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READING LAGS BEHIND: SKILL-SPECIFIC ENGLISH PROFICIENCY GAPS AMONG MANAGEMENT STUDENTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ESP CURRICULUM

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Abstract: Reading is the skill through which business students meet their discipline, yet little is known about how reading develops relative to other English skills among Indonesian management students. This study examines skill-specific proficiency gaps, with a focus on reading, among management students in an Indonesian business faculty and draws implications for the English for specific purposes (ESP) curriculum. EnglishScore results for grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading were analysed for 235 students tested in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. A reading gap index, the difference between each student's reading score and the mean of their other three skills, was calculated alongside CEFR band comparisons and regression analysis. Reading was the weakest skill (M = 175.6) and trailed vocabulary by 18.9 points on average. Two-thirds of students (155; 66.0%) read below the level of their other skills, 67 (28.5%) by 25 points or more, and 74.0% scored below the A2 threshold in reading. Crucially, the reading gap widened with proficiency (Spearman $\rho = -.37$, $p < .001$): it was negligible among the lowest-scoring quarter of students, reached −23.3 points in the highest quarter, and was largest at A2, where reading trailed vocabulary by 55 points. Vocabulary and grammar together predicted 87% of the variance in reading, while listening contributed little. These findings suggest that as students gain words and structures, their ability to process connected text does not keep pace. The study proposes a reading-led ESP curriculum that bridges words to texts at A1, builds guided business reading at A2 and develops genre-based business literacy from B1, supported by carefully levelled materials and regular assessment.

Keywords: *reading proficiency; skill gaps; English for specific purposes; CEFR; management students; Indonesian higher education*

INTRODUCTION

For students of management, English is above all a language of access. Textbooks, case studies, market reports, financial statements, company websites and research articles in business disciplines are overwhelmingly published in English, and the ability to read them determines how much of the global business literature a student can use. Across Southeast Asia, where English serves as the working language of regional cooperation (Lee et al., 2024) and where proficiency shapes graduates' willingness to pursue work abroad (Prasancheep & Kanokpermpoon, 2024), reading competence is therefore not a peripheral skill but a gateway to professional knowledge. Yet in Indonesian business faculties, English is often taught as a short, general course, and it is rarely asked whether students' reading keeps pace with their other language skills.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a common basis for answering such questions. Its descriptors define what learners can do with reading, listening and

other skills at each level, and a systematic review identifies it as the most widely used proficiency scale in educational contexts (Zhu et al., 2023). The framework has generated an expanding body of research, documented in bibliometric studies of CEFR-focused education (Ali et al., 2025; Mutammimah et al., 2026; Nadtayay & Wongsaphan, 2024) and of CEFR-based speaking pedagogy (Khan et al., 2026), as well as in national syntheses such as a review of more than twenty years of CEFR research and practice in Türkiye (Arslan, 2026). The 2020 companion volume has also encouraged new approaches to immersive learning (Demirdöven, 2025), and CEFR-based learning applications are increasingly available (Amiruddin et al., 2025).

In Southeast and East Asia, the CEFR has been combined with communicative language teaching and English as an international language to reshape English classrooms (Foley, 2022). In Indonesia, scholars have advocated CEFR adoption to support 21st-century skills (Miqawati et al., 2023), explored communicative CEFR-based learning (Trimadona et al., 2024) and examined CEFR implementation in non-English study programmes (Rifiyanti, 2023). Reading has received specific attention: national English textbooks have been evaluated for CEFR alignment (Rijali & Nor, 2025), teachers have incorporated local wisdom into reading instruction (Jaelani et al., 2026), and postgraduate students' motivation in preparing for B1 reading has been examined (Sukarton et al., 2025). CEFR-based listening resources such as digital storytelling (Jayanti & Sudimantara, 2023), multisensory computer-assisted learning for under-resourced institutions (Sudimantara et al., 2025), differentiated digital teaching (Sahayu et al., 2026) and multimodal computer-mediated communication tasks (Abdul Qodir, 2024) further illustrate the range of pedagogical responses. The framework also informs other languages in Indonesia, from Bahasa Indonesia for speakers of other languages (Muliastuti et al., 2023) to Arabic, where it guides exam development, vocabulary standards, standardization, textbook analysis and writing indicators (Hakiem et al., 2025; Mahmudi et al., 2025; Nurdianto et al., 2026; Pratama et al., 2024; Utami & Shodiq, 2023).

Why might reading lag behind other skills? Computational and corpus research offers part of the answer by showing how sharply the linguistic demands of texts rise across CEFR levels. Sentence-level difficulty can be annotated and predicted by CEFR level (Arase et al., 2022), English sentences profiled by level (Uchida et al., 2024) and lexical complexity classified in context (Aleksandrova & Pouliot, 2023). Open multilingual resources now support CEFR-based proficiency research (Imperial et al., 2025), grammar can be modelled as a CEFR-aligned knowledge graph (Ribeiro-Flucht & Chen, 2026), and large language models can be combined with the English Vocabulary Profile to assess vocabulary at the word level (Bannò et al., 2025). Analyses of academic reading passages show that lexical diversity and the CEFR level of vocabulary increase substantially in academic texts (Aziz et al., 2026), while studies of ChatGPT-generated reading materials (Nguyen et al., 2026) and of the consistency of automated CEFR analysers (Siripol et al., 2025) show that matching texts to learners' levels is not straightforward. Learner-corpus and classroom research adds that collocational knowledge develops alongside vocabulary proficiency (Eguchi & Kyle, 2023) and that basic-level learners' writing shows clear lexical and syntactic limits (Arrogante et al., 2025). Taken together, this work suggests that knowing words is not the same as being able to process the dense, connected language of authentic texts.

CEFR-referenced assessment provides the means to detect such gaps. Thai universities have used CEFR-based tests to monitor proficiency development (Waluyo et al., 2024), linked autonomous online learning to CEFR outcomes (Theppanya et al., 2025) and documented the difficulties undergraduates face when taking CEFR-based tests (Mafu, 2022). Validation studies of institutional English proficiency tests and CEFR-aligned placement tests stress the importance of appropriate score use (Syafik et al., 2026; Yacoub, 2025), as does research on the interpretation of established tests such as the TOEIC Listening and Reading test (Hsieh, 2023), and teachers' assessment literacy is essential if CEFR-aligned results are to inform teaching (Marzaini et al., 2023). Beyond overall levels, CEFR descriptors have been used to assess integrative ESP competence among engineering students (Bazhutina & Tsepilova, 2024), to profile STEM students' writing within outcome-based education (Wahyuni et al., 2026), to assess L2 writing (Sahu & Mukherjee, 2026), to design learner-centred instruction with basic-user descriptors (Jeon, 2025) and to examine oral proficiency alongside anxiety and self-efficacy (Liwanag et al., 2026). Baseline profiling of freshmen has identified skill-specific gaps as the basis for proficiency enhancement programmes (Pramis et al., 2026).

In Indonesia, the EnglishScore test, which reports grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading scores alongside a CEFR level, has been used to profile English education students (Darwis, 2024) and

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university students more broadly (Kurniati et al., 2025). Related studies have examined lecturers' TOEFL and CEFR proficiency (Kaloeti, 2024) and the proficiency and motivation of English students in Papua (Putri, 2024). These studies typically report overall levels and, at most, average skill scores. They rarely examine how skills relate to one another within individual learners, whether the gap between skills changes as proficiency grows, or what such gaps imply for ESP in non-English programmes.

This study addresses that gap. Using EnglishScore results from management students in an Indonesian business faculty, it examines skill-specific gaps with a focus on reading, the skill most central to business studies. It asks: (1) How does reading proficiency compare with grammar, vocabulary and listening among management students? (2) How large and how widespread is the gap between each student's reading and their other skills, and does it change with overall proficiency? (3) Which language components best predict reading performance, and what do the findings imply for the ESP curriculum?

METHOD

The study used a quantitative, within-learner comparative design based on secondary analysis of institutional assessment records. Whereas profiling studies usually compare skills at the group level, the present design compares each student's reading with their own other skills, so that differences reflect skill-specific gaps rather than differences between students. Figure 1 summarizes the procedure.

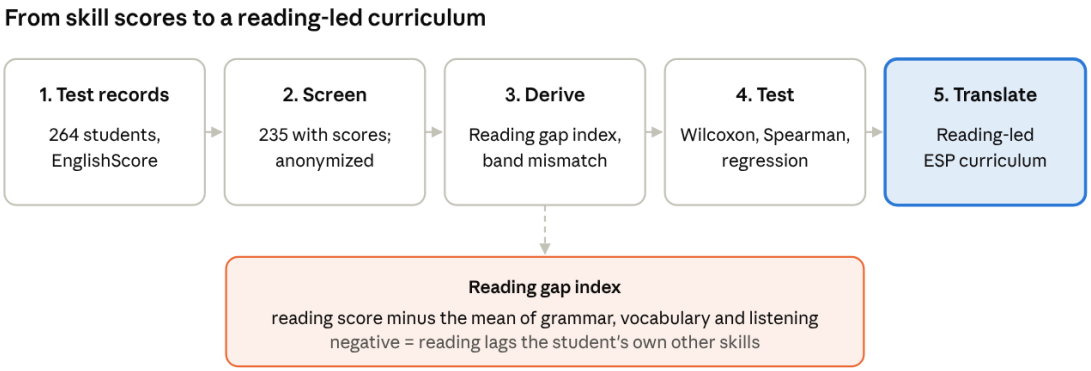


Figure 1 · *Research procedure*

The data come from the Management Study Programme of the Faculty of Economics and Business at an Indonesian university. All students registered for the institutional English proficiency assessment in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year were included. Of 264 registered students, 235 completed the test and were analysed; 29 had no recorded scores and were excluded. Most analysed students belonged to the 2024 intake (n = 214), and 21 came from earlier intakes (Table 1). Student names and identification numbers were removed before analysis, and results are reported only in aggregate.

Table 1. *Dataset summary*

Item	Value
Programme	Management, Faculty of Economics and Business
Assessment	EnglishScore, even semester 2025/2026
Students analysed	235 of 264 registered (89.0%)
Intake	2024: 214; 2021–2023: 21
Skill scores	Grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading
Overall CEFR distribution	Pre-A1 30; A1 131; A2 48; B1 21; B2 5

EnglishScore is a computer-based English test developed by the British Council that has been used to profile Indonesian university students (Darwis, 2024; Kurniati et al., 2025). It reports grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading scores on a common scale together with an overall score and CEFR level. In the present data, CEFR levels correspond to 100-point bands of the overall score (Pre-A1 below 100, A1 100–199, A2 200–299, B1 300–399, B2 400–499, C1 and above 500 or more). The test does not assess speaking or writing.

Five measures were derived to examine reading in relation to the other skills (Table 2). The central measure, the reading gap index, expresses each student's reading score relative to the mean of their

grammar, vocabulary and listening scores, so that a negative value indicates that reading lags the student's other skills.

Table 2. *Derived measures*

Measure	Definition	Interpretation
Reading gap index	Reading score − mean of grammar, vocabulary and listening	Negative: reading lags the student's other skills
Reading lag category	Ahead (gap ≥ +25); in step (−25 < gap < +25); lagging (−50 < gap ≤ −25); strongly lagging (gap ≤ −50)	Proportion of students with a meaningful reading lag
Vocabulary–reading gap	Vocabulary score − reading score	Positive: words known exceed text processing
Band mismatch	Each skill's CEFR band compared with the student's overall band	Below: the skill pulls the student down
Proficiency quartile	Quarter of the overall score distribution	Whether gaps change with proficiency

The threshold of 25 points for a meaningful lag corresponds to a quarter of a CEFR band and is larger than the typical difference between the other three skills.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each skill. Reading was compared with the mean of the other three skills using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, because scores were positively skewed. The relationship between overall proficiency and the reading gap was examined with Spearman's rank correlation and by comparing gaps across proficiency quartiles and CEFR levels. To identify which components best account for reading performance, reading was regressed on vocabulary, grammar and listening using ordinary least squares, and standardized coefficients were compared. Analyses were conducted in Python. Because the B2 group contained only five students, results at that level are reported but interpreted cautiously.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading compared with the other skills (RQ1)

Reading was the weakest of the four skills (Table 3). Its mean (175.6) and median (155) were the lowest, nearly three-quarters of students (174; 74.0%) scored below 200 in reading, placing their reading at A1 or below, and only 19 students reached 300 or more. Vocabulary, by contrast, had the highest mean (194.6) and median (173), the fewest students below 200 (143; 60.9%) and the most at 300 or above (36).

Table 3. *Skill scores and their distribution relative to CEFR thresholds (n = 235)*

Skill	Mean	SD	Median	Below 200 (A1 or lower), n (%)	300 or above (B1+), n
Vocabulary	194.6	97.6	173.0	143 (60.9)	36
Grammar	183.4	90.2	164.0	157 (66.8)	30
Listening	183.3	73.5	170.0	165 (70.2)	19
Reading	175.6	84.5	155.0	174 (74.0)	19

Within students, reading was significantly lower than the mean of the other three skills (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, $p < .001$). The average reading gap index was −11.5 points (SD = 31.6; median −8.7), and reading trailed vocabulary by 18.9 points on average. In 153 students (65.1%), the vocabulary score exceeded the reading score, and in 47 (20.0%) it did so by 50 points or more, half a CEFR band.

How widespread is the reading lag? (RQ2)

The reading lag was widespread. Two-thirds of students (155; 66.0%) read below the mean of their own other skills. Using a threshold of 25 points, a quarter of a CEFR band, 67 students (28.5%) showed a meaningful reading lag, including 24 (10.2%) whose reading trailed their other skills by 50 points or more (Figure 2). Only 15 students (6.4%) read meaningfully ahead of their other skills.

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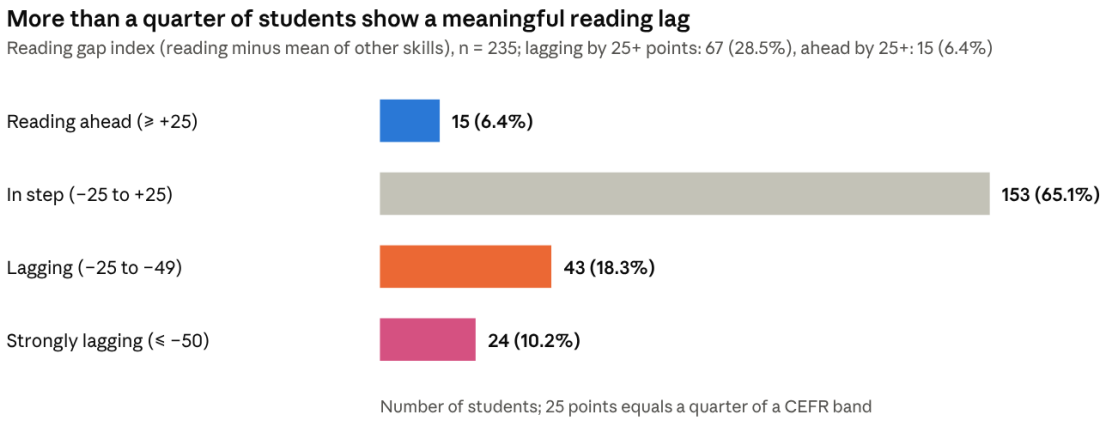


Figure 2. · *Distribution of the reading gap index*

Comparing each skill's CEFR band with the student's overall band confirms the pattern (Table 4). Reading was the skill most often a band below a student's overall level (25 students) and the least often a band above it (12). Vocabulary showed the opposite pattern: it was rarely below the overall band (6) and most often above it (37). For 19 students, reading was both their lowest skill and a full band below their overall level, so that reading alone placed them lower than their other skills would suggest.

Table 4. *Each skill's CEFR band compared with the student's overall band (n = 235)*

Skill	Below overall band	Same band	Above overall band
Reading	25	198	12
Grammar	22	192	21
Listening	19	191	25
Vocabulary	6	192	37

Does the reading gap change with proficiency? (RQ2)

The reading gap was not constant: it widened as overall proficiency increased (Spearman $\rho = -.37$, $p < .001$). Among the lowest-scoring quarter of students, reading was in step with the other skills (gap = +0.1). The gap grew to −9.0 in the second quarter, −14.4 in the third and −23.3 in the highest quarter (Figure 3). In other words, students who had developed more vocabulary, grammar and listening had not developed reading to the same extent.

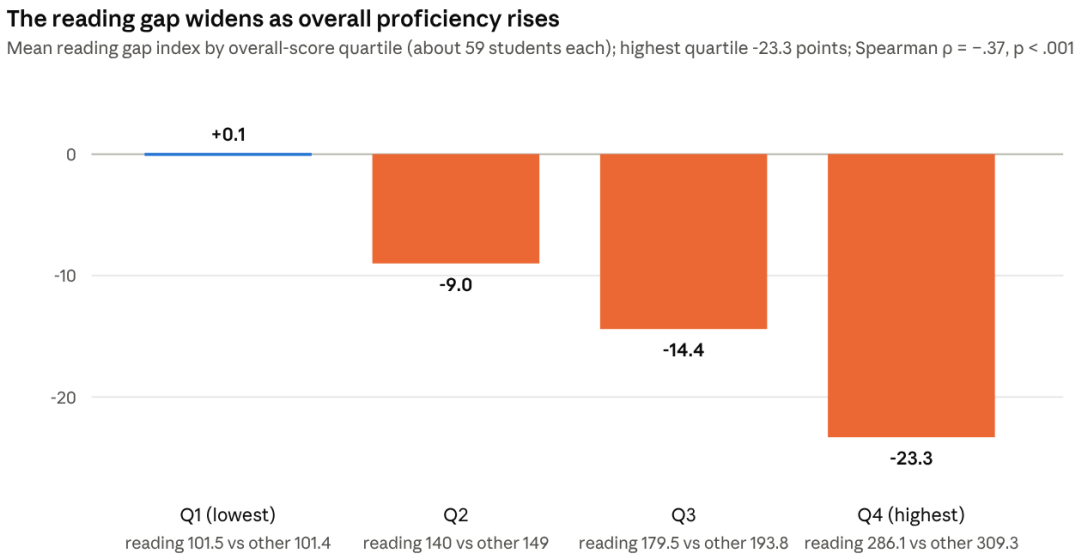


Figure 3. · *Reading gap by overall proficiency quartile*

The same pattern appears across CEFR levels (Table 5). The gap was negligible at Pre-A1, small at A1, and largest at A2, where reading trailed the other skills by 33.7 points (median 40.8) and trailed

vocabulary by 55.3 points (Figure 4). It remained large at B1 (−26.5). Only among the five B2 students did reading exceed the other skills, a result driven by a small group with very high reading scores.

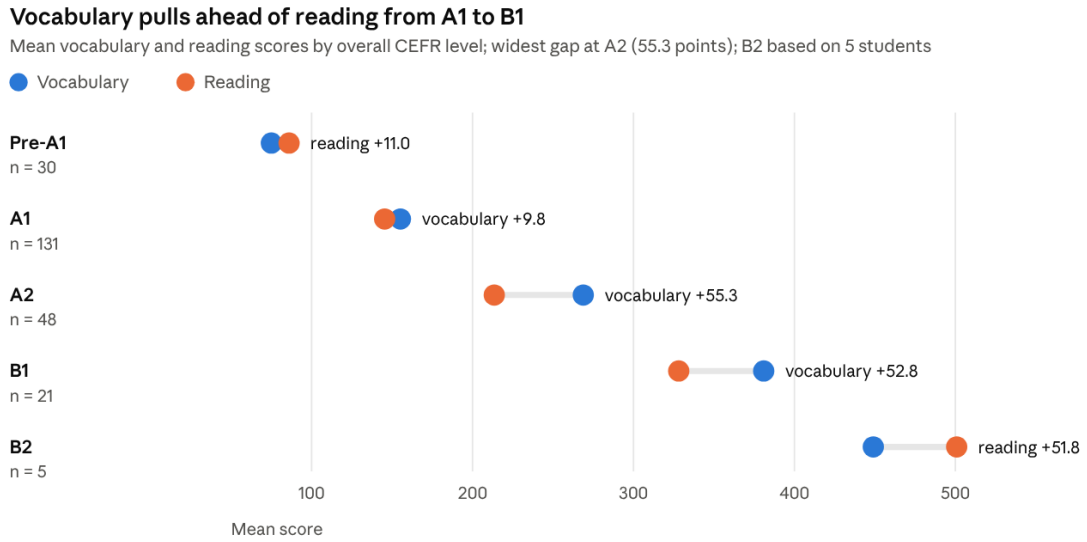


Figure 4. · *Vocabulary and reading scores by overall CEFR level*

Table 5. *Reading gap and vocabulary–reading gap by overall CEFR level*

Level	n	Mean reading gap	Median reading gap	Vocabulary − reading
Pre-A1	30	+2.4	+1.2	−11.0
A1	131	−7.4	−8.3	+9.7
A2	48	−33.7	−40.8	+55.3
B1	21	−26.5	−26.7	+52.8
B2	5	+76.8	+82.3	−51.8

What predicts reading? (RQ3)

Reading was strongly correlated with each of the other skills (vocabulary r = .91, grammar r = .91, listening r = .90). When the three skills were entered together, they explained 87% of the variance in reading (R^2 = .868, adjusted R^2 = .866, $F(3, 231) = 506.2$, $p < .001$; Table 6). Vocabulary (β = .45) and grammar (β = .39) made significant unique contributions, whereas listening did not (β = .11, p = .165). Because the predictors are themselves highly correlated (variance inflation factors 7.7–10.8), the coefficients should be read as indicating relative importance rather than precise independent effects.

Table 6. *Regression of reading on vocabulary, grammar and listening (n = 235)*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	8.60	5.81	—	1.48	.140
Vocabulary	0.39	0.06	.45	6.82	< .001
Grammar	0.37	0.07	.39	5.53	< .001
Listening	0.13	0.09	.11	1.39	.165
R^2 = .868; adjusted R^2 = .866					

Together, these results show that reading is built primarily on vocabulary and grammar, yet as those components grow, reading does not grow in proportion. The gap between knowing words and structures and being able to read connected text is therefore the central skill-specific problem in this population.

Summary of skill-specific gaps

Table 8 brings the main indicators together. Across most indicators, reading is the weakest skill or the one most often lagging, while vocabulary is the strongest or the one most often leading; the exceptions are the small B2 group and the fact that grammar was marginally more often a student's single lowest score (75 students, against 70 for reading). The pattern is consistent enough to treat reading as the principal skill-specific gap in this population, and the vocabulary–reading contrast as its clearest expression.

Table 8. *Summary of skill-specific gap indicators*

Indicator	Reading	Vocabulary	Interpretation
Mean score	175.6 (lowest)	194.6 (highest)	Reading trails by 18.9 points
Students at A1 or below	174 (74.0%)	143 (60.9%)	Reading most often at basic level
Below student's overall band	25	6	Reading most often pulls students down
Above student's overall band	12	37	Vocabulary most often lifts students up
Students with skill as weakest	70	47	Reading weakest for nearly 3 in 10
Gap at A2	−33.7 vs other skills	+55.3 over reading	Gap peaks at A2
Unique contribution to reading	—	β = .45	Vocabulary is the strongest predictor

The students for whom reading is both the weakest skill and a full band below their overall level (n = 19) form a clearly identifiable group for targeted support: their other skills would place them a level higher if their reading caught up.

Knowing words is not reading

The study's first finding is that reading is the weakest skill among management students and that, for two-thirds of them, it trails their own vocabulary, grammar and listening. The gap is not merely a reflection of overall low proficiency: it appears within students, it is most often the skill that pulls a student below their overall CEFR band, and it is largest relative to vocabulary. Students appear to know more words than they can use to make sense of connected text. This pattern is consistent with the view, supported by research mapping sentence difficulty and lexical complexity onto CEFR levels, that reading demands rise steeply as texts lengthen and become syntactically denser (Arase et al., 2022; Aleksandrova & Pouliot, 2023; Uchida et al., 2024). Reading requires learners to integrate word meanings, parse structures and track ideas across sentences, and a growing vocabulary does not automatically supply these processes.

The regression results clarify which components matter. Vocabulary and grammar together accounted for most of the variance in reading, while listening added little once they were known. Reading in this population therefore rests on lexical and grammatical knowledge, but the widening gap shows that this knowledge is not being converted into text comprehension at the same rate. One explanation is that students' vocabulary is broad but shallow: learner-corpus research shows that collocational knowledge, which is central to processing natural text, develops only gradually with proficiency (Eguchi & Kyle, 2023), and classroom profiling of basic-level learners reveals limited lexical and syntactic range (Arrogante et al., 2025). Another explanation is limited exposure to extended reading, so that students rarely practise integrating words and structures in long texts. Both point to the same pedagogical need: moving from word and sentence knowledge to text-level processing.

A gap that widens with growth

The most consequential finding is that the reading gap widens with overall proficiency, from virtually zero in the lowest quartile to more than 23 points in the highest, and peaks at A2. This is counterintuitive: one might expect weaker students to struggle most with reading. Instead, at the lowest levels all skills are uniformly low, and the gap opens as students begin to build vocabulary and grammar. At A2, students know enough words and structures to make visible gains in those components, but reading lags behind by more than half a CEFR band relative to vocabulary. A2 is therefore the critical point at which reading instruction must intensify if the gap is not to persist, as it does at B1.

This pattern matters for curriculum design because it suggests that general English instruction which builds vocabulary and grammar, without systematic reading of extended texts, may widen rather than narrow the gap. It also echoes findings that skill-specific gaps identified in baseline profiling require targeted, skill-level programmes rather than generic proficiency courses (Pramis et al., 2026). The result at B2, where reading exceeded the other skills, should be treated with caution given the small group, but it suggests that reading can become a strength once learners have enough language to read independently, as postgraduate learners preparing for B1 reading also illustrate (Sukarton et al., 2025).

Why reading matters most for management students

The lag in reading is especially problematic for business education. Management students are expected to read textbooks, case studies, reports and research articles, many of them in English. Analyses of academic reading passages show that such texts carry substantial lexical diversity and high CEFR vocabulary levels (Aziz et al., 2026), well beyond what most students in this study can handle: three-quarters read at A1 or below. ESP research has shown how CEFR descriptors can be adapted to the integrative competences of particular disciplines, as with engineering students (Bazhutina & Tsepilova, 2024), and how discipline-specific language can be profiled within outcome-based education (Wahyuni et al., 2026). For management, reading business texts is arguably the core integrative competence, linking language knowledge to disciplinary learning. When reading lags, students lose access not only to English but to the knowledge of their own field.

The gap also affects other skills. Reading provides much of the input from which vocabulary depth, collocations and grammatical patterns are acquired. A persistent reading lag may therefore slow overall development, creating a cycle in which students who read little in English gain little from what they read. Breaking this cycle requires treating reading not as one skill among four but as the organizing skill of the ESP curriculum.

The findings also help explain why general English courses may produce disappointing gains in reading. If instruction emphasizes vocabulary lists and grammar exercises, students may improve in the components the test measures most directly while their ability to read extended text develops more slowly. The widening gap observed here is what one would expect from such instruction: as students accumulate words and structures, their scores in vocabulary and grammar rise, but without sustained practice in reading connected text, reading lags further behind. The remedy is not less vocabulary or grammar but more reading, so that words and structures are encountered and consolidated in meaningful text, and reading becomes the context in which other knowledge is put to use.

A reading-led ESP curriculum

Drawing on these findings, Figure 5 proposes a reading-led ESP curriculum organized in three stages that follow overall CEFR level. Table 7 details each stage.

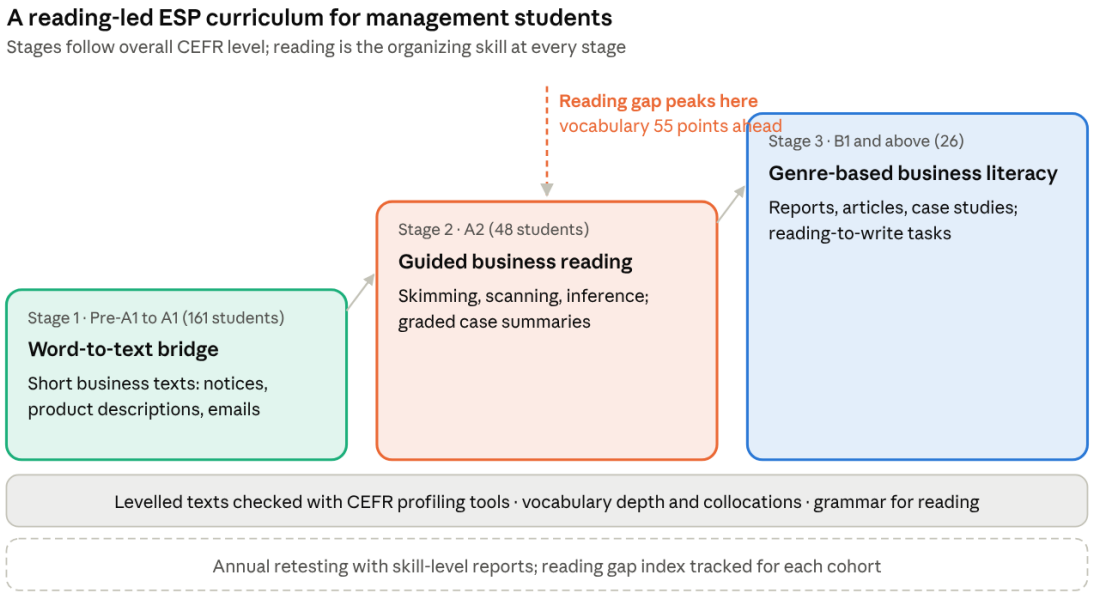


Figure 5. · *A reading-led ESP curriculum model*

Table 7. *Reading-led ESP curriculum matrix*

Stage	Level and students	Reading goals	Business texts	Core activities	Assessment
1. Word-to-text bridge	Pre-A1 to A1 (161)	Understand short, simple texts on	Notices, product descriptions, short	Vocabulary in context, sentence-level decoding,	Short reading checks;

Stage	Level and students	Reading goals	Business texts	Core activities	Assessment
		familiar business topics	emails, simple charts	read-and-match, short graded readers	vocabulary-in-context tasks
2. Guided business reading	A2 (48)	Read short texts on familiar matters and find specific information	Graded case summaries, company profiles, job advertisements, simple reports	Skimming and scanning, connectors and reference, guided inference, collocation work	Graded reading tests; reading gap index monitored
3. Genre-based business literacy	B1 and above (26)	Understand main points of clear texts and use reading for writing	Authentic reports, business news, case studies, research abstracts	Genre analysis, critical reading, reading-to-write summaries and reports	Integrated reading-writing tasks; CEFR-aligned rubrics

Stage 1, the word-to-text bridge, serves the large majority of students at Pre-A1 and A1. Its aim is to connect the vocabulary students are acquiring to short, meaningful business texts, so that words are learned and practised in context rather than in isolation. Because listening was the relative strength of the lowest-level students, listening-supported reading, such as reading along with audio or video, may be a productive entry point, consistent with CEFR-based listening resources (Jayanti & Sudimantara, 2023) and multisensory computer-assisted learning (Sudimantara et al., 2025).

Stage 2, guided business reading, targets A2, where the reading gap peaks. Here instruction should explicitly teach reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, tracking reference and connectors and making inferences, using graded business texts. Attention to collocations and multi-word expressions would help convert vocabulary breadth into depth (Eguchi & Kyle, 2023). This stage is the most important lever in the curriculum because it is where reading falls furthest behind.

Stage 3, genre-based business literacy, serves students at B1 and above. It introduces authentic business genres and links reading to writing, for example through summaries and short reports, so that students learn to use what they read. CEFR-aligned writing assessment (Sahu & Mukherjee, 2026) and integrative ESP descriptors (Bazhutina & Tsepilova, 2024) can guide task design and evaluation.

To illustrate how Stage 2 might work in practice, consider a sequence built around a graded company profile of about 300 words. Before reading, students predict the content from the title and headings and review six to eight key business terms in context, focusing on collocations such as market share, launch a product and target customers. During a first reading, they skim for the main idea of each paragraph and match paragraphs to headings. During a second reading, they scan for specific figures and dates and track reference words and connectors that link sentences, such as however, as a result and this strategy. After reading, they answer inference questions about the company's position, then reuse key collocations in a short written summary of three or four sentences. Each step targets a component of text processing that vocabulary knowledge alone does not supply: integrating sentences, following reference and inferring meaning. Repeated weekly with progressively longer and more varied business texts, such sequences directly address the processes that the reading gap reveals as underdeveloped.

The same logic can be adapted to the other stages. At Stage 1, the text might be a three-sentence product description, with students matching words to pictures and sentences to meanings before reading the whole. At Stage 3, the text might be an authentic business news article or the abstract of a management research paper, with students analysing its structure, evaluating its claims and writing a short response. Across stages, teachers should keep a record of the vocabulary and collocations encountered in reading and recycle them in later texts, so that lexical knowledge is consolidated through repeated exposure in context.

Materials, technology and assessment

A reading-led curriculum depends on texts that match learners' levels. Computational tools can help: sentence-level CEFR profiling (Arase et al., 2022; Uchida et al., 2024), lexical complexity classification (Aleksandrova & Pouliot, 2023), vocabulary profiling with the English Vocabulary Profile (Bannò et al., 2025), CEFR-aligned grammar models (Ribeiro-Flucht & Chen, 2026) and open CEFR corpora (Imperial et al., 2025) allow teachers to check whether texts are appropriate. Generative AI offers a quick way to produce graded business texts, but studies of ChatGPT-generated reading materials

(Nguyen et al., 2026) and of the consistency of automated CEFR analysers (Siripol et al., 2025) warn that outputs need careful checking. CEFR-aligned textbooks (Rijali & Nor, 2025), locally meaningful reading texts (Jaelani et al., 2026), CEFR-based learning applications (Amiruddin et al., 2025), immersive approaches based on the 2020 CEFR update (Demirdöven, 2025), differentiated digital teaching (Sahayu et al., 2026), autonomous online learning (Theppanya et al., 2025) and multimodal computer-mediated tasks (Abdul Qodir, 2024) can extend reading practice beyond the classroom.

Assessment should follow the same logic. Reporting skill-level results, rather than only an overall level, would allow programmes to monitor the reading gap year by year, in the way Thai universities track proficiency development with CEFR-based tests (Waluyo et al., 2024). Institutional tests should be validated for their intended uses (Syafik et al., 2026; Yacoub, 2025), and score interpretation should be cautious at the level of individual skills, as research on established tests emphasizes (Hsieh, 2023). Building teachers' assessment literacy is a precondition for using such information well (Marzaini et al., 2023), and learner-centred design based on CEFR descriptors (Jeon, 2025) can help translate assessment results into classroom goals. Because EnglishScore does not cover productive skills, the curriculum should also include CEFR-referenced assessment of speaking and writing, including attention to the anxiety and self-efficacy that shape oral performance (Liwanag et al., 2026) and to the difficulties learners face with CEFR-based tests (Mafu, 2022).

The institutional and regional context

The curriculum proposed here fits within broader CEFR adoption in Indonesia and the region. Indonesian scholars have argued for the CEFR as a framework for 21st-century English learning (Miqawati et al., 2023), shown how it can underpin communicative teaching (Trimadona et al., 2024; Foley, 2022) and highlighted the particular needs of non-English programmes (Rifiyanti, 2023). Comparable profiling of English education students and Indonesian university students using EnglishScore (Darwis, 2024; Kurniati et al., 2025), of lecturers (Kaloeti, 2024) and of students in Papua (Putri, 2024) suggests that skill-level analysis could be extended across programmes. Because CEFR principles are already applied to Bahasa Indonesia for speakers of other languages (Muliastuti et al., 2023) and to Arabic teaching and assessment (Hakiem et al., 2025; Mahmudi et al., 2025; Nurdianto et al., 2026; Pratama et al., 2024; Utami & Shodiq, 2023), institutions can build a shared, CEFR-referenced approach to language support across departments. Regionally, English's role in ASEAN (Lee et al., 2024) and its link to graduates' international mobility (Prasancheep & Kanokpermpoon, 2024) strengthen the case for investing in reading for business students. The study also contributes to the CEFR literature mapped in bibliometric and systematic reviews (Ali et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2026; Mutammimah et al., 2026; Nadtayay & Wongsaphan, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023; Arslan, 2026) by adding a within-learner, skill-gap perspective from a non-English programme.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. It draws on one programme at one university and a single testing round, so the findings may not generalize to other business faculties. The reading gap index depends on EnglishScore's scaling of the four skills, and it describes relative rather than absolute weakness. The skills are highly correlated, so regression coefficients indicate relative importance rather than precise unique effects. The B2 group was very small, and the 29 untested students may differ from those tested. The test does not measure speaking or writing, and the study lacks information about students' reading habits, prior instruction or motivation, which would help explain why reading lags. Future research should test the reading-led curriculum through intervention studies, track reading gaps longitudinally and combine scores with surveys of reading practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined skill-specific English proficiency gaps among management students in an Indonesian business faculty, with particular attention to reading. Reading was the weakest of the four skills measured: three-quarters of students read at A1 or below, two-thirds read below the level of their own other skills, and more than a quarter showed a lag of at least a quarter of a CEFR band. Reading was also the skill most likely to pull a student below their overall CEFR level.

The central finding is that the reading gap widens as proficiency grows. It was negligible among the weakest students, increased steadily across proficiency quartiles and peaked at A2, where reading trailed

vocabulary by more than half a CEFR band. Vocabulary and grammar together explained most of the variance in reading, yet growth in these components was not matched by growth in reading. Students, in short, were acquiring words and structures faster than they were learning to use them to read connected text.

These findings call for an ESP curriculum in which reading is the organizing skill. The proposed reading-led curriculum bridges words to short texts at the foundation level, intensifies guided reading of graded business texts at A2, where the gap is greatest, and develops genre-based business literacy from B1. It should be supported by carefully levelled materials, attention to vocabulary depth and collocation, and annual assessment that reports skill-level results so that the reading gap can be monitored and addressed.

The study contributes a within-learner perspective on skill gaps to CEFR research and offers business faculties a concrete, data-based rationale for prioritizing reading. Future research should test the proposed curriculum through intervention studies, follow reading gaps over time and explore the reading habits and instructional experiences that lie behind them.

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