

Negotiating Academic Priorities: Final-Year EFL Students' Perceptions of Certification Requirements

Octa Pratama Putra¹, Gorkem Avci², Rinda Riztya³

¹English Literature, Faculty of Communication and Language, Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta, Indonesia

²Department of Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Bartın University, Bartın, Turkey

³Department of Management, Faculty of Economics, Institut Bisnis Nusantara, Jakarta, Indonesia

Submitted: 29 Dec 2025

Revised : 10 May 2026

Accepted : 30 May 2026

Abstract

While higher education institutions increasingly enforce external certification alongside undergraduate thesis requirements to boost graduate employability, this dual obligation often creates strategic and cognitive tensions for final-year EFL students. However, empirical insights into how students negotiate these competing academic priorities during their thesis preparation remain underexplored. This qualitative case study investigates final-year EFL students' perceptions of additional certification requirements in relation to their preparation for thesis defence. The study involved eight undergraduate students from various higher education institutions in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to explore students' experiences and perspectives. The findings revealed two major themes. The first theme, Certification as Future Investment, indicated that most participants perceived certification as a valuable asset that enhanced their professional readiness, confidence, and competitiveness in the job market. The second theme, Cognitive Overload and Divided Focus, showed that a minority of participants experienced difficulties managing simultaneous academic demands, particularly due to the overlap between thesis preparation and certification requirements. The results suggest that students' concerns were not directed at certification itself, but rather at the timing and implementation of the policy during the final stage of their studies. These findings contribute to English language education policy by highlighting the need to realign certification schedules with students' academic phases while integrating student-centered pedagogical support in higher education.

Corresponding e-mail:

^{*)}octa.opp@bsi.ac.id.

Keywords: Certification requirement; English Language Education; final-year EFL students; qualitative case study; thesis defense.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, higher education institutions worldwide have increasingly emphasized graduate employability and measurable learning outcomes as primary indicators of educational quality, institutional effectiveness, and global competitiveness. Sahan and Şahan (2024) argue that this profound institutional shift has driven universities to systematically integrate standardized assessments, professional certifications, and language proficiency tests into their formal graduation requirements. In English language education, such external accountability measures are frequently justified by policymakers and academic leaders as essential mechanisms to ensure that graduating cohorts possess not only abstract theoretical knowledge but also demonstrable, market-ready communicative competence relevant to the rapidly evolving demands of global employment. Consequently, standardized certifications such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and various competency-based credentials have transitioned from optional extracurricular achievements into institutional benchmarks and non-negotiable exit requirements across English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program globally.

Within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, language proficiency certification plays a vital role in validating students' communicative competence for broader academic, professional, and cross-cultural domains (Dimova & Kling, 2018). Standardized test scores are widely perceived by EFL students as crucial academic and career gateways, functioning as prerequisite credentials for international job mobility, competitive corporate recruitment, and entry into post-graduate studies. Recognizing this strategic utility, many universities have institutionalized these high-stakes assessments within outcome-based education (OBE) frameworks and national accreditation benchmarks to demonstrate institutional accountability, transparency, and curriculum effectiveness to external stakeholders (Nawas et al., 2025). By embedding external certification into the formal degree architecture, institutions aim to provide prospective employers with an objective guarantee of graduate quality, thereby enhancing institutional reputation and alumni employment rates.

In Indonesia, this global trend has been extensively adopted across both public and private higher education institutions, where English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language Education programs frequently mandate minimum TOEFL scores or vocational language certifications as compulsory prerequisites for degree completion (Azhari et al., 2022). While designed to elevate graduate competitiveness in the regional and international job markets, the practical implementation of these high-stakes policy mandates frequently intersects directly with the most cognitively demanding and emotionally taxing phase of students' academic trajectories: the undergraduate thesis. Completing and defending an empirical thesis requires intensive, long-term commitment involving systematic literature review, complex methodology design, qualitative or quantitative data analysis, academic writing rigor, and oral defense skills (Abrar et al., 2024). This multi-stage research process makes final-year study an already arduous, high-pressure milestone for undergraduate students navigating their transition toward academic completion.

The convergence of intensive thesis preparation and additional compulsory certification requirements raises critical pedagogical and policy concerns within higher education governance. Prior scholarship in ELT and tertiary education has extensively examined the isolated impacts of

standardized testing on language learners, focusing primarily on test-induced anxiety (Pascoe et al., 2020), test washback effects on classroom learning strategies, or general student academic workload (Shaw et al., 2017). Other empirical inquiries have evaluated student test performance, curricular alignment, and administrative policy compliance predominantly from an institutional or managerial perspective (Azhari et al., 2022). However, these existing studies largely treat certification mandates as isolated administrative events, overlooking the lived, daily realities of students who must simultaneously navigate multiple concurrent high stakes demands. Crucially, limited empirical inquiry has addressed how final-year EFL students actively negotiate, prioritize, or fragment their academic focus when additional standardized certification requirements are superimposed onto the demanding thesis completion process.

While previous scholarship has addressed test-induced anxiety, general workload, or institutional compliance in broader terms (Macaro & Han, 2020), certification policies are predominantly evaluated through macro-level employability metrics rather than through the micro-level lived experiences and emotional well-being of the students themselves. In the Indonesian EFL context, institutional certification mandates are frequently imposed as top-down administrative conditions without adequate pedagogical scaffolding, temporal flexibility, or structured test preparation support, creating an unexamined systemic tension alongside the final thesis completion phase. Consequently, limited empirical attention has been given to how final-year students actively negotiate their academic focus, cognitive bandwidth, and temporal allocation when high-stakes certification deadlines directly collide with thesis defense preparation. Understanding this complex dynamic is crucial in ELT, where final-year learners are simultaneously navigating linguistic mastery, academic research competency, and professional identity development (Coşgun & Savaş, 2023).

To bridge this contextual and empirical gap, this qualitative case study investigates final-year EFL students' perceptions and lived experiences regarding additional certification requirements during their thesis defense preparation at a private university in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. Specifically, it examines how final-year students interpret the perceived benefits and operational burdens of these concurrent policy mandates and how such institutional requirements shape their academic focus, research quality, and emotional readiness. By providing nuanced empirical insights into the alignment (or misalignment) between top-down institutional policies and actual student workload capacities, this study offers practical implications for curriculum designers, department heads, and higher education administrators seeking to optimize exit requirements without compromising research quality or student well-being. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses two main research questions:

1. How do final-year EFL students perceive the additional certification requirements mandated by their institutions?
2. How do these certification requirements influence students' academic focus and preparation for their undergraduate thesis defence?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Context

This study adopted a qualitative case study design (Ferdina et al., 2024) to explore final-year EFL students' perceptions of additional certification requirements alongside their thesis defense preparation. The research was situated within undergraduate English Language Education programs

across higher education institutions in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. In this context, final-year students are required to complete an empirical undergraduate thesis while concurrently fulfilling mandatory language proficiency credentials (*e.g.*, institutionally administered or standardized TOEFL-equivalent assessments with intermediate to upper-intermediate benchmark scores) (Njie & Asimiran, 2021). Passing these high-stakes tests serves as a formal prerequisite for thesis defense registration or graduation eligibility. Across the participating institutions, these policy mandates frequently required student registration fees and potential retakes upon failure, establishing a bounded educational context to investigate how learners negotiate overlapping academic obligations during their final study phase.

Participants and Data Collection

Using purposive sampling, eight final-year undergraduate students (P1–P8) enrolled in English Language Education programs across universities in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, were selected for this study. Selection criteria required participants to be (a) in their final academic year, (b) actively preparing for their undergraduate thesis defense, and (c) undergoing mandatory institutional certification or language proficiency requirements for graduation eligibility. Primary data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews (Brown & Danaher, 2019) lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes per session. The interview protocol explored students' thesis defense preparation, perceptions of certification mandates, and the perceived benefits, challenges, and impacts on their academic focus. To ensure accurate transcription, all interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent and transcribed verbatim, with participant confidentiality safeguarded through pseudonyms. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

No.	Participant Code	Gender	Institution Type	Institution Code	Study Program	Thesis Stage	Additional Certification Requirement
1.	YMU	Female	Private University	University A	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
2.	RGG	Male	Private University	University B	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
3.	MUR	Male	Private University	University C	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
4.	ABQ	Male	Private Institution	Institution D	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
5.	DAN	Female	Private University	University E	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
6.	RKU	Female	Religious-based Institution	Institution F	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
7.	CAW	Male	Private University	University G	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes
8.	UYS	Female	Religious-based Institution	Institution H	English Language Education	Defense Preparation	Yes

Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Geng et al., 2022), following systematic steps: transcribing audio recordings verbatim, familiarizing with the dataset through repeated reading,

generating initial codes for meaningful units, and collapsing codes into salient thematic categories addressing the research questions. Representative verbatim excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme. To establish trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, and confirmability), the analytical findings were closely grounded in raw interview transcripts, maintained through transparent documentation of all methodological procedures, and validated via member-checking with selected participants. Ethical integrity was preserved throughout: all participants provided written informed consent, participated voluntarily with the right to withdraw without penalty, and were fully anonymized through pseudonyms alongside undisclosed institutional affiliations to protect confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative study investigated final-year undergraduate EFL students' nuanced perceptions regarding mandatory language proficiency and competency certification requirements imposed concurrently with their undergraduate thesis defense preparation. The research involved eight final-year undergraduate students (YMU, RGG, MUR, ABQ, DAN, RKU, CAW, and UYS) enrolled in English Language Education and closely related academic programs across diverse higher education institutions in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. Although these participants represented different institutional backgrounds, they shared identical structural academic pressures: navigating the intensive process of research synthesis and oral defense while simultaneously fulfilling institutional benchmarks for standardized language certification (such as TOEFL-equivalent or competency-based credentials). Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data yielded two comprehensive master themes that encapsulate the duality of student experiences: certification as a catalyst for professional identity and graduate employability, contrasted against certification as a source of cognitive overload and temporal strain during final-year academic milestones.

A. Certification as a Catalyst for Professional Identity and Graduate Employability

The majority of participants (six out of eight: YMU, RGG, MUR, ABQ, DAN, and RKU) explicitly endorsed the mandatory certification requirement prior to graduation, conceptualizing standardized credentials as a strategic investment in their long-term professional identity and career mobility. Rather than interpreting institutional mandates as punitive administrative hurdles or unnecessary financial burdens, these final-year students recognized certification as a tangible, empirical validation of their English language competence that extends far beyond the traditional academic transcript. In an increasingly saturated and competitive job market, these participants articulated a clear, pragmatically grounded understanding that an undergraduate diploma alone no longer guarantees a distinct career advantage in ELT or corporate sectors (Zhang & Yu, 2025). For them, obtaining standardized credentials serves as an indispensable instrument for establishing professional credibility, building pedagogical self-confidence, and bridging tertiary academic education with immediate post-graduation employability.

This strategic career foresight was vividly captured in the account provided by YMU (Female, Private University), who detailed how she reframed the immediate pressure of test preparation into a necessary steppingstone for her impending professional trajectory:

"I see the certification requirement as something that will be genuinely useful for my career after graduation. Even though preparing for it while writing my thesis is quite challenging and stressful, it helps me prepare for the real demands of the workplace. It makes me feel much more confident about my English skills because I know that a degree alone is not enough anymore. Having an official score gives me a sense of security when applying for teaching positions or other professional jobs."

YMU's reflection illustrates a sophisticated cognitive reframing process wherein the acute, short-term stress of concurrent academic tasks is rationalized through the lens of long-term professional utility. By viewing the score as a 'sense of security,' she highlights how standardized certification functions as a psychological safety net during the unpredictable transition from university to the job market. Echoing this perspective, RGG (Male, Private University) further underscored the critical necessity of external skill verification as an indispensable mechanism for validating years of formal academic study and augmenting the perceived legitimacy of an undergraduate degree:

"Having an official certification score provides concrete proof of competence that we can immediately show to prospective employers, making our degree far more meaningful. In today's job market, a diploma alone is often seen as just a general requirement, but a recognized language certificate serves as explicit evidence of what we can actually do. Preparing for it forces us to validate our years of study with a standardized metric that employers trust, which ultimately boosts our confidence when competing for professional career opportunities."

RGG's insight points to a critical distinction between internal academic evaluation and external market validation. His observation that a diploma is perceived merely as a 'general requirement' reflects a broader awareness of degree inflation in higher education, wherein prospective employers demand supplementary, standardized proof of functional language proficiency. In this context, official certification acts as symbolic capital that converts classroom-based learning into external credibility. This sentiment was further reinforced by MUR (Male, Private University), who highlighted the profound psychological benefits of formal certification, particularly in mitigating post-graduation anxiety and instilling professional self-efficacy during the critical transition into the labor market:

"It transforms our theoretical knowledge into a recognized professional asset. Knowing I have certified English skills gives me peace of mind when transitioning into the job market. During our studies, we learn a lot of concepts, but without an official language score, it is hard to feel completely secure about our readiness. Having this credential validated by an external institution alleviates my post-graduation anxiety because I know I possess tangible proof of language mastery that employers actively look for."

MUR's account emphasizes the transformational nature of standardized testing in converting abstract, internal academic knowledge into a concrete, market-recognized asset. Her focus on 'peace of mind' demonstrates that external credentialing plays a dual role: it satisfies institutional compliance while simultaneously providing affective stability, reducing the existential dread often associated with final-year career transitions. Similarly, ABQ (Male, Private University) noted that preparing for standardized tests served as an objective diagnostic tool that forced them to systematically refine their core language skills before leaving the university setting:

"The certification process pushed me to re-evaluate my grammar and listening skills systematically, ensuring that my four years of college actually resulted in measurable proficiency. Without this standardized assessment, it is easy to assume that passing routine course exams translates to true

language mastery. Preparing for this exam forced me to identify my specific linguistic weaknesses and systematically bridge those gaps. It gave me a clear benchmark to verify that the time and effort I invested throughout my undergraduate degree truly yielded tangible, professional-level competencies."

ABQ's reflection highlights an essential pedagogical dimension: the self-diagnostic value of standardized testing. By compelling students to confront their specific linguistic deficiencies in grammar and listening comprehension, the certification policy operates as a mechanism for personal academic accountability, preventing false assumptions of language mastery that might otherwise stem from high cumulative GPAs or routine course grades. Adding another dimension of academic alignment, DAN (Female, Private University) emphasized how mandatory credentials significantly enhance graduates' competitive edge during initial recruitment, serving as a distinct market differentiator that elevates job applicants above peers who rely solely on conventional degree transcripts:

"When applying for jobs, having an official certificate sets us apart from other applicants who only carry a diploma. It shows readiness and commitment. In a crowded candidate pool, a standard academic transcript only proves that we completed our coursework, but a recognized language credential demonstrates our active initiative to meet professional standards. It serves as immediate, credible evidence to recruiters that we are fully prepared to function in an English-speaking environment without needing remedial language training."

DAN's perspective highlights the signaling power of professional certifications in human resource selection processes. In a saturated market of job seekers, a recognized language credential functions as an immediate signal of proactive commitment and job readiness, relieving potential employers from the perceived risk of hiring candidates with unverified communication skills. Finally, RKU (Female, Private University) asserted that mandatory certification creates an indispensable institutional benchmark of quality for the entire ELT study program, ensuring that all graduating cohorts consistently mirror international proficiency standards while safeguarding the long-term academic reputation of the degree:

"It ensures that every graduate meets a clear standard, which ultimately protects the reputation of our degree and our institution. When a university establishes a uniform benchmark for language proficiency, it prevents a gap in quality among graduates from the same program. This consistent standard gives future employers confidence in our institution, ensuring that our degree retains its prestige and that every graduate is recognized as a truly capable professional in the field."

RKU's analysis elevates the discussion from individual career advancement to collective institutional governance. She underscores that standardized certification serves a protective quality assurance function, preventing quality disparities among graduates and preserving the institutional brand value of the degree for current students and alumni alike.

Taken together, these empirical accounts demonstrate that the majority of participants do not evaluate language certification in isolation as a mere administrative mandate; rather, they internalize it as a fundamental pillar of their emerging identity as EFL professionals. Their reflections strongly resonate with the core principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), which mandates that tertiary institutions shift their focus from input-driven instruction to verifiable, skill-based outcomes that align directly with societal and industry demands (Rusilowati & Wahyudi, 2020). Standardized certification acts as an objective, external quality assurance metric that validates instructional program effectiveness and guarantees baseline graduate competency to public stakeholders.

Furthermore, these findings align directly with contemporary ELT teacher identity literature, which asserts that recognized credentials and verified language proficiency significantly enhance pre-service teachers' pedagogical self-efficacy, professional legitimacy, and classroom authority (Quan, 2025). By successfully passing standardized assessments, candidates construct a positive professional self-concept that reduces imposter syndrome during initial teaching placements. From a motivational perspective, when students clearly comprehend the explicit career utility and market value of an administrative policy, they exhibit higher levels of autonomous intrinsic and identified motivation—as articulated in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This cognitive alignment enables final-year undergraduates to actively reframe short-term academic stress and logistical friction into a constructive, goal-oriented developmental challenge necessary for professional growth.

B. Divided Focus and Structural Timing: Resistance to Concurrent Demands

In contrast to the majority view, a critical minority of participants (two out of eight: CAW and UYS) firmly opposed the policy of requiring language certification prior to graduation. Importantly, a nuanced thematic analysis of their resistance reveals that CAW and UYS were not ideologically opposed to the intrinsic value or professional utility of standardized certification itself. In fact, both participants explicitly pledged to pursue standardized certification independently after completing their undergraduate degrees. Their opposition was rooted entirely in the structural timing, administrative overlap, and severe cognitive strain caused by fulfilling high-stakes test requirements concurrently with their final-year thesis preparation. For these students, the undergraduate thesis represents the primary, non-negotiable academic benchmark of their degree, demanding undivided analytical focus, rigorous empirical revision, and sustained intellectual engagement. Forcing certification into this final academic window created acute psychological friction, fragmented their academic priorities, and compromised their learning experience. As CAW (Male, Private University) pointed out regarding the continuous struggle to manage competing institutional demands:

"It is not that certification is unimportant, but doing it right before graduation makes it extremely difficult to focus. I would rather concentrate fully on finishing my thesis defense first, and then take the certification test after I graduate. When both high-stakes demands happen at the exact same time, our mental energy gets divided, and we end up feeling overwhelmed by the pressure. If the university gave us the option to clear our thesis first or spread out the requirement earlier in the program, we could achieve much better results in both areas without sacrificing our well-being."

CAW's reflection exposes the logistical and psychological dilemmas generated when two major academic milestones are superimposed onto the same temporal space. Her account emphasizes that student resistance is not born out of academic apathy or a rejection of quality standards but rather stems from a pragmatic desire to protect the integrity of their primary research work. By advocating for structural flexibility or earlier policy integration, she highlights a crucial flaw in top-down policy design: the failure to account for student bandwidth and scheduling feasibility. Echoing these concerns regarding temporal and mental strain, UYS (Female, Private University) elaborated on the detrimental effects of simultaneous institutional mandates, arguing that imposing standardized testing alongside intensive thesis writing severely diminishes students' focus and compromises the overall quality of both deliverables:

"When you are stressed about thesis revisions and advisor deadlines, adding a standardized test score requirement creates overwhelming pressure. I promise to get certified after graduation when my mind is"

clear, but forcing it now only divides our energy and harms our thesis quality. Managing continuous feedback from advisors while simultaneously preparing for a high-stakes proficiency exam exhausts our mental bandwidth. Instead of allowing us to produce a thoroughly polished thesis, this temporal overlap forces us into survival mode, where we just try to clear administrative hurdles rather than focus on true academic excellence."

UYS's narrative provides a stark description of the emotional and cognitive toll imposed by concurrent institutional mandates. Her observation that students are forced into "survival mode" illustrates a critical shift in student orientation—from deep, meaningful academic engagement to superficial administrative compliance. When faced with overlapping high-stakes deadlines, learners are compelled to adopt defensive coping mechanisms, prioritizing immediate task completion over scholarly depth and research quality.

The qualitative accounts provided by CAW and UYS illuminate a critical policy-practice mismatch in contemporary higher education governance, where institutional benchmark deadlines and rigid graduation metrics directly collide with students' finite cognitive capacity, temporal resources, and emotional well-being during high-stakes academic transitions. Rather than fostering academic excellence, forcing concurrent high-stakes requirements creates systemic friction that threatens both student mental health and the scholarly output of their undergraduate research.

The psychological strain articulated by CAW and UYS can be robustly interpreted through Cognitive Load Theory (Evans et al., 2024). Working memory possesses strictly limited processing capacity when handling novel and complex cognitive tasks. Completing a final-year EFL thesis can impose substantial cognitive demands, as students need to integrate research methodology, literature synthesis, second-language academic writing conventions, data interpretation, and iterative feedback throughout the research and writing process (Sunaryo et al., 2025). From a Cognitive Load Theory perspective, the simultaneous processing of multiple interacting elements can increase intrinsic cognitive load (Sweller, 2010). This process alone fully saturates the intrinsic cognitive load of most final-year undergraduates. When an institution superimposes a secondary high-stakes hurdle—such as a mandatory language proficiency exam with strict cutoff scores—the extraneous cognitive load escalates dramatically.

This mental concurrency depletes available working memory capacity, inducing severe task-switching friction, temporal exhaustion, and academic fatigue (Olatunbosun & Pillay, 2024). Instead of experiencing the synergy that outcome-based education promises, students suffer from cognitive overload, wherein the mental energy required to prepare for standardized test structures directly drains the focus needed to refine research findings. The explicit pledge by CAW and UYS to seek certification post-graduation underscores that their resistance is not an avoidance of accountability, but rather a rational, self-regulatory coping strategy designed to preserve academic quality during thesis completion.

Consequently, institutional success in certification policy hinges not on rigid administrative enforcement or punitive graduation barriers, but on strategic scheduling, structural scaffolding, and curriculum integration that respect students' cognitive readiness and workload limits throughout their academic timeline. Higher education leaders must recognize that imposing multiple exit hurdles without temporal spacing risks transforming meaningful educational benchmarks into counterproductive administrative traps.

C. Pedagogical Synthesis and Institutional Policy Alignment

Synthesizing the contrasting perspectives of the participants reveals that institutional certification policies in ELT programs operate along a delicate spectrum between professional enablement and administrative strain. The empirical evidence demonstrates that language certification requirements are not inherently problematic, ideologically rejected, or counterproductive in themselves; rather, their ultimate pedagogical outcome and affective reception are largely dictated by structural implementation, curricular alignment, temporal spacing, and institutional scaffolding. When students possess adequate preparation time, clear diagnostic feedback, and a well-defined perception of post-graduation career utility, certification serves as an empowering catalyst for professional identity development, self-efficacy, and graduate employment readiness. Conversely, when certification is imposed as an isolated, top-down administrative barrier or an overlapping requirement during the high-stakes final thesis stage, it triggers severe cognitive overload, fragments academic priorities, and compromises student emotional well-being (Qamariah & Hercz, 2026).

This empirical divergence highlights a fundamental tension in higher education governance between macro-level quality assurance goals and micro-level student learning experiences. While university management utilizes standardized credentials to demonstrate institutional accountability, program comparability, and accreditation compliance (Nawas et al., 2025), students bear the cognitive and logistical brunt of uncoordinated policy timelines. When administrative deadlines collide with the analytical demands of thesis writing, the diagnostic value of standardized testing is undermined, reducing a meaningful quality metric to an anxiety-inducing administrative obstacle. Therefore, the core challenge for ELT departments lies not in choosing whether to mandate certification, but in optimizing *when* and *how* such benchmarks are integrated into the broader curriculum.

To resolve this institutional paradox, university administrators, curriculum designers, and ELT program leaders must transition away from rigid, late-stage exit mandates toward a scaffolded, student-centred curriculum model. Rather than treating language certification as a sudden, isolated hurdle imposed at the finish line of an undergraduate degree, institutions should embed diagnostic testing frameworks and structured test-preparation modules into middle-year coursework, specifically during Semesters 4 or 5. Introducing standardized language benchmarks at this intermediate stage offers three key pedagogical advantages:

- a) **Early Diagnostic Identification:** It allows students to identify specific linguistic weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary, or listening comprehension early in their academic trajectory, providing them with ample time to remediate skill gaps through elective courses or targeted self-study before facing final-year research demands.
- b) **Cognitive Load Optimization:** Decoupling high-stakes language testing from the undergraduate thesis prevents working memory saturation and task-switching fatigue during the final year, enabling students to devote undivided intellectual energy to their empirical research and oral defence preparation.
- c) **Enhanced Affective Readiness:** Achieving the required proficiency scores prior to the final semester fosters a sense of academic accomplishment and psychological security, allowing learners to enter their final thesis phase with elevated self-efficacy and reduced post-graduation anxiety.

Furthermore, higher education governance must incorporate policy flexibility and institutional support mechanisms. For students who do not meet required proficiency thresholds during mid-year assessments, departments should provide subsidized retake opportunities, non-punitive remedial workshops, or credit-bearing preparation seminars rather than placing the entire financial and preparatory burden on individual learners. Such strategic scheduling aligns institutional quality assurance metrics with students' cognitive readiness, emotional bandwidth, and developmental capacity. By transforming late-stage exit barriers into scaffolded developmental milestones, tertiary institutions can ensure that professional certification remains an asset for graduate employability without sacrificing research quality or student well-being during final-year undergraduate studies.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated final-year EFL students' perceptions of mandatory language certification requirements during their thesis defense preparation. The findings synthesize a dual perspective: while most participants (6/8) viewed additional certification as a strategic investment that enhances professional credibility, confidence, and graduate employability, a critical minority (2/8) experienced cognitive overload and split academic focus. Crucially, student concerns were not directed at certification as an educational benchmark, but rather at the structural timing of its simultaneous imposition alongside high-stakes thesis writing. These findings yield direct logical implications for higher education administrators and ELT curriculum developers. To optimize the pedagogical benefits of certification without inducing academic strain, institutional leaders must transition from simultaneous to scaffolded policy execution. Integrating certification preparation and testing into earlier semesters (*e.g.*, middle-year coursework) or offering structured diagnostic support before the final year would preserve academic rigor while respecting students' cognitive readiness and mental well-being during thesis completion. Despite its qualitative depth, this study has several limitations that provide pathways for future research. Conducted as a qualitative case study with eight participants across institutions in Bogor, West Java, the findings represent contextualized student perspectives rather than broad generalizability. Future studies should employ quantitative or mixed-methods designs involving larger, multi-regional cohorts to examine the broader empirical impact of certification timing on thesis completion rates and academic performance. Additionally, investigating institutional perspectives—such as policy designers and faculty advisors—would provide a more holistic evaluation of certification policy implementation.

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