



Dormitory-Based Experiential English Immersion and Proficiency Outcomes Among Maritime Cadets

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Abstract

This study evaluated whether the DREAM (Dormitory for Real English Acquisition and Mastery) Dormitory, an experiential English immersion program at the Merchant Marine Polytechnic of Makassar (PIP Makassar), improved maritime cadets' English proficiency. Grounded in experiential learning theory, the program requires cadets to use English in structured and informal daily activities. A quantitative one-group pre-test-post-test pre-experimental design was applied. Participants were first-year male cadets residing in Dormitory C2, and a TOEIC prediction test measuring listening, reading, speaking, and writing was administered before and after participation in the program. A total of 179 cadets were analyzed using descriptive statistics, the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, and a paired-sample t-test, with Cohen's d computed as the effect size. The results showed that the mean total TOEIC score increased significantly from 646.37 (SD = 223.12) to 816.90 (SD = 228.42), a mean gain of 170.53 points, $t(178) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 0.83$). All four skills improved significantly, with reading, writing, and listening showing moderate effects and speaking the smallest gain. Improvement was observed in 80.4% of cadets, and intermediate-level cadets gained the most. The findings indicate that experiential, dormitory-based English immersion was associated with meaningful proficiency gains in a maritime education setting, supporting continued institutional investment in structured immersion environments.

Introduction

English also serves as the international language of the sea and is not just an academic need but an operational necessity in the maritime world that influences the safety and accuracy of international communications on board ship (IMO SMCP, 2000; Komari et al., 2026; Saridaki, 2023). The International Maritime Organization (IMO) Standard Marine Communication Phrases has set English as the language of the sea and asks sea users to be communicative competent while doing their jobs at sea (Herdawan et al., 2021). As a result, maritime Higher Education Institutions have to find ways to create English courses for cadets that have a communicative purpose.

English for specific purposes is one of the components in training maritime professionals who can compete in the world, in the Merchant Marine Polytechnic of Makassar (PIP Makassar). However, after years of traditional classroom learning, many cadets have not yet acquired the ability to speak English with confidence. In maritime institutions, cadets are usually not immersed in English beyond the classroom, and few opportunities exist for them to learn English through communication and practice, which limits their communicative ability (Herdawan et al., 2021; Simanjuntak et al., 2024). These situations argue for the need to encourage more experiential and immersive methods which transcend formal English learning.

To counter this, PIP Makassar created a residential program dubbed DREAM (Dormitory for Real English Acquisition and Mastery) where cadets are expected to speak English in their daily activities, both on a structured and informal basis. Based on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) that views learning as a cyclical process consisting of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In the dormitory, cadets do get to experience English, not just as a subject, but as something that constantly requires them to communicate authentically and that is aligned with the experiential principles of language education as discussed by Kolb & Kolb (2021), Rahmi (2024) and Thongchai (2024).

Authenticity, structure and agency are all design elements of experiential learning environments that can affect the depth of learners' engagement and learning outcomes (Duchatelet et al., 2024). In terms of language learning, experience-based learning is suitable because it places language in the context of real social situations, rather than in artificial language practices, thus involving students in real communication (Embarek & Hacene, 2024; Sopamena, 2016). In practice, immersion and dormitory-based programs have been found to be associated with increased confidence in speaking, willingness to communicate and ability to communicate (Alfa'in & Zuhriyah, 2023; Ardiansyah, 2020; Aszhari & Ma'rifatulloh, 2024; Jalaluddin, 2022; Pushpalatha, 2022).

Finally, a program has to be judged in terms of its outcomes, regardless of how sound the theoretical program is. It is therefore important to know whether participation results in measurable gains in skills and performance and for this reason programs should be further developed to maximise the benefits for participants. The need for English on board for the maritime cadets is directly linked to professional and safety reasons and limited time and resources must be expended optimally.

While the research on experiential learning and English immersion is increasing, there is limited research in systematically assessing these programs in maritime education and even less reporting quantitative proficiency results from disciplined, residential immersion programs. This study was conducted to investigate the extent of cadets' English proficiency change after participating in DREAM Dormitory, based upon their TOEIC prediction test. In particular, it was designed to see if there was a significant improvement in overall TOEIC scores and in the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) as well as to examine the difference in the improvement of the four skills among cadets grouped according to their initial TOEIC scores.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative approach using a one-group pre-test–post-test pre-experimental design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The analysis focused on the measurable change in cadets' English proficiency before and after participation in the program. Consistent with a pre-experimental design, the study did not involve a comparison group, as the program was implemented institution-wide for all eligible first-year cadets.

The research was conducted at the DREAM Dormitory of PIP Makassar, specifically the dormitory designated for first-year male cadets (Dormitory C2). This group was selected because it represents the most formalized application of the program, being directly facilitated and supervised by English Personal Care (EPC) mentors. Total sampling was applied. The analytic sample was drawn from an initial population of 214 first-year male cadets assigned to Dormitory C2 during the study period. During data screening, 35 cadets were excluded due to incomplete testing records: 15 did not sit for the pre-test, 4 did not sit for the post-test, 11 had

Listening and Reading scores unrecorded because of a system error, 4 had incomplete post-test components, and 1 had no recorded data in either test. The remaining 179 cadets with complete, matched pre- and post-test records constituted the final analytic sample.

The DREAM Dormitory program ran for approximately six months, from December 2025 to May 2026, coinciding with cadets' first-year residency in Dormitory C2. Throughout this period, cadets were required to use English in daily dormitory activities under continuous monitoring by English Personal Care (EPC) mentors, supported by senior, advanced-level cadets who actively prompted and modeled consistent English use among their peers. This daily, supervised routine constituted the structured dimension of the immersion, while spontaneous peer interaction supplied its informal dimension, together operationalizing the concrete-experience stage of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle described above.

English proficiency was measured using a TOEIC prediction test developed and administered by the institution's Language Unit, comprising listening, reading, speaking, and writing sections scored on the same scale as the official TOEIC Listening & Reading (0–495 per section) and Speaking & Writing (0–200 per section) tests. The pre-test was administered in December 2025, at the outset of cadets' participation in the program, and served as the baseline, while the post-test was administered in May 2026, upon completion of the program. The same test format was used on both occasions to ensure comparability of scores. As an internally developed instrument, however, this prediction test does not have a published validity or reliability report, a limitation addressed further in the Discussion.

Cadets were classified into three proficiency levels based on their pre-test total TOEIC score, following the TOEIC-to-CEFR score mapping published by ETS Global (2025): Basic (CEFR A1–A2, total score < 550), Intermediate (CEFR B1–B2, 550–944), and Advanced (CEFR C1, ≥ 945).

Cadets concurrently attended other formal English instruction during the study period, including English for Maritime coursework within the regular curriculum and separate afternoon English classes. Because the design does not include a comparison group, these concurrent instructional inputs cannot be disentangled from the effect of DREAM Dormitory itself, a limitation addressed in the Discussion.

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) summarized cadets' performance on the total score and on each skill. The Shapiro–Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the pre–post difference scores. A paired-sample t-test was then conducted to determine whether the change from pre-test to post-test was statistically significant, and Cohen's d was calculated as the mean gain divided by the standard deviation of the difference scores, the formula appropriate for paired-sample designs (Lakens, 2013). For each skill component, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied as a non-parametric confirmation wherever the corresponding difference scores departed from normality; given four skill-level comparisons, a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha ($.05/4 = .0125$) was applied alongside the conventional threshold to guard against inflated Type I error. To determine whether gains differed by cadets' initial proficiency level, gain scores were compared across the three proficiency groups using a one-way ANOVA, following confirmation of normality (Shapiro–Wilk test, computed separately for each group) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test), with Tukey's HSD test used for post hoc pairwise comparisons where the omnibus test was significant. A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was adopted throughout. Institutional research permission was obtained through formal correspondence with PIP Makassar management, and written informed consent was obtained from participating cadets prior to data collection; individual records were anonymized during analysis.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of 179 matched cadet records revealed a substantial and statistically significant improvement in overall English proficiency following participation in DREAM Dormitory. The mean total TOEIC score rose from 646.37 (SD = 223.12) at pre-test to 816.90 (SD = 228.42) at post-test, an average gain of 170.53 points. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the total difference scores were normally distributed ($W = .99$, $p = .37$), confirming the appropriateness of the paired-sample t-test. The test showed that the gain was highly significant, $t(178) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.83$). Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and inferential results for the total score and each skill component.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test TOEIC results and paired-sample t-test (N = 179)

Measure	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Mean Gain	95% CI	t (178)	p	Cohen's d
TOEIC Total	646.37 (223.12)	816.90 (228.42)	+170.53	[140.28, 200.78]	11.13	<.001	0.83
Listening	233.02 (104.77)	277.18 (113.69)	+44.16	[31.51, 56.81]	6.89	<.001	0.52
Reading	187.18 (96.88)	269.64 (136.34)	+82.46	[61.70, 103.22]	7.84	<.001	0.59
Speaking	121.62 (43.10)	135.06 (58.61)	+13.44	[3.18, 23.69]	2.59	.011	0.19
Writing	104.55 (43.14)	135.03 (51.85)	+30.47	[21.82, 39.13]	6.95	<.001	0.52

Note. Cohen's d calculated as mean gain divided by the standard deviation of the difference scores (Lakens, 2013). Source: Primary data, 2025.

As shown in Table 1, all four skills improved significantly. Reading recorded the largest skill gain (+82.46 points, $d = 0.59$), followed by listening (+44.16, $d = 0.52$) and writing (+30.47, $d = 0.52$), each reflecting a moderate effect. Speaking showed the smallest improvement (+13.44, $d = 0.19$), and although it remained statistically significant ($t(178) = 2.59$, $p = .011$), its effect size was small. Because the difference scores for listening, speaking, and writing departed from normality, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were also conducted and confirmed the significance of all skill gains, strengthening confidence in the findings. Table 2 summarizes the normality and Wilcoxon signed-rank results for each skill component.

Table 2. Shapiro–Wilk Normality and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results by Skill Component (N = 179)

Measure	Shapiro-Wilk W	p	Distribution	Wilcoxon p
TOEIC Total	0.992	.374	Normal	—
Listening	0.941	<.001	Not normal	<.001
Reading	0.989	.167	Normal	<.001
Speaking	0.963	<.001	Not normal	.007
Writing	0.974	.002	Not normal	<.001

Note. Wilcoxon signed-rank test applied as a non-parametric confirmation of the paired-sample t-test. With a Bonferroni correction for four comparisons (adjusted $\alpha = .0125$), all four skills, including Speaking, remain significant. Source: Primary data, 2025.

At the individual level, 80.4% of cadets ($n = 144$) improved their total score, 18.4% ($n = 33$) declined, and 1.1% ($n = 2$) showed no change, indicating that the positive trend was broadly distributed rather than driven by a small number of high achievers.

The small increase in speaking proficiency is worthy of more theoretical research and the lack of symmetry between receptive and productive development in SLA provides a good account. Generally, learners move from receptive to productive, where an abundance of comprehensible input quickly builds language receptive competence and the trajectory of productive fluency is a slower progression (Fatimah et al., 2026; Kassim, 2025). Importantly, however, mere exposure is not enough for the production: learners must be given opportunities to be challenged to produce language in order to be able to develop their language skills at the same rate as listening and reading (Kassim, 2025). The input-rich dormitory setting might thus have helped to develop cadets' receptive competence before they were able to provide sufficient productive practice for speaking. The affective factor must also be taken into account because motivation to communicate is situational and even if a cadet has been competent in speaking, but still has low confidence or if he feels high anxiety, he will avoid making speech, especially in disciplined programs in the residence (Auliyah & Sujannah, 2023; Emelia et al., 2024). The pattern also corresponds to Kolb's (1984) cycle, in which speaking is related to the active experimentation stages, which is the most cognitively and affectively demanding stage and which is also a stage that is characteristic of the experience-grasping stages of listening and reading. These accounts together account for the fact that a single cycle mainly produced positive learning gains in receptive proficiency, which has also been reported in earlier dormitory studies that found improvements in confidence and interaction, while oral output was the most challenging learning gain to sustain, often due to affective obstacles like anxiety, shyness, and peer-related social pressure that discourage students from speaking even as they become more competent (Aszhari & Ma'rifatulloh, 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2025; Jalaluddin, 2022; Rohman et al., 2025). An equally similar assessment of an experiential English program also revealed that, while all of the skills were enhanced, listening and reading were the most developed, and speaking was the least, supporting the interpretation that Listening and Reading were the most developed skills under immersion conditions, and speaking was the least (Dinamika et al., 2025).

Table 3 provides further insights into how the program worked through the differentiated gains across proficiency levels. A one-way ANOVA showed differences between gain scores of the three proficiency levels were significant, $F(2, 176) = 8.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, medium effect. Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons indicated that cadets in the intermediate level made significantly more gains than both basic level cadets ($p = .024$) and advanced level cadets ($p < .001$); and that the difference between basic level cadets and advanced level cadets was not significant ($p = .999$). These differences follow what is known as the principle of input that is pitched just above a learner's zone of comfortable yet difficult input (Kassim, 2025). For intermediate cadets, the natural language of the Dormitory environment was probably in this sweet spot, allowing them to move from natural interaction to measurable attainment in no time. Because of what is called a "ceiling effect", advanced cadets had little opportunity to move further into the top quartile of the test, while basic cadets may have been "maxed out" and unable to measure much difference within one program cycle. This aligns with the results of immersion in the dormitory, which revealed that lower skill and less confident learners made less progress with open immersion and had greater need for more focused scaffolding for productive immersion (Rohman et al., 2025). This reading aligns with the experiential learning premise that learning is recursive and builds on prior learning frameworks (Kolb & Kolb, 2021), and indicates that experiential immersion will be particularly fruitful for those

learners who have some existing framework of prior learning from which authentic practice can build.

Table 3. TOEIC Total Score Gains by Cadets' Initial Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	n	Pre-test M	Post-test M	Mean Gain (SD)
Basic	19	431.80	519.70	+87.90 (144.63)
Intermediate	114	614.30	831.20	+216.80 (185.73)
Advance	46	814.30	904.20	+89.90 (237.46)

Note. One-way ANOVA: $F(2, 176) = 8.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Tukey HSD: Intermediate > Basic, $p = .024$; Intermediate > Advance, $p < .001$; Basic vs. Advance, ns ($p = .999$). Source: Primary data, 2025.

Beyond the magnitude of the gains, the overall pattern of results is similar to that predicted by the theoretical mechanism which provides the basis for the program. Experiential Learning Theory is a learning theory that posits that learning is a process that cycles through four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Rahmi, 2024). DREAM Dormitory implements this cycle by introducing English into cadets' daily life, in which concrete experience is provided by authentic interaction, reflection and feedback are triggered by mentorship on English Personal Care and English Zone rules, the repeated use of these rules enables cadets to internalize the language and apply it again, thereby closing the circle and feeding the next cycle of experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2021; Rahmi, 2024). The efficacy of such a space relies on its authenticity, structure and agency (Duchatelet et al., 2024). DREAM has high scores on all three: Communication is serious professionally for future seafarers (authenticity), scaffolding is provided through mentoring and zone rules (structure), cadets are active and participate (agency) with collaborators (peers). The results of the immersion were broad and robust, which may be explained theoretically by the combination of these design elements, unlike the results of less structured exposures that tend to be more constrained and limited (Embarek & Hacene, 2024; Rahmi, 2024). Other immersive dormitory programs, which require students to use English throughout the entire program and have regular contact with peers, have also reported an improvement of students' proficiency, which indicates that structure and the regular interaction with peers are also important factors contributing to an immersive outcome (Rohman, 2024; Shadiev et al., 2025; Mustapha & Karim, 2025).

The findings showed that there was a significant improvement in the maritime cadets' English proficiency after participating in the DREAM Dormitory program (Nurdin & Rahman, 2023; Sulistiono et al., 2025; Simanjuntak et al., 2024). The results are in line with experiential English immersion and dormitory learning research findings which state that the use of the language in an authentic context is more effective in increasing communicative competence than using the language in the context of the classroom learning process (Embarek & Hacene, 2024; Pushpalatha, 2022; Rahmi, 2024). The large and widespread improvements found here reflect the program's core tenets of building cadets' English proficiency and serve as a foundation for continuing and expanding the use of structured immersion at the institution (Gawlik-Kobylińska, 2026; Jackson & Brown-Robertson, 2026; Mukhasibi & Brown-Robertson, 2026).

These outcomes have to be considered in the light of a few boundaries (Tutić & Voss, 2026; Araujo-Regado et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). The consistency of the pre and post test administration of this TOEIC prediction test administered by the Language Unit of the institution provides some confidence in the comparability of the test, however, it has not been

reported on its psychometric properties. The study was also limited to the first year male cadets at one school, reducing the generalizability of figures. During the study period cadets had several other formal English instruction that also occurred, such as other information delivered in the English for Maritime course and separate afternoon classes; due to the nature of the one-group design, the other inputs of English instruction cannot be separated from the effects of DREAM Dormitory. The reported improvements should thus be seen as improvements due to a participation in the program and not as a definite proof of the effect of the program. Future studies with an official, independently validated proficiency measure; a comparison group; and additional qualitative evidence of cadets' language development in the dormitory environment would further support these outcomes.

Conclusion

This study evaluated whether the DREAM Dormitory program improved maritime cadets' English proficiency and found that proficiency increased significantly after participation, with the mean total TOEIC score rising by 170.53 points, $t(178) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, and a large effect size ($d = 0.83$); all four skills improved significantly, reading most and speaking least, while intermediate-level cadets benefited the most and 80.4% of cadets recorded gains, indicating that experiential, dormitory-based English immersion is associated with meaningful proficiency development in a maritime education context. In answer to the research question, the program demonstrably contributed to cadets' measurable English proficiency, supporting its continuation and expansion as a structured immersion environment. It is suggested that the institution strengthen the speaking dimension through more guided oral-practice and feedback opportunities, extend the program to additional cadet cohorts, and incorporate official proficiency measures in future evaluations; researchers are further encouraged to complement these outcome findings with qualitative evidence on how and why experiential English dormitories foster language development in maritime and other vocational settings.

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