

Research article

Study Buddy: An English Training Program for College Students Who Failed Their English Comprehensive Exam

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ORCIDNurrahma Sutisna Putri: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7227-8832>**Abstract.**

This study delved into the implementation of the Study Buddy program to help college students who failed their English comprehensive exam. Nine students participated in the study. Descriptive qualitative methods were used. The Study Buddy program was carried out by English lecturers teaching at the university. The program consisted of two stages: English training and private tutoring. The materials were related to those of the English comprehensive exam, covering four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Data were collected through the English comprehensive exam and by interviews. It was found that there were significant changes seen after the students participated in the Study Buddy program. The findings also showed that the participants were extremely enthusiastic about the program, shown by their high attendance rates (95%) and their positive responses regarding the program. This study hopes to shed some light on the importance of helping students with English learning difficulties.

Keywords: study buddy, English training, college students, English comprehensive exam

1. Introduction

High-stake English test has been regarded by most students as difficult since it is usually used to determine whether or not students are allowed to continue to the next level of education. This affects students in a massive way because they are facing a huge burden to pass the test. For countries with English as the first or second language, this might not become a huge problem since they are accustomed to use English outside the classroom. However, for students living in countries with English as a foreign language like Indonesia, this is extremely challenging for students communicate using their native language by the time they leave the classrooms.

Pertaining to washback of high-stake testing to students, Khasbani [1] examines the accommodation practice in Indonesia related to challenges and difficulties of Students

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with Difficulties (SwD) on English high-stake assessment. It was found that the practice of English high-stakes assessment is still far from being perfect and it is done without having an adequate level of validation and definite regulation. This is homework for educators in Indonesia especially English teachers and lecturers to make efforts in helping Students with Difficulties (SwD) in English by giving them more attention, feedbacks, and to care more about their English compared to more motivated students or students with higher English proficiency.

Higher education is no exception. Several universities demand students to pass the so-called English comprehensive exam as one of the requirements for graduation aside from writing theses. As mentioned earlier, this exam is usually done in the end of study term which results in high pressure on behalf of the students. It needs considerable efforts from universities to help the students pass the exam. One of the strategies is by implementing programs that can provide assistance for students. One of which is Study Buddy program which is built on the basis of providing 'buddy' or 'friend' who provides assistance and helps to students during the preparation for the English test.

Thalluri et al. [2] investigated whether participation in a peer support scheme called 'Study Buddy Support (SBS) in Nursing and Midwifery department improves pass rates of 'at-risk' students. It was found that there were 72% participants who passed the program and 49% of them did not pass the program. Study Buddy gives benefits flowing in both directions, that is, for at-risk students and academically gifted students (buddy leaders). It is undeniable that the so-called 'at-risk' students are the ones who need English teachers more compared to more motivated students. However, with the demands set by university lecturers in higher education, this might be a case since several students might be left behind during the teaching and learning activity. This is where Study Buddy program takes place. It provides assistance to students with low English proficiency so then they will not fail again in the next English Comprehensive Exam.

In the same vein, Silverman et al. [3] investigated reading buddies programs in which older and younger students are paired to read books on a regular basis in the US using quasi-experimental study. It was found that there were effects of treatment on measures of vocabulary for both kindergarteners and fourth-grade students. Pairing older with younger students or students with high English proficiency and those with low English proficiency can become another alternative in implementing Study Buddy program, aside from pairing students with low English proficiency with their English teachers or lecturers. They can learn from each other since their age gap is not far, hence their communication is easily understood by each other.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, this study will try to answer the following research question:

“How is Study Buddy program in a university is implemented for students who failed their English Comprehensive Exam?”

2. Method

This study uses descriptive qualitative research study. It focuses on depicting the implementation of Study Buddy program for college students in a university who did not pass English Comprehensive Exam

The instruments used are two; the first is IELTS-like English Comprehensive Exam and the second is interview guide. The conclusion is drawn by looking at the results of students' scores on English Comprehension Test before and after the students joining the program in which the researchers confirmed the results to the participants by using interview guide.

English Comprehensive Exam conducted in the setting of the study used IELTS-like test (International English Language Testing Service) as the main instrument. In this case, IELTS can be regarded as a high stake testing in the university since students' interest in writing their thesis in English will be determined by whether or not they passed the test.

Furthermore, the IELTS-like English Comprehensive Exam tests 4 skills; Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Before taking the English Comprehensive Exam, the participants must have already taken two IELTS Preparation courses beforehand, that is, IELTS Listening & Reading in the first semester and IELTS Writing & Speaking in the second semester. Hence, the students are allowed to take the English Comprehensive Exam starting from the fourth semester. Based on the results of English Comprehensive Exam per January 2021, the researchers obtained the data on the students who failed the exam. From the data, the researchers conducted interviews on the participants' interest and willingness to participate in the Study Buddy program. The researchers then obtained 9 students who are willing and ready to participate in the Study Buddy program which ran for 14 weeks, starting from February to May 2021.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The implementation of study buddy program

3.1.1. Contract signing

The first step taken in the implementation of Study Buddy program is contract signing with the participants which was held on 7 February 2021. The participants were short-listed and interviewed on the basis of being failed in the English Comprehensive Exam in the previous semester. Furthermore, the rationale behind this contract signing is to make sure that the participants are engaged in the program. As mentioned before, there were 9 students taking part in the program. After being given explanation regarding the program, all of them agreed to sign the contract. The contract clearly stated that the participants are to be willing and ready to be given English trainings every day, as well as weekly and monthly assessment exams.

3.1.2. Focus group discussion

After having a list of participants for the Study Buddy program, the researchers then conducted Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in which the event was attended by two experienced IELTS Trainers teaching in the university and the researchers themselves which was held on 8 February 2021. The agenda reached several decisions regarding the materials used in this Study Buddy program. The first set of materials is pertaining to the main materials. The main materials to be used during the program are IELTS materials practices from Cambridge University ESOL Examination. The rationale behind the decision is because the materials from Cambridge University are the closest materials to the real IELTS test. The second set of materials is the ones made and released by the university as the textbooks for IELTS Preparation courses in the university. As mentioned before, the university requires all students are to take two IELTS Preparation courses which are IELTS Listening & Reading in the first semester and IELTS Writing & Speaking in the second semester. The third set of materials are the ones taken from the Internet as the enrichment materials, namely test booklets from British Council, news articles taken from www.bbcnews.co.uk, and English podcasts downloaded from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/podcasts>. The reasons why those sources were chosen because they are regarded as the most relevant and suitable sources for English enrichments and they provide natural English exposure.

3.1.3. IELTS training

IELTS Training is the first activity held as part of the English training series of Study Buddy program. IELTS-like test (International English Language Testing Service) is used by the university as the benchmark for the English Comprehensive Exam which was held on 11 February 2021. Therefore, the materials used in this first IELTS Training consist of four skills tested in IELTS real test which are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The first researcher was in charge of giving trainings on Listening and Speaking and the second researcher was in charge of teaching tips and tricks to do Reading and Writing exercises.

3.1.4. Private tutoring

The last activity in the series of English training is private tutoring which lasted from April to August 2021. In this activity, both researchers gave private tutoring to the participants covering all four skills tested in the English Comprehensive Exam which are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. They were all conducted face-to-face, except in May 2021 the private tutoring had to be conducted online since the participants took Ramadhan leave as part of their semester-end holiday. During this private tutoring, the researchers privately through emails and WhatsApp sent the materials to the participants. Usually, the deadline given is 1x24 hours for them to work on the assignments.

3.2. Participants' scores before and after Study Buddy program

From the result of English Comprehensive Exam held on 6 August 2021, it was found that students' scores increased by 1-2 points seen after the implementation of Study Buddy program. The following table contains participants' scores before and after the implementation of Study Buddy Program.

As seen in Table 1 above, it is clear that Study Buddy program does increase participants' scores in English Comprehensive Exam compared to their scores taken before the implementation of the Study Buddy Program. The researchers found that the participants were enthusiastic and eager to work on the assignments given seen from their high attendance percentage. Not only did they answer the questions on time mostly, they also were open to feedbacks given by the researchers. This results in them being reflective in their own learning.

TABLE 1: Participants' Scores Before and After the Implementation of Study Buddy Program.

No	Participant	Exam Scores before Study Buddy 11 Feb 2021				Exam Scores after Study Buddy 6 Aug 2021			
		L	S	R	W	L	S	R	W
1	ABA	4	4.5	4	3.5	4	5	5	6.5
2	HT	4.5	4	5	4	4	4	4.5	6.5
3	MA	4	4.5	4.5	4	5	5	4.5	4.5
4	MF	5	5	4.5	4	5.5	5	6	5.5
5	NF	4.5	4.5	4	4.5	5	4.5	5	4.5
6	MR	4	4.5	5	4.5	4	4	6	5
7	MRM	4.5	5	4.5	4.5	4.5	5	4.5	5.5
8	MRI	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	-	-	-	-
9	MK	4.5	5	4	4	5	5	4.5	5

It is clear from the data above that the participants have low English proficiency. This makes them prone to failure in learning English, particularly in high-stake testing such as the university's English Comprehensive Exam. Hsu et al. [4] investigated attitudes of low-proficiency students towards the use of CALL in Freshman English class in Taiwan. Overall, it was found that through repetitive training, students may get better test results and have higher self-efficacy as well as increasing their interest and confidence in learning English. This is why Study Buddy program is highly recommended to help solving problems faced by students with low English proficiency.

Furthermore, it can be said that the participants of Study Buddy program are the ones who need their English teachers more compared to those who excel in English classes. Huang and Tsai [5] analyzed the differences of the beliefs of high proficiency and low proficiency students. They found that high proficiency learners tend to hold positive language learning beliefs than the low proficiency ones. It also includes learners' perceptions of their classmates' reactions, the formation of learners' self-efficacy, instructions of English communication strategies, and the impact of parents' beliefs on learners' expectations. In this notion, students with high proficiency and low English proficiency see the teaching and learning is totally different. Therefore, it is the English lecturers' job to make sure that they are able to diagnose students' perspectives toward the teaching and learning activities.

Moreover, Zhong [6] delves into the development of five low-proficiency Chinese EFL learners' beliefs, language learning strategies, and English language proficiency over a 16-week period. It was found that changes did happen to the learners, namely: from analytical approach to a more experiential one, the focus of accuracy to fluency and their self-efficacy is strengthened as their language progressed. This study has similarity

with Study Buddy program since it focuses on looking at the English development of low proficiency students during a particular period of training. The Study Buddy participants were not only given English exercises, hence taught using analytical approach, but also given enrichment materials from the Internet which are more experiential.

Subsequently, the so-called Students with Difficulties (SwD) can be regarded as a new holy grail in the field of English Language Teaching. Pertaining to the participants' past 'relationship' with English, several participants revealed that they had unpleasant experiences in English since they always found it difficult to make sense of it started from when they learnt English in secondary education. Thao et al. [7] investigated four aspects of speaking difficulties encountered by English-majored students in one university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It was found that the students' speaking abilities were often affected by speaking difficulties particularly affective difficulties. It also revealed that the number of years spent learning English also affected their speaking skills. The researcher did find that during speaking practices, the participants seem very anxious because they were too afraid to make grammatical mistakes and the fact that they do not have a wide range of vocabulary items.

4. Conclusions

From the aforementioned discussions above, several conclusions can be drawn as follows.

First of all, there were four stages in the implementation of Study Buddy program namely Contract Signing, Focus Group Discussion, IELTS Training, and Private Tutoring. There were 9 students who signed the contract stating that they are willing and ready to follow all stages in the Study Buddy program. Moreover, the materials chosen by experts and practitioners are the ones taken from Cambridge University ESOL Examination, test booklets from British Council, news articles from www.bbcnews.co.uk, and English podcasts downloaded from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/podcasts>. During IELTS Training stage, the researchers taught all four language skills in which the first researcher gave training on Listening and Speaking, while the second researcher taught Reading and Writing. Private tutoring was done by providing assistance to the participants privately.

Second of all, it can be concluded that participants' scores increased, seen before and after the implementation of Study Buddy program, that is, scores in English Comprehensive Exam. The scores are the results of hard work not only from the researchers

but also from the participants themselves who are always willing and ready to do the assignments and expose themselves to English natural enrichment materials.

Third of all, it can be interpreted that English lecturers need to pay more attention to aspects related to high-stake testing and its washbacks to students, the so-called Students with Difficulties (SwD, students with low English proficiency and factors affecting students' difficulties in learning English.

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