

Rethinking Curriculum through Trainees' Eyes: Investigating Perceptions of Technical and Vocational Trainees' English Proficiency



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Abstract

In Ethiopia's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, English proficiency is vital for global career advancement, especially in the garment and apparel fashion technology fields, where multinational textile and garment companies are rapidly expanding in Ethiopia. Despite the inclusion of English courses in the curriculum, trainees at the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Technical and Vocational Training Institute (TVTI) struggle to effectively apply their English skills in professional settings. This study investigates trainees' self-perceived English proficiency, identifies language difficulties, and proposes curriculum reforms to align English instruction with industry-specific needs. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys and interviews from garment and fashion technology trainees at the TVTI. Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative analysis, and thematic analysis was applied to interview data. Results showed that writing was the most challenging macro-skill, followed by speaking and listening, while note-taking and understanding technical instructions were identified as the hardest sub-skills. Interviewees emphasized the disconnection between general English instruction and the technical language skills required in the garment industry. Grammar and vocabulary related to industry processes were commonly cited as needing improvement. The findings suggest that integrating garment-specific grammar and vocabulary into the English curriculum would enhance trainees' practical language use. Tailored instruction combining communicative English skills with industry-relevant content can better prepare trainees for the linguistic demands of their careers. This study highlights the need for curriculum reform in Ethiopian TVT Institute to address the specific language challenges faced by trainees and improve their competitiveness in the global workforce.

Keywords: *English for specific purpose, technical and vocational English, sub-skill, trainee, difficulty*

1. Introduction

In today's globalized job market, English language proficiency is essential, especially in technical and vocational fields (Miftah, 2015; Tabalan, 2016). English has become the dominant language for communication in industries such as fashion, where cross-border collaboration is common (Ammon, 2016; Coe & Yeung, 2015; Roshid, 2014), particularly in countries like Ethiopia where multinational textile and garment companies are rapidly expanding. In the context of garment production and other technical sectors, proficiency in both written and

spoken English is vital for career advancement and effective communication (Simie & McKinley, 2024; Wang & Grosse, 2023).

Despite this demand, the current Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) curricula in Ethiopia do not adequately address the specific English language needs of trainees (Belachew, 2020), particularly in garment and fashion technology fields. Ethiopian TVET programs focus heavily on practical skills, with limited integration of English language instruction, even though English is the medium of instruction at higher levels and is crucial for global employability (Hasan & Karim, 2019). The curriculum's emphasis on local languages and content neglects the industry-specific English skills necessary for trainees to succeed in international markets (Tajuddin & Jauhar, 2015), thereby limiting their opportunities for both academic and professional advancement (Belachew, 2020).

The current English language courses, such as *Communicative English Skills I*, *Communicative English Skills II*, and *Basic Writing Skills*, offered at the Federal Technical and Vocational Institute (TVTI), have not significantly improved trainees' ability to engage in fluent and accurate communication, especially in real-world settings related to their future careers. Despite extensive English instruction, TVTI graduates often struggle with basic communication, which impacts their performance in creating teaching, training, and learning materials (TTLM), delivering training sessions, and producing operation sheets.

These deficiencies are evident in language assessments in which many trainees underperform. Employers at TVET sectors have echoed concerns about graduates' English proficiency, citing difficulties in conveying needs and responding to instructions. Furthermore, a tracer study conducted by TVTI revealed employer dissatisfaction with the English proficiency of graduates, despite a curriculum revision in 2019. The new courses failed to address the specific language demands of graduates, who are expected to become trainers rather than industry professionals.

To address these gaps, it is essential to rethink the English curriculum to align with the practical language needs of garment industry trainees. This study proposes modifications that integrate both technical content and communicative English skills. One suggested change is the incorporation of garment-specific grammar features, such as the present simple tense, which is critical for describing processes and routines in production settings (Sevy-Biloon, 2018). In addition, emphasizing the passive voice, a common feature in technical communication, would enhance trainees' ability to deliver technical instructions (Hyland, 2019; Doláková, 2016; Swales & Feak, 2012). Furthermore, incorporating garment-specific vocabulary related to fabrics, machinery, and production processes would make English learning more relevant and applicable to trainees' professional roles. Content-based instruction models, which blend general language skills with industry-specific terminology, would ensure that trainees are equipped with the language proficiency necessary for their careers (Wesche, 2012; Sevy-Biloon, 2018). As a result it is essential to conduct a research in order to make the appropriate modifications or changes in the existing English curriculum.

This study aims to address the English proficiency challenges faced by Ethiopian TVET trainees, particularly in garment and apparel fashion technology, and propose curriculum reforms that align with their specific linguistic needs. By rethinking the curriculum, the study seeks to offer actionable solutions that will enhance trainees' communication skills and better prepare them for both local and international markets. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Assess trainees' perceptions regarding the difficulty of language macro-skills in the context of garment and apparel fashion technology.

2. Identify trainees' perceptions regarding the difficulty of sub-skills in the context of garment, and apparel fashion technology.
3. Determine the most challenging language macro-skills and sub-skills based on trainees' difficulty ratings.
4. Provide recommendations for teachers and policymakers on how to restructure the curriculum to balance fluency with practical skills required for success in global market.

By adopting a more tailored, context-specific approach to curriculum reform, Ethiopian TVET programs can significantly enhance the employability and competitiveness of their graduates in the global job market. Addressing these curriculum gaps through evidence-based reforms will ensure that Ethiopian TVET trainees not only acquire technical skills but also develop the English language proficiency necessary for professional success. This study provides valuable insights for practitioners, educators, and policymakers seeking to improve technical education outcomes in Ethiopia and similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

Situated learning theory emphasizes learning in authentic contexts, influenced by social interactions, cultural practices, and physical surroundings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Leaman & Flanagan, 2013; Rogoff, 1990). Learners construct knowledge through active participation, collaboration, and drawing on prior experiences (Brown et al., 2000). According to this theory, learning is not solely a cognitive process but is influenced by the social interactions, cultural practices, and physical surroundings in which it occurs. Learners construct knowledge by actively participating in authentic activities, collaborating with others, and drawing upon their prior experiences and cultural backgrounds (Brown et al., 2000). This approach aims to enhance the transferability and application of knowledge and skills to real-life situations.

In the global garment industry, English proficiency is crucial for communication in manufacturing, supply chain management, customer relations, and technical documentation (Coe & Yeung, 2015). The growth of e-commerce raises the demand for strong written English skills (Wang & Grosse, 2023), while oral communication is essential for phone contacts (Simie & McKinley, 2024).

Given these workplace demands, extensive research has focused on understanding the specific language needs of garment and apparel trainees. Studies have explored various skill areas, including writing, speaking, listening, and reading, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by learners (Alrasheed, 2019; Hyland, 2013; Kobayashi, 2005; Novriyani & Nurweni, 2018; Peverly et al., 2007). Writing studies have identified difficulties with structure, cohesiveness, and grammar among Hong Kong undergraduates (Evans & Green, 2007), while explicit training has shown to improve outcomes for Ghanaian students (Bediako, 2020; Hyland, 2013). Verbatim transcription is less effective than selective note-taking in terms of information retention (Kobayashi, 2005; Piolat et al., 2005).

Comprehension in garment and apparel training is influenced by characteristics like delivery speed, accents, noise, encoding technique, and multitasking (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Kobayashi, 2005; Vandergrift, 2004). During lectures, active listening and note-making, aligned with socio-cognitive theories of skill development, play a crucial role in capturing concepts systematically and maximizing learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Peverly et al., 2007; Zimmerman, 2008). Technical materials, due to their specific content and language, require higher levels of analytical thinking and familiarity compared to regular books (Chen, 2003; Roy, 2010). Regardless of skill levels, confidence, attitudes, and experiences significantly impact oral abilities (Buhari & Hanafi, 2022; Clément et al., 2003).

While the existing research provides valuable insights, there is a lack of localized studies, particularly from non-Western contexts (Alrasheed, 2019; Chen, 2003). Despite the importance of tailoring support to specific needs, little is known about the perceived challenges faced by Ethiopian trainees. Studies have found a strong association between the frameworks of socio-cognitive and situated learning theory, which emphasize the development of contextual competence through individualized and authentic practice (Ammanabrolu & Riedl, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

To bridge the linguistic gaps in Ethiopian garment and apparel fashion training, focused exploration is necessary. Assessing language abilities assists in revising curricula to meet industry needs (Gözüyeşil, 2014). One of the challenges is that trainees' primary languages are not always used when referring to technical vocabulary in English (Babson, 2014). This issue could be addressed through multimodal, multilingual education (Babson, 2014). Incorporating occupation-specific vocabulary and communication approaches into technical curricula improves tailored English training and enhances workforce readiness (Astawa et al., 2017; Kurnia et al., 2014). International models suggest that combining linguistic and vocational education facilitates smoother transitions into post-study employment (Xie, 2021).

Skill development can be supported through targeted tactics such as industry seminars, immersion programs, and specialized courses that foster confidence in professional usage (Rashtchi & Porkar, 2020). Anticipating obstacles enhances linguistic identity based on past experiences (Rashtchi & Porkar, 2020). Proficient English speaking abilities improve marketability and enable access to international markets, which is crucial for industrial integration (Babson, 2014). To achieve optimal results, garment and apparel fashion institutes must continue exploring effective methods and implementing curriculum revisions that promote improved industry integration (Astawa et al., 2017). In general, enhanced localized comprehension can facilitate language acquisition and align with technical proficiency, leading to success in international careers.

In summary, situated learning theory emphasizes learning in authentic contexts influenced by social interactions and cultural surroundings. Studies focus on the language needs of trainees, addressing challenges in writing, listening, and speaking. Integrating occupation-specific vocabulary and communication strategies into technical curricula, along with industry seminars and specialized courses, enhances English training and industry integration. Proficiency in spoken English improves employability and international market access, supporting success in global careers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling Technique

Stratified random sampling was chosen as the most appropriate method for this study to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The total population of trainees in the garment and apparel fashion technology program was divided into strata based on their program of study (regular, summer, and evening). This approach accounted for the different subgroups within the population and allowed for a proportional representation of each stratum in the sample. The sampling frame included population sizes of 25 regular trainees, 50 summer trainees, and 45 evening trainees.

Using Bukhari's (2020), and Krejcie & Morgan's (1970). statistical formula and table for determining sample sizes, the required sample was calculated to be 108 participants. The sample size was allocated proportionally across the strata based on the population ratios, resulting in 24 regular trainees, 44 summer trainees, and 40 evening trainees. While

proportional allocation can help control for potential bias, it may also limit the sample's diversity. This approach minimizes the risk of over- or under-representing a particular group, thereby reducing potential bias in the findings. It also allows for more accurate comparisons and generalizations to be made about the entire population based on the sample.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

A mixed-methods approach was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the language needs of garment and apparel fashion technology trainees. The primary instrument used was a questionnaire administered to the 108 sampled participants. The questionnaire contained a combination of closed-ended and open-ended items, allowing for the collection of structured quantitative data. It gathered demographic information and assessed trainees' perceptions of difficulty with various language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Participants were asked to rate the level of difficulty on a 5-point Likert scale, providing quantitative data for statistical analysis and comparison.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 trainees that were random selected. These interviews were conducted in the local language to obtain rich and descriptive feedback from the participants. The interviews provided an opportunity for trainees to elaborate on their perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to language skills in a more open-ended and conversational manner. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, nine observation sessions were undertaken to observe trainees' language use in practical activities. These observations were conducted during regular training sessions and involved the researcher observing and taking field notes on trainees' language production, interaction, and engagement. The observations provided insights into the actual language performance of the trainees and allowed for a comparison with their self-reported perceptions.

This multi-method approach of combining the questionnaire, interviews, and observations provided triangulation of data sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. By using different methods of data collection, the study was able to capture a more comprehensive and refined understanding of the trainees' perceptions and experiences related to language difficulties in the context of garment and apparel fashion.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequencies, means, standard deviations, and variability in perceived difficulties. This analysis provided a quantitative overview and comparison of the participants' perceptions.

The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed through an inductive coding process to identify prominent themes and patterns. This qualitative analysis provided a deeper understanding of the trainees' experiences and perceptions of language difficulties. The field notes from the observation sessions were examined for patterns relating to actual language performance compared to self-report.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, a constant comparative analysis was employed to cross-validate the quantitative and qualitative data. This process involved comparing and discussing the findings from the questionnaire, interviews, and observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the language needs of garment and apparel fashion technology trainees. The theoretical lens of socio-cognitive and situated learning frameworks was used to interpret the results and provide a theoretical context for the findings.

The data analysis process was done by using SPSS 25 software for quantitative analysis and NVivo software for organizing and coding the qualitative data. This allowed for efficient data management and systematic analysis, ensuring the accuracy and consistency of the analysis process.

The procedures followed for representative sampling, multi-method data collecting, and thorough analysis are outlined in the methodology section above. This plainness enhances the generalizability of the study and provides a solid foundation for the interpretation of the findings.

3.4 Limitations

Considering additional contextual variables could strengthen external validity. It would be beneficial if the study fully investigated individual traits such as learning styles or prior experiences that may influence self-efficacy. Considering these variables in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding. It would be advantageous if self-reported perceptions through questionnaires were supplemented by additional objective measures of proficiency.

4. Results

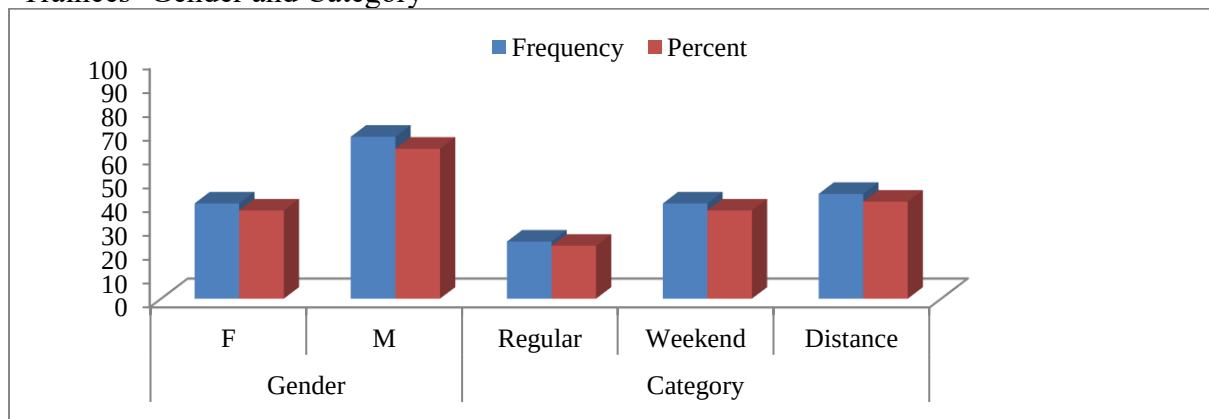
This section presents the key findings from the study based on the analysis of the data collected. The results aim to address each of the research objectives outlined earlier. The findings are organized into relevant sub-sections about the trainees' background, and perceptions of difficulty across various language macro-skills and sub-skills. Quantitative data from surveys is supplemented with qualitative insights from interviews and observations to provide a holistic understanding of participants' experiences.

4.1 Background of Trainees

In this section, we provide an overview of the background characteristics of the trainees who participated in the study. The analysis of frequency graphs offers valuable insights into the profiles of the 108 respondents.

Figure 1

Trainees' Gender and Category

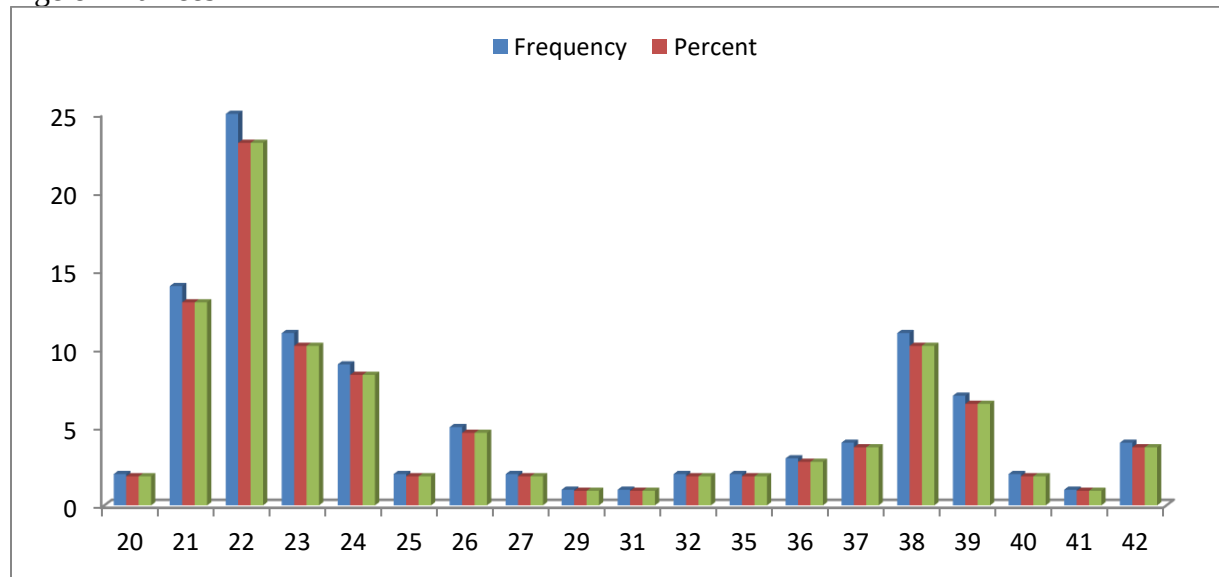


When the gender distribution of the sample was looked at, more female trainees than male trainees were included. In particular, 68 trainees, or 63% of the total, identified as female, and 40 trainees, or 37%, as male. Context is provided by the gender ratio of about 2:1 female to male, which suggests that the perspectives expressed are a little more in line with the experiences of female trainees.

Moving to the category of study, distance learning emerged as the most popular option chosen by the largest share of respondents (40.7%, or 44 trainees). Weekend classes came in a close second with 37%, or 40 trainees. Only the minority (22.2%, or 24 trainees) undertook regular daytime classes. This preference for flexible distance or part-time formats over regular on-campus formats indicates the trainee has a profile more aligned with working professionals balancing work and study commitments.

Figure 2

Age of Trainees



The majority of respondents (58.2%) were aged 20–25. As traditional undergraduates, they have few outside responsibilities competing for time but may lack work/life experience to contextualize concepts. Exposure to English instruction varied, and the academic language's abstractness could be challenging without practical application opportunities. According to Larsen-Freeman & Long (2014), younger trainees do better on organized grammar examinations, while adults outperform on communicative activities, probably as a result of life experiences. However, given specific factors, both groups can succeed just as much.

Those aged 26 – 30 (7.4%) balanced their first jobs and families with their studies, making pragmatic language skills essential for both professional advancement and community engagement. Many felt somewhat competent but driven to improve when using English professionally or personally after graduating from college.

The 31– 40 age group (29.8%) acquires English proficiency in conjunction with stable employment and families to promote career mobility. Significant work and life experience help to contextualize new concepts, yet returning to school after years away might be difficult. Achievement is driven by practicality.

After an extended layoff, the 41– 45 group (4.6%) has the biggest academic challenges, but they make up for it with maturity, subject matter mastery, and more obvious skill objectives. Self-driven and self-paced learning works well for busy schedules when assistance encourages independence and flexibility. These age groups and language learning notions are in line with Brown & Larson-Hall (2012), who stated that physical maturation influences early skills but not ultimate proficiency.

Generally, life experience and aging may lessen language barriers, but a lack of appropriate support can impede due to conflicting responsibilities or time away. All age groups benefit from

strong motivation derived from personal and professional goals. Personalized support that considers a range of situations improves the learning environment.

4.2. Trainees' Difficulty of English Language Skills

This section provides an overview of the trainees' ratings for the difficulty of each macro-skill. The data were collected through a questionnaire that asked the trainees to rate the difficulty of various macro-skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, on a 5-point Likert scale. The section evaluates trainees' self-ratings of their difficulty across English macro-skills as captured through a questionnaire. Each of the subsections also presents perceived difficulty of related sub-skills.

4.2.1. Trainees' Perception of Difficulty of Macro-Skills

This subsection presents trainees' ratings of six key macro-skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary—on a 5-point Likert scale. Trends and examples of qualitative feedback provide context for perceived difficulties.

Table 1

Trainees' rating of the difficulties of macro-skills

Macro-skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Listening	108	1.00	5.00	3.57	1.20
Speaking	108	1.00	5.00	3.15	1.35
Reading	108	1.00	5.00	3.61	1.27
Writing	108	1.00	5.00	3.10	1.45
Grammar	108	1.00	5.00	3.74	1.26
Vocabulary	108	1.00	5.00	3.79	1.33

Several trends can be seen in how trainees perceive their language proficiency. *Writing* and *speaking*, with mean difficulty ratings of 3.10 and 3.15 and standard deviations of 1.45 and 1.35 respectively, were rated as being the most challenging. The fact that writing has a higher mean difficulty rating than the other macro-skills may indicate that trainees have trouble organizing their thoughts, structuring their writing, choosing the right grammar and vocabulary, or conveying their ideas clearly and persuasively. Regarding writing skills, interviewee 6 stated:

When it comes to expressing myself effectively in written form, I encounter several challenges. One of the main difficulties is organizing my thoughts coherently. Sometimes, I struggle to structure my writing in a logical and flowing manner, resulting in disjointed or fragmented ideas. I also lack appropriate vocabulary to express my thoughts. This can make it challenging for readers to follow my arguments or grasp the central message of my writing. Another challenge I face is finding the ideal mix between being concise and giving enough details. My tendency to either be excessively specific or go off on pointless deviations sometimes take attention away from the core idea I'm attempting to convey.

Similarly, Interviewee 10 expressed challenges with speaking and writing skills, saying:

Well, um...., I'd say speaking and writing are definitely the hardest for me because, in class, you know...., we mostly learn general English. But then, when I'm in the workshop, ah, I just don't really know how to explain what I'm doing in English. Like, the teachers often focus on things like grammar rules, which is fine, but, um, we don't really practice how to describe the actual production steps. For example, I need to be able to say things like 'we cut the fabric' or 'the machine is being repaired,' and using the right words for these technical processes is just, um, really tricky. In my opinion, it

would be so helpful if we could spend more time on language that's directly related to what we do in garment production, like talking about different fabrics and machines. Also, um..., I think learning how to give instructions using the passive voice would be really useful, especially for explaining processes—like, saying 'the fabric is sewn together.' I feel like that would make it a lot easier to communicate at work, especially when I need to give instructions or explain what's going on.

Like grammar, vocabulary was rated as moderately challenging with a mean score of 3.79 and a standard deviation of 1.33. Interviewee 8 responded that the problem he faced was ensuring proper grammar and vocabulary usage. He strived to convey his ideas accurately, but there were instances where he was struggling with selecting the right words or constructing grammatically correct sentences. This can affect the clarity and precision of his writing, making it harder for the intended audience to understand his message. Interviewee 2 said:

You know..., when we're in class, the English we're taught feels way too general and doesn't really connect with what we're going to need in our actual jobs later on. Like, for instance, there are so many terms in garment production—things related to fabrics, machinery, and quality control—that we don't even go over in our English courses. And honestly, these are the kinds of words we'll really need when we're talking to suppliers or writing up reports. If the curriculum could focus more on these specific terms and show us how to use them in technical instructions or reports, I feel like it would be so much more useful. I mean, it's important to learn basic communication skills too, but mixing that with technical vocabulary would really prepare us a lot better for the workplace.

The average difficulty rating for *listening* among the trainees was also 3.57, with a standard deviation of 1.20, making it the third most difficult skill. In addition, with a mean difficulty rating of 3.61 and a standard deviation of 1.27, *reading* was rated as somewhat challenging. *Grammar* was considered to be a moderately challenging language component, with a mean difficulty rating of 3.74 and a standard deviation of 1.26.

Interviewee 4 highlighted that listening comprehension posed significant challenges, particularly when lectures were delivered by Filipino and Indian instructors. The combination of unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, and complex vocabulary made it difficult to follow the content. She also mentioned that understanding tone, intonation, and non-verbal cues added another layer of complexity to listening, further impeding comprehension. Environmental distractions or background noise exacerbated these difficulties, making it harder to stay focused during lectures.

Observations in the classroom confirmed that trainees struggled across multiple language abilities, including writing, grammar, vocabulary, organization, and pronunciation. In writing, trainees had difficulty organizing their thoughts logically, constructing grammatically sound sentences, and using appropriate technical terminology. This often led to disjointed and unclear written communication. Grammar inconsistencies were also prevalent, causing misunderstandings in both written and spoken interactions. The lack of industry-specific vocabulary further compounded their struggles, particularly when it came to accurately describing technical processes or completing assignments. This limited vocabulary often led to communication breakdowns in reports and other written tasks.

Pronunciation challenges were evident in oral presentations and discussions, where mispronunciations hindered clarity and fluency. These issues affected trainees' ability to communicate effectively with peers and instructors. Listening and note-taking also emerged as significant obstacles, especially during lectures delivered in fast-paced or heavily accented

English. Many trainees struggled to keep up with the flow of speech, making it difficult to discern key information. Their limited note-taking skills further hindered their ability to retain lecture content and impacted their overall understanding of complex subjects. These combined challenges not only affected their academic performance but also restricted their active participation in classroom discussions, group activities, and practical exercises, ultimately limiting their overall engagement and learning outcomes.

4.2.2. Trainees' Perception of Difficulty of Listening Sub-Skills

This subsection presents trainees' ratings of difficulty for eleven listening sub-skills. Mean scores and standard deviations reveal which sub-skills posed relatively greater challenges on average.

Table 2

Trainees' rating of the difficulties of listening sub-skills

Listening sub-skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Listening to Questions	108	1.00	5.00	3.02	1.37
Listening to Class Discussions	108	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.33
Listening to Presentations	108	1.00	5.00	2.74	1.38
Listening to Feedback	108	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.56
Listening to Instructions	108	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.44
Listening to Advice	108	1.00	5.00	2.75	1.51
Listening to Meetings	108	1.00	5.00	2.82	1.45
Listening to Foreigners	108	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.44
Listening to Explanations	108	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.31
Listening to Interview	108	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.49
Listening to Lecture to Take Notes	108	1.00	5.00	2.68	1.34

Several trends emerged regarding how trainees perceive the difficulty of listening sub-skills. The most difficult sub-skill, with a mean difficulty score of 2.68, is *listening to a lecture* while taking notes. This suggests that trainees struggle to comprehend lectures and simultaneously record key points, which may be due to the cognitive demands of processing spoken language while organizing information on paper. Observations confirmed this as many trainees were seen attempting to write verbatim notes during fast-paced lectures, often missing essential points.

Similarly, *listening to presentations* was rated as moderately difficult, with a mean score of 2.74. Presentations often include complex terminology and structured content delivery, which may explain why trainees find this skill challenging. Observations of classroom presentations indicated that trainees frequently looked confused during key segments, especially when unfamiliar technical terms were used.

Another sub-skill trainees found somewhat difficult was *listening to and understanding advice*, with a mean score of 2.75. Trainees expressed difficulty processing verbal guidance from instructors or peers, often failing to apply feedback effectively. Classroom observations revealed that some trainees hesitated to ask follow-up questions, likely due to uncertainty about the advice they had received.

Listening during meetings, where multiple speakers provide real-time information, also posed moderate difficulty with a mean score of 2.82. Meetings demand attention to different perspectives, which can be overwhelming, particularly in dynamic discussions. In observations of group projects, some trainees struggled to follow discussions when several speakers voiced opinions simultaneously.

Listening to foreigners with different accents or speech patterns was rated as challenging with a mean score of 2.86. Trainees found it difficult to comprehend unfamiliar pronunciations or faster speech, especially from non-native English speakers. This was particularly evident during interactions with foreign instructors, where several trainees were observed asking for clarifications or missing key instructions entirely.

Understanding interviews and *feedback* both received a mean score of 2.96, reflecting that these sub-skills also posed moderate challenges. In both cases, active listening is essential, whether to grasp interview questions or interpret constructive criticism. Trainees were often seen struggling to retain feedback given in oral form, failing to apply suggested improvements in subsequent tasks.

Listening to instructions and *class discussions* had identical mean scores of 2.98, indicating a moderate level of difficulty. Instructions, particularly in practical settings, require precision in understanding, and even minor misunderstandings can lead to errors. Observations showed that some trainees needed additional clarification after instructions were given, highlighting gaps in comprehension.

Interestingly, trainees found *listening to questions* relatively easier, with a mean score of 3.02. However, observations indicated that some trainees found it challenging to understand the intent behind certain questions, leading to delayed or unclear responses.

Lastly, *listening to explanations* was considered one of the more manageable sub-skills, with a mean difficulty score of 3.14. While still moderately difficult, trainees generally found it easier to comprehend direct explanations from instructors, especially when visual aids or demonstrations were provided.

4.2.3. Trainees' Perception of Difficulty of Reading Sub-Skills

This subsection examines trainees' ratings of ten reading sub-skills, identifying which areas they found most or least challenging. The means and standard deviations of each sub-skill are presented in Table 3 to highlight the overall difficulty and variability in trainees' responses.

Table 3

Trainees' rating of the difficulties of reading sub-skills

Reading sub-skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Reading Notes/Handouts	108	1.00	5.00	3.31	1.43
Reading Books	108	1.00	5.00	3.12	1.43
Reading Manuals	108	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.32
Reading Charts	108	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.34
Reading Models/Diagrams	108	1.00	5.00	2.99	1.34
Reading Instructions	108	1.00	5.00	2.99	1.36
Reading journals Articles	108	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.40
Reading TTLM	108	1.00	5.00	3.17	1.46
Reading Letters	108	1.00	5.00	3.26	1.35
Reading Reports	108	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.47

The data reveals that *reading manuals* and *reading reports*, both with a mean score of 2.97, were perceived as the most difficult sub-skills. Trainees reported significant challenges in extracting and understanding information from these technical documents. *Reading models/diagrams* and *reading instructions*, both with a mean score of 2.99, followed closely, indicating difficulties with interpreting technical and visual content in garment production. Interviewee 12 expressed specific struggles with reading manuals and diagrams:

Well, when I try to read the technical manuals or instructions, I often feel, ah.... you know..., kind of lost because the language is just too complicated. Like, sometimes I can't even understand the basic terms, you know... Especially when they're talking about specific fabric properties or machine operations. It's, um, really hard to follow the diagrams as well, because I don't always get what the labels or steps are trying to explain in English. Honestly, I really think we need more practice with these kinds of materials in class, you know..., because they're exactly what we'll be dealing with on the job.

Sub-skills like *reading books* and *reading charts* with mean scores of 3.12 and 3.14 respectively were rated as moderately challenging. These skills require a certain level of expertise and effort to interpret data and content relevant to garment and apparel fashion technology. Similarly, *reading journal articles* and *reading TTLM* which have 3.05 and 3.17 mean score respectively found to be moderately difficult particularly when dealing with technical writing and academic articles related to garment technology.

In terms of *reading letters* having a mean score of 3.26 and *reading notes/ hand-outs* with a mean score of 3.31 were rated as relatively easier, implying that understanding and retrieving relevant information from these sources demanded considerable attention and effort.

Observational data from both classroom and workshop settings support these findings, particularly regarding the challenges trainees face with reading manuals and technical instructions. During workshop sessions, many trainees struggled to follow the instructions in technical manuals, often requiring clarification from instructors. This observation highlights the difficulty they face in understanding dense, technical language in these documents. Similarly, when tasked with interpreting diagrams and models during practical activities, several trainees showed visible signs of confusion, frequently asking for assistance in decoding the visual and technical information presented. In classroom settings, when asked to read and comprehend reports or manuals related to garment production processes, trainees often hesitated and needed more time to process the content. Many trainees resorted to asking for explanations or paraphrasing assistance from peers and instructors, indicating that these types of materials are particularly challenging for them. This observation aligns with the low mean scores for reading manuals and reports, reinforcing the need for more targeted reading instruction that focuses on technical documentation.

4.2.4. Trainees' Perception of Difficulty of Speaking Sub-skills

This subsection presents trainees' difficulty ratings for seven speaking sub-skills. The data in Table 4 shows means and standard deviations, highlighting both the general level of difficulty and variability across these skills.

Table 4

Trainees' rating of the difficulties of speaking sub-skills

Speaking sub-skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Asking Questions	108	1.00	5.00	3.10	1.52
Replying Questions	108	1.00	5.00	3.31	1.09
Participating in Discussions	108	1.00	5.00	3.03	1.33
Giving Presentations	108	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.30
Giving Instructions	108	1.00	5.00	3.11	1.35
Describing Diagrams/Charts	108	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.25
Responding to Interviews	108	1.00	5.00	2.97	1.34

The sub-skill with the lowest mean value (2.88) is *giving presentations*, suggesting that trainees find this skill the most challenging. Conversely, *replying to questions* (3.31) is perceived as the easiest skill to master. Other sub-skills, such as *asking questions*, *participating in discussions*, *giving instructions*, *describing diagrams/charts*, and *responding to interviews*, fall within a moderate difficulty mean scores of 3.03 to 2.97.

The variability, as shown by standard deviation (SD), reveals interesting patterns. *Replying to questions* and *describing diagrams/charts* have lower SDs, suggesting greater consensus among trainees in perceiving these skills as moderately difficult. However, *participating in discussions* and *giving instructions* show higher SDs, implying more diverse experiences and challenges among trainees regarding these sub-skills.

Observations in both classroom and workshop settings support the finding that trainees find giving presentations and participating in discussions particularly challenging. During classroom observations, many trainees hesitated when asked to present their work, with most relying heavily on reading pre-prepared notes. Some trainees displayed visible anxiety, often avoiding eye contact and speaking in a monotone. This observation aligns with the quantitative finding that *giving presentations* was rated the most difficult sub-skill which has a mean value of 2.88.

Similarly, in workshop settings, where trainees are required to explain processes or outcomes, it was observed that they found it difficult to give instructions or provide verbal explanations in English. Many trainees reverted to their native language when attempting to describe technical steps in garment production, indicating a lack of confidence in using English for these tasks. This mirrors the feedback from Interviewee 7, who highlighted their discomfort with presentations:

When we have to present in front of the class, I always get nervous, and I think... it's because I don't feel confident using the right technical words. I know what I want to say, but sometimes I forget the English terms or I worry that my grammar is wrong. So, I just stick to reading from my notes, and even then..., it's hard to get everything right. I really wish we could practice more technical English in our lessons so that we'd be better prepared for presentations.

This comment reflects the overall struggle with presentations, where trainees face challenges due to a lack of familiarity with technical vocabulary and discomfort with spontaneous speech. It reinforces the need for curriculum adjustments that focus more on technical English and public speaking skills relevant to their industry.

During group activities and discussions, a similar reluctance to speak was observed. Trainees were hesitant to ask questions or contribute to discussions unless prompted by the instructor, and when they did participate, their responses were often brief or incomplete. This lack of engagement suggests that *participating in discussions* which has a mean of 3.03 is also a challenging area, further underscoring the importance of creating opportunities for trainees to practice spontaneous communication in a supportive environment.

4.2.5. Trainees' Perception of Difficulty of Writing Sub-skills

This final subsection presents trainees' assessments of the difficulty levels for eight writing sub-skills, using means and standard deviations to reflect the relative challenges encountered by trainees.

Table 5

Trainees' rating of the difficulties of writing sub-skills

Writing sub-skills	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Writing Assignment	108	1.00	5.00	3.02	1.37

Doing Writing Task/Exam	108	1.00	5.00	3.21	1.44
Writing Instruction	108	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.42
Writing Essay	108	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.39
Making Notes	108	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.46
Writing Project Proposals	108	1.00	5.00	2.94	1.49
Writing Letters	108	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.34
Writing Reports	108	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.37

The trainees' assessments provide valuable insights into their experiences with writing sub-skills. Among the sub-skills, *writing instructions* and *writing essays* were rated as the most challenging, both with a mean score of 2.93. This suggests that trainees found it particularly difficult to organize and clearly articulate complex ideas in these forms of writing. Similarly, *writing project proposals* and *writing reports* were also rated as relatively difficult, with mean scores of 2.94 and 2.98 respectively. These writing tasks require a high level of organization and the ability to effectively communicate technical information, which many trainees found challenging.

On the other hand, *writing letters* and *writing assignments* were perceived as moderately challenging, with mean scores of 3.01 and 3.02 respectively, indicating that trainees found these tasks slightly less difficult. The sub-skills *making notes* and *doing writing tasks/exams* had the highest mean scores of 3.23 and 3.21 respectively, indicating that these were perceived as the least difficult of the writing sub-skills.

The standard deviations reflect the diversity of trainees' opinions on each sub-skill. Higher standard deviation values, such as those for *doing writing tasks/exams* (SD = 1.44) and *making notes* (SD = 1.47), suggest a wider range of experiences and perceptions of difficulty among trainees for these tasks.

Observation results supported these findings, as trainees were observed struggling with organizing thoughts and structuring their writing, particularly when required to use technical terminology. During a writing task, many trainees hesitated, often spending considerable time trying to frame sentences that accurately conveyed their ideas. Grammar issues were frequently noted, with inconsistent verb usage and awkward phrasing affecting clarity. Moreover, vocabulary challenges were apparent, particularly when trainees attempted to write about specific garment production processes, where they lacked the precise industry-specific language.

Trainee 8 further articulated the difficulty of organizing thoughts coherently, stating:

I really struggle with putting my ideas on paper, you know... Like, sometimes I have the thoughts in my head, but when I actually sit down to write them, it's just... I don't know, I just can't find the right words or make them flow logically. It's almost like everything gets jumbled up. And it's especially hard when I have to explain something technical. I feel like I understand it in my mind, but getting it down in writing in a way that makes sense to someone else is, well, really tough.

This sentiment was echoed by other trainees, who noted similar challenges in translating technical knowledge into written form.

Trainee 2 also mentioned the challenge of structuring paragraphs in essays, explaining, "*ah... as to me...it's hard to figure out where to start and how to organize everything in a way that makes sense. I often end up writing things out of order, and even ah it's difficult to fix them later.*" Trainee 4 highlighted issues with writing reports, noting, "*There's so much to include in a report, and I always feel like I'm missing something important. You know... it's hard to meet all the requirements and make sure it's clear.*"

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate trainees' perceptions of English language difficulty within an Ethiopian technical program. The following discussion will contextualize key findings, relate them to prior research, present new insights, address limitations, and consider implications.

5.1. Trainees' Perceptions of Writing Difficulty

The finding that trainees rated writing as the most challenging aligns with past research. Studies show non-native speakers face organizational, coherence, and grammatical hurdles in academic writing due to intricate conventions (Hyland, 2013). This also aligns with research findings that strong writing and oral skills are essential for garment and textile technology trainees, as effective written communication is crucial for tasks like reports, proposals, and documentation (Miftah, 2015; Kho et al., 2023). Trainees in this study emphasized their struggles with expressing technical content in writing, as noted by Interviewee 6, who stated, *"When it comes to expressing myself effectively in written form, I encounter several challenges. One of the main difficulties is organizing my thoughts coherently. Sometimes, I struggle to structure my writing in a logical and flowing manner, resulting in disjointed or fragmented ideas."* This underscores the need for focused writing instruction to improve the clarity and structure of trainees' written communication. In addition, Interviewee 10 highlighted the specific challenges related to industry-relevant grammar: *"In my opinion, it would be so helpful if we could spend more time on language that's directly related to what we do in garment production, like talking about different fabrics and machines. I think learning how to give instructions using the passive voice would be really useful, especially for explaining processes."* This demonstrates a need for curricula to focus on technical language features like the passive voice and industry-specific terminology to better equip trainees for their future roles.

Variability in writing perceptions in this study could relate to individual factors like confidence, prior experience, and language proficiency, as hypothesized by Illyin et al. (2019). Situated learning theory posits that mastery develops through authentic context-embedded practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); trainees with richer applied writing experiences may feel more competent. Bediako (2021) found that English for Specific Purposes courses boosted students' writing self-efficacy.

Zelege et al. (2023) found that the language contents used in the Federal TVET Institute are not suitable for meeting the English language needs of the trainees. The existing teaching material lacks topical or thematic relevance to the trainees' specific fields of study across various units. Targeted intervention is needed, as Ethiopian technical and vocational training often neglects discipline-specific development. Customized support addressing organizational structures, technical terminology, and self-regulated learning strategies could help optimize writing outcomes (MacArthur et al., 2008; Novriyani & Nurweni, 2018).

5.2. Difficulty of Trainees with Listening Sub-Skills

The struggle with note-taking aligns with research showing the added cognitive load of verbatim transcription hinders comprehension for many trainees (Kobayashi, 2005; Piolat et al., 2005). Variables including delivery speed, unfamiliar accents, and background noise exacerbate difficulties (Kobayashi, 2005; Vandergrift, 2004). As Interviewee 4 explained, *"Listening is challenging, especially when lectures are delivered by Filipinos and Indians. The unfamiliar accents, fast-paced speech, and complex vocabulary make it difficult to follow the lecture."* This aligns with findings that non-native accents and varied delivery styles often create barriers to comprehension in diverse educational settings.

The theory posits lectures are socially constructed learning experiences; active listening and note construction scaffold knowledge internalization (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Note-taking frameworks providing visual outlines and cue words could boost trainees' abilities to selectively encode meaningful concepts over verbatim details (Peeverly et al., 2007). Instructors adopting explicit instruction in effective note-taking strategies also support students according to socio-cognitive models (Zimmerman, 2008).

5.3. Difficulty with Technical Reading Materials

Perceiving manuals, reports, instructions, and models/diagrams as the most difficult aligns with findings that technical reading demands stronger inference, critical analysis, and familiarity with specialized terminology than general materials (Chen, 2003; Roy, 2010). Interviewee 2 provided insight on this issue: *"The English we're taught feels too general and doesn't really connect with what we'll need in our actual jobs. There are many terms related to fabrics, machinery, and quality control that we don't even cover in our English courses."* This response supports the notion that the current curriculum lacks technical relevance, hindering trainees' ability to navigate industry-specific documents effectively.

Close reading techniques that activate relevant schemata before attempting comprehension and note-taking could help (Duchak, 2014). Interactive readings incorporating visuals, discussions, and applied tasks may also better support situated learning in this context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ammanabrolu et al., 2021). Instructors must acknowledge cultural learning style differences to ensure equitable access through flexible delivery methods (Naz et al., 2023).

5.4. Variability in Speaking Perceptions

The finding that oral presentations, describing diagrams/charts, and responding to interviews were the most difficult speaking sub-skills indicates a significant challenge for trainees. Interviewee 10 emphasized this difficulty: *"Speaking and writing are definitely the hardest for me because, you know..., in class, we mostly learn general English. But when I'm in the workshop, I just don't know how to explain what I'm doing in English."* This aligns with research showing that students face difficulty translating general language learning to specific technical environments (Jamaludin et al., 2020; Clément et al., 2003).

Establishing a supportive classroom environment where mistakes are accepted and incremental learning is celebrated may help boost confidence over time as competence increases (Voisin et al., 2023). Repeated opportunities to practice speaking in a range of authentic workplace simulation tasks empower students to develop robust self-regulation abilities and situated expertise (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Generally, targeted language instruction catered to students' particular needs and employing tailored support mechanisms, as these conclusions recommend, correspond with best practices cited in other research for facilitating technical English proficiency.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to assess the English language proficiency challenges faced by trainees at the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Technical and Vocational Training Institute, particularly within the garment and apparel fashion technology field. The findings reveal significant insights that have direct implications for curriculum reform and the enhancement of English language support within technical programs.

Writing emerged as the most challenging macro-skill, aligning with previous studies that highlight non-native learners' struggles with coherence, organization, and grammar in technical writing. The variability in writing perceptions among trainees suggests that factors such as prior

language experience and confidence play a role in shaping writing self-efficacy. Therefore, a targeted, tailored approach to writing instruction, incorporating industry-specific content, grammar, and vocabulary, could address these challenges. By adopting content-based instruction that integrates relevant industry terms and technical grammar, educators can optimize language learning outcomes.

Listening and note-taking during lectures also posed significant challenges, particularly when lectures were delivered by instructors with unfamiliar accents or at a fast pace. The difficulty in comprehending spoken language was exacerbated by the cognitive load of simultaneously listening, understanding technical terms, and taking notes. This emphasizes the need for strategic interventions, such as providing note-taking frameworks and adapting delivery methods to reduce cognitive overload. Moreover, tailored listening exercises that simulate real-world technical communication could further enhance listening proficiency.

Speaking skills presented another challenge, with trainees struggling to articulate technical processes in English. The disconnection between general English instruction and the specific language skills needed in the garment industry. This indicates the need for curriculum reforms that integrate speaking exercises focused on technical language, including garment-specific grammar and passive voice usage. Repeated practice in authentic, industry-relevant contexts would boost trainees' speaking confidence and competence.

Generally, the study supports socio-cognitive and situated learning theories, which advocate for contextualized, customized language development. It also highlights the distinct language demands within the Ethiopian TVET context, where technical and communicative English skills must be harmonized. As industry demands evolve, continuous assessment and curriculum responsiveness are essential to ensuring trainees develop the language proficiency necessary for international competitiveness.

The findings provide a foundation for future research focused on further refining English language instruction for non-native learners in technical fields. Responsive, context-specific interventions can optimize the learning trajectories of diverse trainees, equipping them with the skills needed to thrive in global markets. This study contributes valuable insights to an understudied area, offering practical recommendations for enhancing English language education in technical and vocational settings. Further research should explore pedagogical interventions and curriculum adaptations that specifically address the unique challenges identified in this study.

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