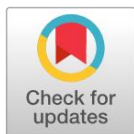


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Student-Athletes' Narratives of English Learning Needs in Special Sports Classes: Implications for Contextual ESP Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Background. Student-athletes in special sports classes represent a unique group with dual demands in academic learning and intensive athletic training. Limited study time, physical fatigue, and the need for international communication in sports make their English learning needs distinct and academically important to investigate. However, these specific needs are often not adequately addressed in conventional English classrooms.

Purpose. This study aims to analyze the English learning needs of junior high school student-athletes to inform more contextual and relevant ESP instruction.

Method. This study employed a descriptive quantitative design involving 58 student-athletes. Data were collected through a needs analysis questionnaire focusing on target needs and learning needs. The analysis highlights students' perspectives, preferences, and learning challenges as a basis for identifying effective instructional strategies.

Results. The findings reveal that students prioritize speaking skills as the most essential for their future athletic communication, followed by listening skills. Students expressed a preference for interactive and engaging learning media such as games and videos, reflecting their need for dynamic and practice-oriented activities. Most participants identified themselves at an elementary level of English proficiency, with key difficulties in vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. In addition, students showed a strong preference for kinaesthetic learning styles and outdoor learning environments, indicating the importance of movement-based and experiential learning. These findings reflect student voices and learning experiences that emphasize the need for more engaging and context-relevant instruction.

Conclusion. The study concludes that English instruction for student-athletes should be designed using contextual, communicative, and multisensory approaches that align with their lived learning experiences. These findings provide practical implications for developing ESP-based materials and strategies that support both academic development and athletic performance.

KEYWORDS

English For Specific Purposes, English Learning Needs, Needs Analysis, Student-Athletes

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INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes in special sports classes require English not only for academic purposes but also for communication in international sports contexts. English enables them to interact with athletes and coaches from

different countries, understand sports knowledge (Yunita et al., 2018; Siti et al., 2024). Therefore, English proficiency is essential to support both academic and athletic development at the junior high school level (Đorić, 2020; Siahaan & Suherman, 2022; MacNamara & Collins, 2019).

However, junior high school student-athletes face specific academic challenges. Their intensive training schedules limit study time and often lead to physical fatigue, which affects concentration during lessons (Brown & Fletcher, 2017). In addition, student-athletes tend to perceive English as less relevant to their primary goal of improving sports performance, which reduces their motivation in conventional classrooms (Damayanti & Sadikin, 2023; Henry, 2019). These conditions indicate the need for a more flexible and contextual approach to English learning (Hsieh, 2018; Arifin, 2015; Basturkmen, 2020).

Previous studies have explored needs analysis and learning strategies in English education, including the use of technology, blended learning, and vocabulary development (Priambodo, 2020; Hudaya, 2017; Rosidah et al., 2021; Lai & Bower, 2019; Nation, 2022). Other studies also highlight students' difficulties in reading and the need for appropriate learning materials (Hidayatulloh & Sugirin, 2022; Aprilianti & Sukano, 2025; Grabe & Stoller, 2020). However, these studies generally focus on broader student populations and do not specifically examine the unique context of student-athletes in special sports classes at the junior high school level. In addition, there is limited research that integrates both target needs and learning needs within an ESP framework in this context (Erdiana et al., 2020; Dewi et al., 2023; Amalia & Albiansyah, 2023).

Needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes plays a central role in identifying learners' necessities, lacks, and wants, as well as their preferred learning processes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Ekayati et al., 2020; Basturkmen, 2020). Understanding these aspects is essential to ensure that English instruction is relevant, effective, and aligned with students' real-life contexts, particularly in sports settings (Nasution & Tarigan, 2024; Riza, 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the English learning needs of student-athletes in special sports classes by examining their target needs and learning needs. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of contextual and ESP-based instructional strategies that support both academic achievement and athletic performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach to identify the English learning needs of student-athletes based on numerical data in the form of percentages (Sugiyono, 2013). The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Kalasan, Yogyakarta, on Monday, October 21, 2024. Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from both the university and the school to ensure that the research complied with ethical standards for studies involving junior high school students. The data collection was carried out in a classroom setting under the supervision of the researcher.

The population consisted of student-athletes enrolled in special sports classes, and a total of 58 students were selected as the sample using purposive sampling, considering their active involvement in both academic and athletic activities. The participants were junior high school student-athletes with varying levels of English proficiency and regular training schedules.

The main instrument used in this study was a needs analysis questionnaire developed based on the framework of Hutchinson and Waters (1987), which categorizes needs into target needs and learning needs. The questionnaire included items related to students' necessities, lacks, wants, preferred learning methods, and learning media. The instrument consisted of both single-choice and multiple-choice items and was designed using a nominal scale.

To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by experts in English education and ESP to evaluate the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each item. Revisions were made based on expert feedback to improve the quality of the instrument. The questionnaire blueprint was also designed to ensure alignment with the dimensions of target needs and learning needs. Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was informally tried out on a small group of students with similar characteristics to ensure that the items were clearly understood. The results indicated that the items were comprehensible and suitable for the target participants. Since the questionnaire focused on descriptive data, reliability was ensured through consistency in item construction, clear response options, and alignment with the theoretical framework.

Table 1. Questionnaire Blueprint

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Indicators	Item Numbers	Response Type
Target Needs	Necessities	Priority of English skills	5	Multiple choice (4 options)
	Wants	Preferred learning media	12	Multiple response
		Learning goals	13	Multiple choice (multiple options)
	Lacks	Current proficiency level	Speaking difficulties	3
Listening difficulties			8	Multiple response
Reading difficulties			9	Multiple response
Writing difficulties			10	Multiple response
Purpose of learning English			11	Multiple response
Learning Needs	Goals	Purpose of learning English	13	Multiple choice (multiple options)
	Inputs	Preferred learning media	12	Multiple response
		Preferred learning materials	14	Multiple choice
	Procedures	Learning activities	15	Multiple choice
		Learning environment	16	Multiple choice
		Learning styles	2	Multiple choice
	Teacher Role	Expected role of teacher	17	Multiple choice
	Student Role	Expected role of students	18	Multiple choice
		21st century skills development	19	Multiple choice

The primary data were collected through direct distribution of the questionnaire to the participants. Students completed the questionnaire independently during class time, and the researcher provided guidance to ensure clarity of instructions. In addition, classroom observations were conducted during two meetings to support and validate the questionnaire data. The observations focused on students' participation, learning behavior, and interaction during English lessons. The observation was non-structured and used as contextual support rather than as primary data.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly percentages, to identify patterns and tendencies in students' responses. The percentage was calculated using the formula $P = (f/N) \times 100$, where f refers to the frequency of responses and N refers to the total number

of respondents. For multiple-response items, the percentage was calculated based on the total number of responses rather than the number of respondents. The analysis followed Creswell (2012), focusing on organizing, summarizing, and interpreting the data to explain students' English learning needs in the context of special sports classes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on observations in special sports classes, during two meetings, the learning activities began with the teacher and students preparing the class, and the teacher gave a reflection before starting the learning. The teacher used the lecture method in the classroom, assisted by tools such as projectors and laptops to support learning. Students tended to be less focused and easily distracted when explaining the material. The lack of student focus was because the English lesson was at the end of the class, and students were already tired of learning and also practicing. This learning process could have been more engaging when the teacher explained that students were busy with their activities. In addition, this is also caused by the need for more student motivation towards the material and monotonous learning models from teachers. The conducive situation was when the teacher started to give students assignments to read stories from textbooks and ask questions about the characteristics and the meaning of the story being read. In the narrative text learning material, the teacher asked students to mention what types of narrative texts, vocabulary students needed help understanding, tenses in a story, and verb forms. In addition, students will refocus on the lesson when the teacher associates the learning model with videos or pictures. From this observation, students prefer learning related to sound and images, and they can also be given material related to sports. The findings in the analysis of the learning needs of student-athletes in special sports classes are discussed based on the main components according to Hutchinson & Waters (1987), namely Target Needs and Learning Needs.

Target Needs

Necessities

The results show that speaking is the most prioritized skill, with 71.4% of students selecting it, followed by listening at 25%, reading at 3.6%, and no students choosing writing. This indicates that students strongly prioritize speaking over other language skills, as it is more relevant for direct communication such as daily conversations and presentations. Therefore, learning design should focus on speaking activities, particularly those that simulate real communication in student-athlete contexts, such as interacting with coaches, giving presentations, and participating in discussions.

5. What skills do you think are the most important to learn in English?
58 responses

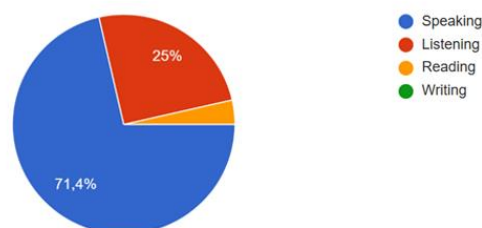


Figure 1. Result of student necessities

Wants

The results show that 82.1% of students prefer games as a learning medium, followed by videos at 75% and learning applications at 42.9%, while textbooks, e-books, and PowerPoint presentations

are less preferred. This indicates that students favor interactive and engaging media rather than passive learning methods, as they often feel tired after physical training and have difficulty maintaining focus during conventional instruction. Therefore, learning design should prioritize game-based and video-based activities to increase engagement and sustain students' attention in the classroom.

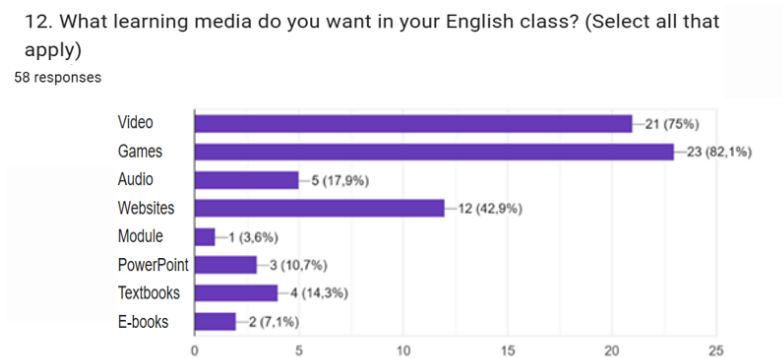


Figure 2. Result of student wants

Lacks

The results show that most students are at the A2 level (42.9%), followed by B1 (32.1%) and A1 (21.4%), with very few students at B2 and C1 levels. This indicates that the majority of students are at basic to lower-intermediate proficiency and still have limitations in understanding more complex English materials. Therefore, learning design should be adjusted to A2–B1 levels, with a focus on strengthening basic vocabulary, grammar, and gradual progression toward more complex language use.

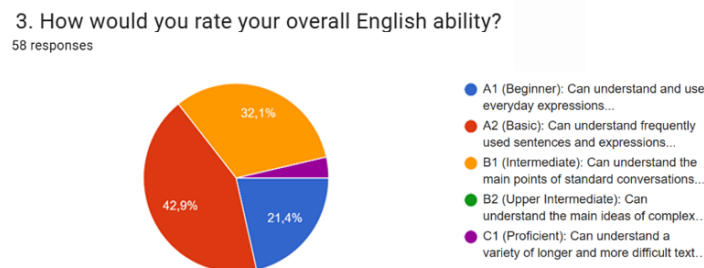


Figure 3. Results of students' English language ability levels

The results show that the main difficulties in speaking are fluency (50%) and vocabulary and pronunciation (46.4%), while fewer students report problems in conveying ideas coherently (21.4%). This indicates that students face greater challenges in language production than in organizing their ideas. Therefore, learning design should focus on improving fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation through structured speaking practice such as role-play, guided conversations, and sports-related communication tasks.

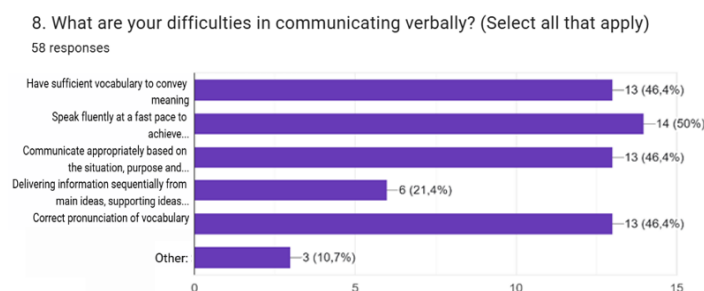


Figure 4. The result of difficulty in speaking

The results show that 46.4% of students have difficulty distinguishing sounds, meanings, and abbreviated words, while 39.3% struggle with understanding spoken information. This indicates that students face challenges in both phonological recognition and contextual comprehension. Therefore, learning design should focus on listening activities that train sound recognition and meaning understanding, such as exposure to authentic audio, guided listening tasks, and sports-related conversations.

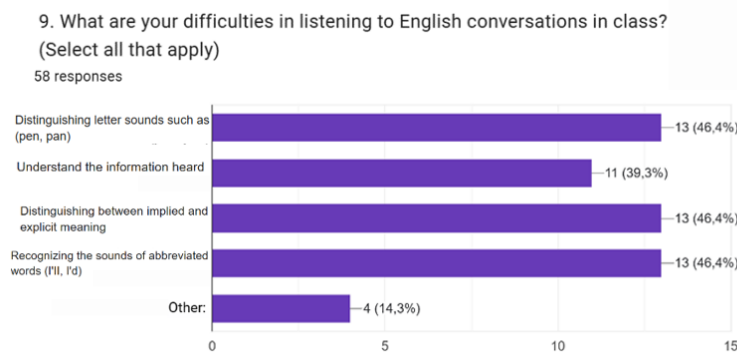


Figure 5. The result of difficulty in listening

The results show that 57.1% of students have difficulty understanding text content and sentence structure, while 46.4% struggle to distinguish between implied and explicit meanings. This indicates that students face challenges in both grammatical understanding and deeper text interpretation. Therefore, learning design should focus on strengthening grammar and developing reading strategies, such as identifying main ideas, understanding context, and interpreting implicit meanings through relevant texts.

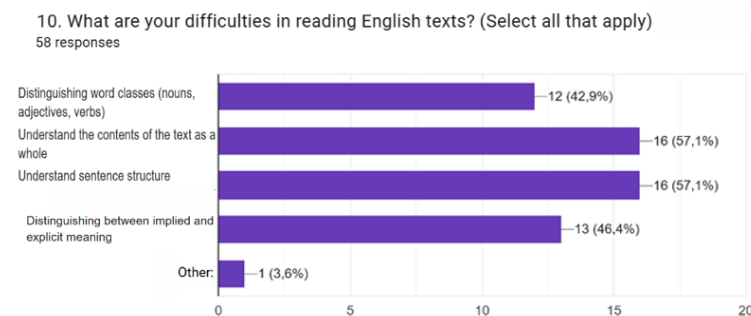


Figure 6. The result of difficulty in reading

The results show that 78.6% of students have difficulty choosing appropriate words in writing, followed by challenges in developing ideas (42.9%) and using correct grammar (39.3%). This indicates that limited vocabulary and basic grammar are the main barriers in students' writing. Therefore, learning design should focus on vocabulary development, sentence construction, and guided writing practice, such as composing short texts, structured exercises, and sports-related writing tasks.

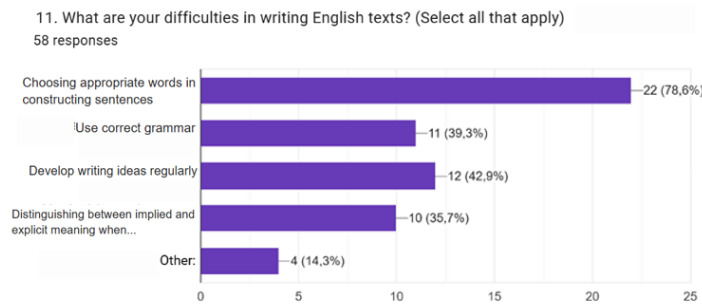


Figure 7. The result of difficulty in writing

The findings show that student-athletes primarily need English for communication, with a strong emphasis on speaking skills. They prefer interactive learning media such as games and videos, while passive materials are less effective due to their limited focus after physical training. In terms of proficiency, most students are at A2 to B1 levels, which indicates a basic to lower-intermediate ability with limitations in handling more complex language. Students also face consistent difficulties across skills, especially in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension.

These results indicate that English learning design for student-athletes should focus on speaking as the main skill, supported by interactive and engaging media. The materials should match students' proficiency levels and gradually develop their language ability. In addition, learning activities should address specific difficulties in each skill through contextual and practice-based tasks, particularly those related to sports situations, to improve both engagement and language competence.

Learning Needs

This section discusses learning needs, which include four parts: learning goals, input, procedure, and teacher and student roles.

Goals

The results show that the main learning goals are “to communicate well in English” and “to gain knowledge,” each selected by 32.1% of students, followed by “for future careers” at 21.4%, while other goals receive minimal responses. This indicates that students are primarily driven by practical and communicative purposes rather than academic or personal development goals. Therefore, learning design should focus on developing practical communication skills and career-related competencies through activities such as role-plays, real-life communication tasks, and job interview simulations.

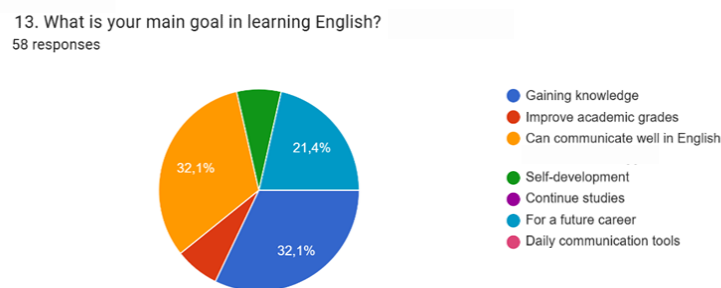


Figure 8. The results of students' goals in learning English

Inputs

The results show that students prefer song-based materials (53.6%), followed by videos (50%) and educational games (42.9%), while podcasts, texts, and dialogues receive lower interest. This indicates that students are more attracted to audiovisual and activity-based materials than text-based

or traditional formats. Therefore, learning design should integrate songs, videos, and interactive activities to increase engagement and match students' preferences in learning English.

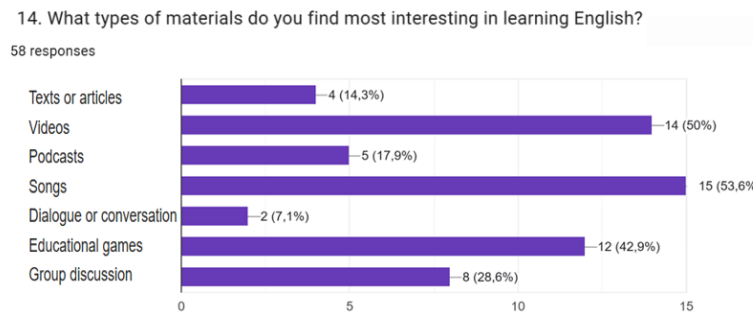


Figure 9. The results of interesting learning materials

Procedures

The results show that students prefer interactive language games such as role play (39.3%), followed by group work (25%) and projects (17.9%), while lectures, discussions, and other activities receive minimal interest. This indicates that students favor participatory and collaborative learning activities rather than passive or teacher-centered methods. Therefore, learning design should prioritize interactive and student-centered activities such as role play, group work, and project-based tasks to increase engagement and active participation.

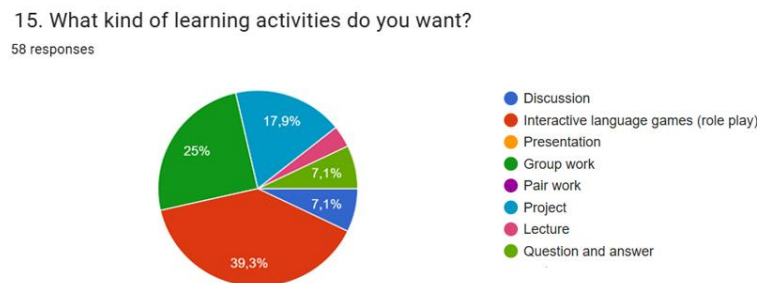


Figure 10. The results of learning activities that students want

The results show that most students prefer outdoor learning (60.7%), followed by indoor classes (21.4%) and online learning (17.9%). This indicates that students favor learning environments that allow more physical activity and interaction rather than traditional or fully online settings. Therefore, learning design should incorporate outdoor and flexible learning environments, combined with interactive activities that support movement and active participation.

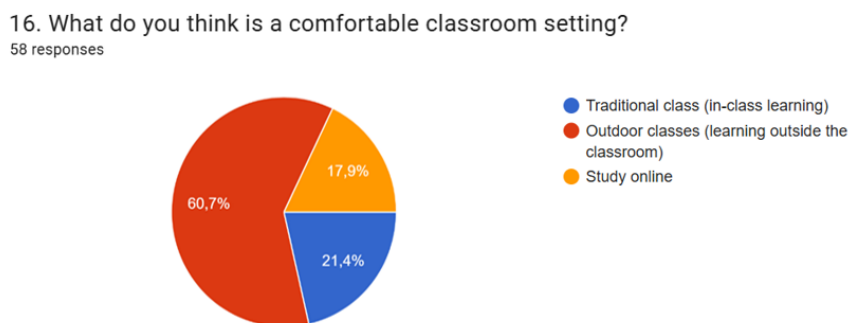


Figure 11. Results of class arrangement

The results show that most students prefer a kinesthetic learning style (35.7%), followed by visual (32.1%) and auditory (25%), while other styles receive minimal responses. This indicates that students tend to favor active and experience-based learning, supported by visual input, rather than passive listening. Therefore, learning design should emphasize kinesthetic and visual activities, such as hands-on tasks, movement-based learning, and the use of images or videos to support understanding.

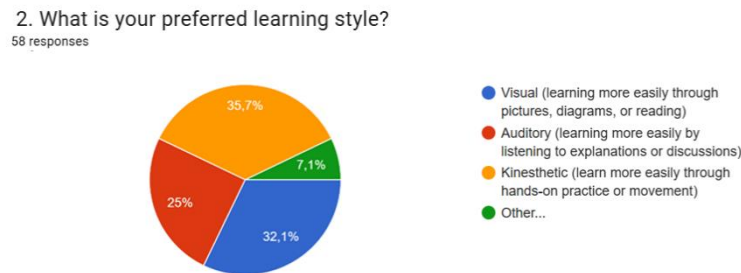


Figure 12. Results of student learning styles

Teacher Role

The results show that most students expect teachers to act as facilitators (46.4%) and coaches (32.1%), while fewer students prefer roles such as motivators or resource persons. This indicates that students value guidance and support during the learning process rather than one-way instruction. Therefore, learning design should position teachers as facilitators who guide activities, provide feedback, and support student-centered learning.

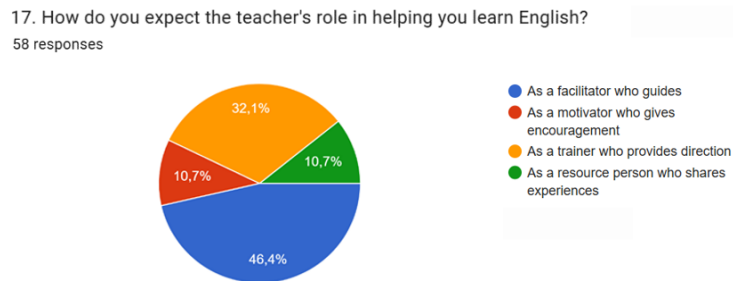


Figure 13. The results of the teacher's role according to students

Student's Role

The results show that students see their main role as actively participating and asking questions (32.1%), followed by collaborating with classmates (28.6%), being independent in learning (21.4%), and speaking in public (17.9%). This indicates that students tend to value active participation, collaboration, and learner autonomy in the learning process. Therefore, learning design should encourage student-centered activities that promote interaction, collaboration, and opportunities to actively use English in meaningful contexts.

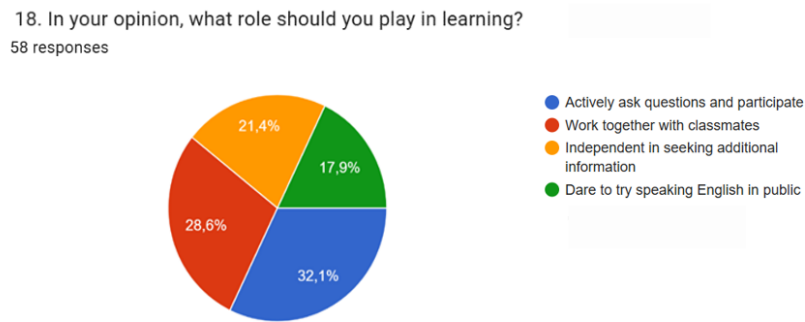


Figure 14. The results of students' roles in learning

The results show that students prioritize effective communication in English (46.4%), followed by critical and creative thinking (32.1%) and creativity (21.4%), while collaboration receives no responses. This indicates that students focus more on developing communication and higher-order thinking skills through English learning. Therefore, learning design should integrate activities that promote communication and critical thinking, such as problem-solving tasks, discussions, and real-life communication practices.

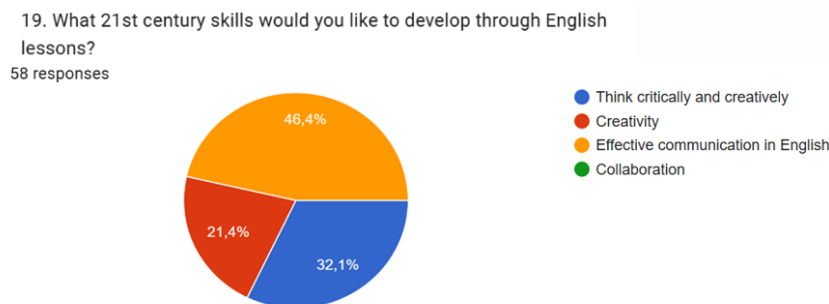


Figure 15. The results of 21st-century skills that students want

Discussion

The results of this study were analyzed based on two main components of Hutchinson & Waters' (1987) theory, namely Target Needs and Learning Needs. Data were obtained through a questionnaire that was analyzed statistically descriptively and supported by the results of observations in sports classes.

Target Needs
Necessities

The results show that the English language skills most needed by students are speaking (71.4%), followed by listening (25%). These skills are very relevant for student athletes who will participate in international competitions and interact across cultures. This finding is in line with Dewi et al. (2023) and Rosidah et al. (2021) who stated that speaking and listening skills are primary needs in the context of global communication, especially for students in professional environments.

Lacks

Most students admitted to being at level A2 (42.9%) according to the CEFR scale, indicating limited understanding of complex texts and conversations. The main difficulties include lack of vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation (Rosidah et al., 2021). In listening skills, difficulties occur in distinguishing letter sounds, implied meanings, and abbreviated words, indicating the need for phonological practice and understanding context.

Wants

A total of 82.1% of students chose educational games, and 75% chose videos as their preferred learning media. This indicates a preference for interactive and fun learning. This finding supports the multisensory theory (Dewi et al., 2023) which states that the combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetics elements can increase focus and learning motivation. In addition, the game-based learning theory is also explained by Dewi et al. (2023) as an approach that can increase active student participation.

Learning Needs

Goals

Most students learn English to communicate effectively (32.1%) and gain knowledge (32.1%). This indicates pragmatic motivation. This finding supports the view that students tend to perceive English as a crucial resource for future careers, particularly when learning materials are aligned with their professional contexts and real-world needs (Lapele et al., 2025; Rostina, 2025).

Input

The most interesting learning media were songs (53.6%) and videos (50%), reinforcing the relevance of the audiovisual approach. Dewi et al. (2023) explained that song-based materials can help strengthen vocabulary memory through emotion and rhythm, while videos provide a visual context that clarifies meaning.

Procedures

Students preferred role play (39.3%) and group work (25%), while lecture methods (3.6%) and presentations (0%) were less popular. This finding is in line with the active learning theory, which states that active learning through simulation, discussion, and collaboration increases student engagement and understanding. Tong & An (2024) also support the use of sports-based activities in English learning to encourage student athlete participation.

Setting and Learning Style

Most students chose to study outside the classroom (60.7%), indicating the need for a dynamic learning atmosphere. The dominant learning style is kinaesthetic (35.7%), supporting students' need to learn through direct practice and movement. This finding strengthens the ecological systems theory, which highlights that students' development and learning are shaped by multiple layers of environmental systems, including the immediate learning environment that affects comfort and engagement (Tong & An, 2024).

Teachers' and Students' Roles

Students expect teachers to act as facilitators (46.4%) and coaches. They themselves want to actively ask questions and participate (32.1%), and develop effective communication (46.4%) as 21st century skills. This indicates the need for a teaching approach that encourages collaboration and two-way interaction, as suggested by Dewi et al. (2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that students in special sports classes at the junior high school level have distinct English learning needs that differ from regular students. Speaking emerged as the most prioritized skill (71.4%), followed by listening, while reading and writing were considered less essential. Most students assessed their English proficiency at the A2 level and reported difficulties in

vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, and fluency. In terms of preferred learning methods, students showed a strong inclination toward interactive and multisensory approaches such as educational games, videos, and outdoor learning environments. The dominant learning style was kinaesthetic, indicating that students benefit more from physical and hands-on activities. Students also expected teachers to act as facilitators, while they themselves aimed to participate actively and develop effective communication skills as part of their 21st-century competencies.

These findings emphasize the need to design contextual, communicative, and engaging English learning strategies tailored to the specific characteristics of student-athletes. Understanding their learning needs can help educators develop more relevant and meaningful instruction that supports both their academic development and athletic success.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to improve language clarity, refine academic writing, and ensure the organization of the manuscript meets international journal standards. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, and writing the original draft.

Author 2: Supervision, methodology validation, review and editing, and final approval of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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