, and aligned with the specific demands of standardized assessments such as the TOEFL. The significant improvement in participants' posttest scores underscores the potential of such time-bound programs to produce measurable language gains within a limited duration. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how strategic pedagogical design—rooted in motivational theories and focused on targeted language skills—can enhance the effectiveness of short-term interventions. For institutions like UNISKA Kediri, where postgraduate students often face pressing proficiency requirements, short-term intensive courses present a viable and impactful solution to bridge skill gaps and support academic advancement.

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