

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

English is a widely spoken language that many people worldwide learn and use to communicate. Proficiency in English enables individuals to engage in global conversations, access international resources, and participate in the worldwide workforce (Zayanti et al., 2023). Responding to the growing demands of the globalized world of work and the need for students to become competent in international communication, the education system in Indonesia has made English a main subject at various levels of education. English is regarded as a foreign language in Indonesia, where many people teach it. It is also taught in schools as a foreign language (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). English is a required subject in junior high and senior high school, and it is also available as an elective course in high school (Kasihani, 2010, as cited in Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). Particularly in the context of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, English language teaching is designed not only to develop general communication skills but also to support specific vocational competencies that are customized to each field of study. According to the Decree of the head of *Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan (BSKAP)* Number 8 of 2020, the achievements of learning English in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* include: 1) Communicative competence in English with multimodal texts (oral, written, visual, and audiovisual); 2) Intercultural competence to understand and appreciate Indonesian and foreign cultural perspectives, practices, and products; 3) Confidence to express oneself as an independent and responsible individual; and 4) Critical and creative reasoning skills.

In vocational high schools, especially those specializing in hospitality, English is one of the required foreign languages that students must learn. It is intended to help them communicate effectively during practical training and to build the habit of using English in real-world service settings. The specific objectives of learning English at vocational high schools majoring in hospitality, based on the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, include mastering hospitality terminology such

as “Front Office,” “Housekeeping,” and “Food & Beverage,” as well as communicating directly with guests in hotel service simulations. Teaching English in a vocational high school demands various subjects and teaching methods. There are several differences between teaching English in a vocational high school and a senior high school (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). In senior high schools, English focuses more on academic skills like reading, writing, and exam preparation. On the other hand, teaching English in vocational high schools should be related to the students’ major to focus on real-world job skills. Vocational high schools offer many majors, one of which is hospitality. According to King (1995), hospitality generally involves being welcoming, kind, and gracious toward guests to ensure their comfort and safety. It also encompasses host-guest relationships, relationship building, and attention to both physical and emotional well-being. The hospitality program prepares students to become professionals in hospitality operations, with career paths such as general managers or directors responsible for travel arrangements, promotions, and providing services and facilities for travelers.

Meanwhile, researchers found that this phenomenon occurs in Tasikmalaya Regency, which has one Vocational high school (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK*) offering a hospitality major. Based on data from the Ministry of Education and *Pusat Data dan Teknologi Informasi (Pusdatin)* (2025), there are 117 formal Vocational high schools (*SMK*) spread across 39 sub-districts in Tasikmalaya Regency. However, of these schools, only one offers a hospitality program. This condition illustrates that access to vocational education relevant to the tourism industry remains limited in this region. The tourism sector in Tasikmalaya continues to grow. Data from *Badan Pusat Statistik* (2023) shows an increase in the number of tourist visits to various local attractions during the period 2022 to 2023, along with the emergence of more supporting facilities such as coffee shops, cafés, and other culinary places that serve as attractions for visitors. This school plays a strategic role in preparing students for the workforce in the tourism and hospitality sector, especially as tourism potential in the area continues to develop. In its implementation, the school has adopted the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, using an English learning approach that emphasizes practical communication

relevant to industry needs, including the use of hospitality-related terms and interaction with foreign guests. Learning is facilitated through activities such as guest service simulations, formal conversation practice, and role-playing. This learning method fits with the spirit of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which gives teachers the freedom to design lessons that are more practical and connected to the students' future careers. English is taught not just as a general subject, but as a useful tool for daily communication in the hospitality field.

However, as the only school with a hospitality major in the area, the school faces a number of challenges, such as limited resources and differences in students' motivation and readiness in interpreting the importance of learning English. Therefore, it is important to examine students' perceptions of English language learning to understand how they perceive the role of the language in supporting their competence and work readiness in the hospitality field.

Previous studies have examined English language education in vocational contexts, particularly its relevance to students' future careers. For instance, Hua and Beverton (2013) explored both general and vocational English courses for Taiwanese students, emphasizing the role of English in enhancing students' communication skills. However, their study primarily centered on how English proficiency supports employability and career readiness, rather than on students' current classroom experiences or individual perceptions of English learning. Similarly, Kardijan et al. (2017) investigated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs in the hospitality sector and identified a substantial gap between the actual learning needs of hospitality students and how English instruction was implemented. Their findings pointed to a misalignment between curriculum content and industry expectations, raising important questions about how such discrepancies influence students' engagement, motivation, and perceptions of English learning in vocational high school.

Unlike other studies, this research focused more on how hospitality students in Tasikmalaya Regency learned English in the classroom. Because no one has studied this kind of context before, especially with hospitality students in Tasikmalaya regency, Indonesia. This presented an important research gap. In other

words, the research aimed to find out students' perceptions of the relevance and importance of learning English in hospitality majors to be examined. This study aimed to provide deeper insights into how hospitality vocational high school students relate English language learning to their academic and professional qualifications and aspirations.

## **1.2 Formulation of the Problem**

A research question addressed in the present study is “What are the hospitality vocational high school students’ perceptions of English learning?”

## **1.3 Operational Definitions**

### **1.3.1 The Students’**

#### **Perceptions:**

Perception is people’s opinion toward a particular object that they think is true. In this research, perception refers to students’ perception of English learning in the hospitality vocational high school in Tasikmalaya Regency.

### **1.3.2 English Learning:**

English learning is a process of learning English in a hospitality vocational high school, which, in this study, the school is located in Tasikmalaya regency.

### **1.3.3 Hospitality Vocational high school:**

Hospitality vocational high school is one of the majors in vocational schools that prepares students for certain jobs. The majors referred to in this study are hospitality students at Tasikmalaya Regency vocational high school.

## **1.4 Aim of the Research**

The study aims to investigate the students’ perceptions of English learning in Vocational high schools.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

### **1.5.1 Theoretical Uses**

This research provides the basic theory of English learning to support hospitality vocational high school students in their English learning journey.

### **1.5.2 Practical Uses**

This research will be helpful for English teachers in teaching English to hospitality vocational high school students and help students prepare for their future careers.

### **1.5.3 Empirical Uses**

This research will reveal the students' perceptions of English learning in hospitality vocational high schools.