



Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Diagnostic Tests in English Language Learning: A Case Study at Vocational High School 1 Limboto

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ABSTRACT

This study explores students' and teachers' perceptions of diagnostic tests in English language learning at Vocational High School 1 Limboto, aiming to understand their roles, benefits, and implementation challenges within the Merdeka Curriculum context. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis conducted between March–May 2025. Findings reveal that teachers routinely administer diagnostic tests at the beginning of each semester to map students' initial abilities—particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and reading—and possess a strong conceptual understanding of diagnostic assessments as tools for identifying strengths and weaknesses, grouping learners, and designing differentiated instruction. Students perceive these tests as valuable reflective tools that enhance awareness of their learning needs and support focused skill development. Implementation is effective in preparation and administration stages but suboptimal in follow-up, as grouping and remedial actions remain informal. Supporting factors include teachers' experience, clear planning, and positive classroom environments, while constraints involve limited time and institutional support. The study contributes to the literature by contextualizing diagnostic assessment in vocational education, highlighting the gap between understanding and practice, and emphasizing the need for systematic follow-up strategies to fully leverage assessment results in improving learning outcomes.

Keywords: diagnostic test, perception, English learning, vocational education, formative assessment

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, diagnostic tests have become an important concern in the world of education, particularly in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Diagnostic tests serve to identify students' initial abilities, strengths, and weaknesses before the learning process begins (Shehzadi et al., 2021). This function has become very strategic in the modern era of education, which emphasizes student-centered learning and differentiated learning, as emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. By knowing the initial profile of students, teachers can design learning strategies that suit the individual needs of learners (Brookhart & McMillan, 2019). However, despite its great potential, the

implementation of diagnostic assessments in the field still faces various challenges, ranging from teachers' limited understanding of the function of these assessments to students' negative perceptions of them as an additional burden.

A literature review shows that diagnostic assessment plays a central role in ensuring the effectiveness of learning. According to (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007), effective assessment is assessment that is able to provide feedback to improve learning (assessment for learning), not merely measure learning outcomes. In the context of English language learning, research by (Mohammed et al., 2023) confirms that well-designed diagnostic assessments can help teachers identify specific skills such as lexicogrammatical, inference, skimming, and scanning, so that teaching strategies can be focused on areas that need strengthening. Thus, diagnostic assessments serve as an initial mapping tool that enables teachers to carry out targeted pedagogical interventions.

In addition to technical aspects, teachers' and students' perceptions of diagnostic assessments are key factors in their success. Positive perceptions can increase motivation, participation, and the use of assessment results to improve learning. Conversely, negative perceptions can hinder the implementation of assessments and reduce their effectiveness (Nguyen & Truong, 2021). (Menggo & Gunas, 2022) emphasize that positive attitudes toward performance-based assessments, including diagnostic assessments, correlate with increased student participation and skills. However, most studies still focus on the general academic context, not on vocational schools, even though the more heterogeneous and skill-oriented characteristics of vocational students require more adaptive and contextual assessments.

In addition, diagnostic tests are in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes customized and student-centered learning (Anggreana, Ginanto, Felicia, Andiarti, Herutami, Alhapip, Iswoyo, hartini, 2022). In this curriculum, teachers are required to identify students' readiness and learning profiles at the beginning of the semester to design adaptive learning strategies. Previous studies have also proven that diagnostic assessments can be the basis for implementing differentiated learning effectively (Wardhani, 2023). However, research in the context of vocational education is still limited, even though vocational students often have diverse language abilities and contextual learning objectives oriented towards workplace competencies (Rafi & Pourdana, 2023). Therefore, understanding how students and teachers perceive the role and benefits of diagnostic tests is crucial to ensure that assessments are not only conducted technically but also interpreted meaningfully and utilized optimally in the learning process. This highlights the importance of exploring the cognitive and affective dimensions of diagnostic assessment, as teacher and student perceptions play a decisive role in transforming assessment results into effective pedagogical actions (Farhady & Selcuk, 2022).

From an implementation perspective, a number of studies have developed valid and reliable diagnostic assessment models (Khamboonruang, 2020). These models highlight the importance of systematic stages, starting from planning, administration, analysis of results, to follow-up in the form of remedial teaching. However, the social meaning aspect of diagnostic assessment, such as how teachers and students interpret its functions and benefits, has not been studied in depth. In fact, literature such as (Fernandes et al., 2025) shows that teachers' perceptions act as a cognitive filter in implementing assessment policies. In other words, without proper understanding and acceptance from the actors in the field, even ideally designed assessments will not function optimally.

This gap highlights the need for studies that integrate technical dimensions and user perceptions in specific contexts, such as vocational high schools. In vocational high schools environments, students have diverse language abilities and pragmatic learning

goals—therefore, diagnostic assessments have the potential to play an important role in helping teachers tailor learning to student profiles. However, to date, there has been little research that simultaneously analyzes how teachers and students interpret diagnostic assessments, how they use them in learning practices, and what factors influence their success in vocational contexts.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze students' and teachers' perceptions of the use of diagnostic tests in English language learning in vocational schools, as well as to identify the factors that support and hinder their implementation. The main questions to be answered are:

1. How do students perceive the role and benefits of diagnostic tests in their English learning process?
2. How do teachers understand the function, practice, and challenges of implementing diagnostic tests in English classes?
3. What factors support or hinder the implementation of diagnostic tests based on the experiences of students and teachers?

This study argues that positive perceptions and a strong understanding among students and teachers will increase the effectiveness of diagnostic assessment. Correlationally, the better teachers' understanding of the function of diagnostic assessment and the higher students' awareness of its benefits, the greater the impact on learning motivation, learning planning, and learning outcomes. Conversely, negative perceptions can result in assessments becoming mere formalities without any real contribution to learning. Therefore, this study is not only academically important in strengthening the literature on formative assessment and educational perceptions, but also practically significant in providing recommendations for teachers, schools, and policymakers in optimizing the role of diagnostic tests in vocational schools

METHOD

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the phenomenon or case of “Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Diagnostic Tests in English Language Learning,” which is a prominent phenomenon in the world of English language learning. This case was chosen because it is considered a very important issue and has a broad impact on the field of learning assessment, especially in the development of English subject assessments. This phenomenon influences test design, learning strategy determination, and evaluation policies implemented in schools. The case selection process was carried out by comparing various phenomena related to diagnostic tests that have emerged in the world of education, such as the implementation of diagnostic assessments at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. After reviewing various cases, the phenomenon of student and teacher perceptions was chosen because it was considered the most representative in describing the actual challenges and their impact on assessment designs that are more responsive to the needs of students.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, as it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning, perceptions, and experiences of students and teachers regarding the implementation of diagnostic tests in the context of English language learning. This approach was chosen because diagnostic tests are a crucial issue globally, as they play an important role in identifying learning needs, designing remedial learning strategies, and developing assessments that are adaptive to the current generation of learners. This qualitative research was conducted through several systematic stages,

namely: (a) formulation of the research focus based on literature studies and field phenomena; (b) data collection through literature review, media review, observation, and interviews; (c) thematic and interpretive data analysis; and (d) data verification through triangulation, reflection, and re-examination of meaning with participants.

Data Sources and Participants

The data for this study was sourced from secondary materials such as scientific articles, research reports, and media reports discussing the implementation and controversies surrounding diagnostic tests in education. Media data was chosen because the media often serves as a public space that records policy dynamics, stakeholder views, and public reactions to the implementation of diagnostic tests. Thus, media data provides a social and factual context that enriches our understanding of the phenomenon. The data selection process was carried out through systematic searches using keywords such as “diagnostic test” and “diagnostic assessment” in both English and Indonesian, taking into account the credibility of the sources, the relevance of the topics, and the publication time frame that was still current. In addition, this study also involved field participants in the form of English teachers and students at the secondary school level who had implemented diagnostic tests, so that the field data could strengthen and complement the secondary data.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in stages, beginning with a desk review of literature to examine academic debates and theories about diagnostic assessment in education. Next, media materials were reviewed to identify issues, discourse, and public views on the application of diagnostic tests. After that, direct observations were made in the classroom to observe the process of implementing diagnostic tests, from planning and implementation to follow-up in learning. The researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with English teachers and a number of students to explore their perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and relevance of diagnostic tests. In addition, interviews with experts in the field of assessment and education were also conducted to enrich the perspectives on policy and practice. All data collection processes were carried out in accordance with research ethics principles, such as participant consent, data confidentiality, and information disclosure.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in stages using a qualitative thematic analysis approach. The first stage was data reduction, which involved filtering, selecting, and grouping data from interviews, observations, documents, and media reports according to the research focus. The next stage is data display, where the results of the reduction are arranged in the form of narratives, tables, or thematic visualizations to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between categories. After that, data verification and interpretation are carried out through a process of triangulation, re-examination of findings with participants (member checking), and thick description. The final stage is drawing conclusions, which are compiled based on the integration of findings from various sources to answer research questions and provide an in-depth understanding of how students' and teachers' perceptions of diagnostic tests are formed and how this implies the development of English language learning assessment

FINDING

Data Visualization In-depth interview

(Table 1: Data Visualization In-depth interview)

Aspect	Important Quotes	Meaning / Initial Code	Initial Theme
Previous Experience	“I usually conduct diagnostic tests at the beginning of each semester to assess students’ initial English proficiency.”	Teachers have regular experience in administering diagnostic tests.	Direct experience in applying diagnostic tests.
	“It was quite helpful. The test gave me an overview of the students’ abilities.”	Tests help map students' initial abilities.	Practical benefits of diagnostic testing.
	“It made me realize that diagnostic testing is very important.”	Positive perception of the strategic value of diagnostic tests.	Awareness of the importance of initial assessment.
Understanding of Assessment	“The main purpose is to identify students’ initial strengths and weaknesses.”	Teachers' understanding of the main functions of diagnostic assessments.	Teachers' conceptual understanding.
	“The diagnostic test results help me map the class into groups based on their skills.”	Use of assessment results for student grouping.	Utilization of assessment results for differentiated learning.
Learning Objectives	“The test results allow me to adjust materials and activities according to the learning outcomes.”	Integration of assessment results into lesson planning.	Adjustment of teaching strategies.
	“Very relevant... Knowing their starting level helps me design learning that meets workplace communication needs.”	High relevance to the contextual needs of vocational students.	Contextualization of learning according to the needs of the workplace.

The interview results show that teachers have routine experience in conducting diagnostic tests at the beginning of the semester to map students' initial abilities, particularly in grammar and vocabulary. This experience makes teachers realize the importance of diagnostic assessment as a strategic first step in designing more targeted learning. Teachers also have a good conceptual understanding of the main function of diagnostic tests, which is to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and use the results to group students and develop differentiated learning. Furthermore, teachers use test results to adjust learning materials and activities to align with curriculum objectives and the

contextual needs of vocational students, such as communication skills in the workplace. These findings indicate that teachers not only understand the technical functions of diagnostic tests, but are also able to integrate them into relevant and adaptive learning planning, thereby strengthening the effectiveness and meaning of learning for students.

Data Visualization Observation

(Table 2: Data Visualization Observation)

Aspect	Observation Questions	Score (1–3)	Key Findings / Notes	Thematic Meaning
A. Preparation Stage	Test objectives are defined	3	Clear objective: identify strengths & weaknesses	Teachers understand the main function of tests
	Appropriate question types are selected	3	Questions cover grammar, vocabulary, reading	Test design is relevant to student profiles
	Instructions are clear	3	Given in two languages	High accessibility, support for student understanding
B. Implementation Stage	Instructions are explained	3	Explained step by step	Effective communication
	The classroom atmosphere is comfortable	3	Teachers provide positive encouragement	Affective support, minimizing anxiety
	Procedures and timing are appropriate	3	Regular and timely implementation	Discipline in implementation
	Teacher monitoring and assistance	3	Teachers circulate and assist	Active mentoring
C. Analysis Stage	Systematic checking of results	3	Use of rubrics	Objective analysis
	Identification of common errors	3	Grammar and vocabulary are dominant	Awareness of problematic areas
	Grouping of weaknesses	2	Conducted informally	Not yet systematic, potential for improvement
D. Follow-Up Stage	Provision of feedback	3	Explanation of errors + motivation	Reflective learning
	Adjustment of strategies/remedial measures	2	Planned, not yet implemented	Challenges in follow-up implementation

Observations show that the diagnostic test was conducted effectively and systematically. During the preparation stage, teachers clearly defined the test objectives, selected relevant questions (grammar, vocabulary, reading), and provided instructions in two languages so that students could easily understand them. During the implementation stage, teachers explained the instructions step by step, created a comfortable classroom atmosphere, followed procedures with discipline, and actively monitored and assisted students. During the analysis stage, teachers checked the results systematically using assessment rubrics and identified common errors, but the grouping of weaknesses was still done informally. In the follow-up stage, teachers provide constructive feedback and motivate students, but adjustments to learning strategies and remediation are still limited to plans. Overall, teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the function of diagnostic tests and implement them effectively, although improvements are still needed in the follow-up stage so that assessment results can be utilized more optimally.

1. Consistency and Practical Experience in Conducting Diagnostic Tests

Teachers demonstrate a routine habit of administering diagnostic tests at the beginning of the semester. This not only indicates consistency in assessment practices, but also builds empirical experience that strengthens teachers' understanding and positive perception of the strategic value of diagnostic assessments. Teachers realize that these tests provide a comprehensive picture of students' initial abilities, especially in terms of grammar and vocabulary, thereby helping them design more targeted learning.

Trend: Teachers have experience-based assessment literacy; consistent implementation contributes to positive perceptions and effective use of tests.

2. Strong Conceptual Understanding of the Function of Diagnostic Assessment

From both interviews and observations, it appears that teachers have a clear understanding of the main function of diagnostic assessment, which is to identify students' strengths and weaknesses before learning begins. Teachers also use assessment results to map student abilities and group them based on learning needs. This understanding is reflected in every stage of implementation—from determining objectives and selecting relevant questions to analyzing results using rubrics.

Trend: Teachers demonstrate good assessment literacy, understanding assessment as a tool for mapping and making learning decisions, not merely measuring results.

3. Integration of Assessment Results into Learning Planning

Teachers utilize diagnostic test results to adjust learning materials, activities, and strategies to align with curriculum objectives and vocational student needs, including communication in the workplace. Observations confirm that teachers follow up with constructive feedback and begin to design remedial learning, although the implementation stage is not yet optimal.

Trend: There are real efforts to integrate assessment results into adaptive and contextual learning planning, although follow-up still needs to be strengthened.

4. Effective Implementation but Follow-up Not Yet Optimal

Observation data shows that the preparation and implementation stages were carried out very well (clear objectives, effective instructions, conducive atmosphere, time discipline), while the analysis and follow-up stages still have room for improvement. Teachers have systematically examined the results and provided reflective feedback, but the grouping of weaknesses is still informal and remedial learning has not been fully implemented.

Trend: Teachers are able to carry out assessments effectively, but the optimal use of assessment results in follow-up actions remains a major challenge.

Synthesis of Key Findings

The four trends above reinforce the conclusion that teachers have positive perceptions, good conceptual understanding, and adequate technical skills in administering diagnostic tests. Diagnostic assessments are seen not only as an initial evaluation tool, but also as a strategic instrument to support differentiated and contextual learning. However, the follow-up stage is a weak point that needs to be improved so that the assessment results can be fully utilized to continuously improve student learning outcomes.

Based on the results of observations, students perceive diagnostic tests as an important tool for understanding their initial abilities in English. Teachers clearly explained the purpose of the test, provided instructions in two languages, and created a comfortable and supportive classroom atmosphere, so that students felt more prepared, confident, and understood the benefits of assessment. Through systematic implementation and active guidance from teachers, students realized that diagnostic tests were not just formal assessments, but a means of self-reflection that helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. In addition, constructive feedback and explanations of mistakes from the teacher further reinforce students' perception that test results can be used to improve the learning process and enhance language skills. Thus, students view diagnostic tests as an integral part of learning, which helps them learn in a more focused and effective manner.

The results of interviews and observations show that teachers have a strong conceptual understanding of the function of diagnostic tests as a tool to identify students' strengths and weaknesses before the learning process begins. Teachers routinely conduct these assessments at the beginning of the semester and use them to map students' abilities and group them based on their level of mastery. In practice, teachers have demonstrated good technical skills, from planning with clear objectives, selecting relevant questions, to analyzing results using objective assessment rubrics. Teachers also recognize that assessment results can be used to develop differentiated learning and tailor materials to curriculum objectives and vocational student needs. However, the main challenge faced by teachers is in the follow-up stage, because the grouping of students' weaknesses is still done informally and remedial strategies have not been fully implemented. This shows that even though teachers have good assessment literacy and understand the function of diagnostic tests in theory, optimizing the use of assessment results is still an aspect that needs to be strengthened in practice.

Data analysis reveals that the successful implementation of diagnostic tests is supported by several key factors. First, teachers' routine experience in conducting tests at the beginning of each semester reinforces consistency and effectiveness. Second, careful planning and selection of relevant instruments enable assessments to run according to their objectives. Third, a positive learning environment, with effective communication and a comfortable classroom atmosphere, helps students feel motivated. In addition, the use of test results to adjust learning is also an important supporting factor. However, there are also obstacles that reduce the optimization of implementation, such as follow-up stages that are not yet optimal, informal grouping of weaknesses, and the inconsistent application of remedial strategies. These obstacles are likely influenced by time constraints, teachers' workloads, and a lack of systematic support from school institutions. Overall, these results show that although the implementation of diagnostic tests has been effective, the utilization of assessment results and the implementation of follow-up actions remain major challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that assessments truly support the improvement of student learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of the study indicate that diagnostic tests play a strategic role in English language learning in vocational schools. Students perceive these assessments as tools for reflective learning, while teachers view them as instruments for mapping abilities and planning differentiated learning. The implementation is effective in terms of planning and execution, but still faces challenges in the follow-up stage, particularly in remedial teaching and systematic management of assessment results. These findings confirm that assessment literacy and teacher experience are key to the successful implementation of diagnostic tests, but institutional support is needed so that assessment results can be fully utilized to improve the quality of learning and student learning outcomes.

The results of the study show that students perceive diagnostic tests as an important tool for understanding their initial abilities and improving the English learning process, because through clear explanations from teachers, easy-to-understand instructions, and constructive feedback, they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses and learn in a more focused manner. Meanwhile, teachers have a strong conceptual and technical understanding of the function of diagnostic tests as a means of mapping students' abilities and designing differentiated learning in accordance with curriculum objectives and vocational needs. Teachers routinely conduct assessments with careful planning, systematic analysis, and reflective feedback, but challenges still arise in the follow-up stage, where the grouping of weaknesses is not yet systematic and remedial strategies have not been fully implemented. Supporting factors for implementation include teacher experience, clear planning, and a positive classroom atmosphere, while the main obstacles lie in limited time, resources, and institutional support. Therefore, even though the implementation is effective, the use of assessment results for learning improvement still needs to be optimized.

The results of this study can be logically explained based on the spatial and temporal context at SMK Negeri 1 Limboto in March–May 2025, when the school implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of formative assessment, including diagnostic tests. In terms of space, teachers routinely conducted diagnostic tests at the beginning of the semester to map the initial abilities of diverse vocational students, particularly in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and reading, in order to design learning that was appropriate to the needs of the world of work. In terms of time, the research was conducted at the beginning of the school year when teachers began to integrate the assessment results into their lesson plans, but still faced challenges in the follow-up stage, such as informal grouping and limited remedial measures. These findings reflect the real social and educational situation in vocational schools, where teachers have a good understanding and practice of assessment, but still need systemic support and time to optimize the results of diagnostic tests.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies (Mohammed et al., 2023; William, 2011) which confirm that diagnostic tests play an important role in mapping students' initial abilities and helping teachers design differentiated learning. However, there is significant inconsistency in the follow-up to assessment results, where this study found that teachers still face limitations in the implementation of remedial and systematic grouping, in contrast to previous studies that showed more optimal follow-up implementation. This difference can be explained by the social and temporal context at SMK Negeri 1 Limboto, which is a vocational environment with specific needs and limited institutional support. This study adds a dimension of contextualization of diagnostic assessment in work-oriented vocational learning, enriching the literature by highlighting teachers' perceptions and actual practices in the field. Its main contribution lies in revealing

the gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation, as well as emphasizing the need for systemic support so that diagnostic assessment is truly effective in the context of vocational education.

Based on the research findings, a technical action plan is needed to optimize the implementation of diagnostic tests in vocational English classes. The first step is to develop standardized diagnostic assessment guidelines, including determining objectives, selecting instruments, implementation procedures, and analyzing results using clear rubrics. Furthermore, schools need to provide training for teachers on follow-up strategies, such as systematic grouping of student abilities, designing remedial and enrichment programs, and utilizing assessment results in adaptive learning planning. Institutional support is also needed in the form of dedicated time for remediation, collaboration between teachers, and monitoring by the principal to ensure that assessments are carried out continuously. In addition, the integration of simple technologies such as digital analysis sheets can help teachers manage test result data efficiently. With the implementation of these steps, diagnostic assessments will not only function as a mapping tool, but also become an effective learning decision-making instrument to improve learning outcomes and the readiness of vocational students to enter the workforce.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study shows that although diagnostic tests have been consistently applied and are well understood conceptually by teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Limboto, the follow-up stage remains the weakest point in practice. Teachers routinely administer diagnostic tests at the beginning of each semester, set clear objectives, and use relevant questions to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Students view these assessments as a useful reflective tool for understanding their learning needs. However, the use of assessment results in the form of systematic grouping and remedial learning is still limited and informal. This unexpected gap highlights a disconnect between conceptual understanding and practical application, emphasizing that effective diagnostic assessment requires not only technical implementation but also continuous follow-up actions with time and institutional system support.

The strength and main contribution of this study lies in its attempt to contextualize diagnostic assessment in vocational education, a field that has been rarely explored in the literature. By combining the perceptions of teachers and students as well as the results of direct classroom observations, this study provides a comprehensive picture of how diagnostic tests function as pedagogical and reflective instruments in English language learning. This study enriches the theoretical understanding of formative and diagnostic assessment by adding a vocational dimension, and shows how assessment results can be integrated into differentiated and work-oriented learning. Furthermore, this study provides practical insights into how teacher assessment literacy, a positive classroom climate, and institutional support interact in determining the effectiveness of diagnostic assessment implementation. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to the development of an assessment framework for learning (assessment for learning) that is responsive to the unique characteristics of vocational students and is in line with the Merdeka Curriculum.

However, this study has several limitations that open up opportunities for further research. First, this study only focuses on one school context with a qualitative case study design, so the results cannot be generalized to a broader educational context. Second, the analysis in this study explored perceptions and practices more than it explored the influence of policies or institutional factors that may affect the implementation of

diagnostic tests. Third, although this study highlights weaknesses in the follow-up stage, it has not experimentally tested intervention models to improve them. Therefore, future research is recommended to use a mixed-method approach with a comparative or longitudinal design in various vocational schools to validate and expand these findings. Future research can also examine the role of digital assessment tools, collaborative teacher training, and institutional policies in optimizing the implementation of diagnostic assessments and ensuring that the results are used systematically to improve the learning outcomes and job skills of vocational students.

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