

Navigating Barriers to English Proficiency: A Qualitative Descriptive Study Among University Students in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by fifth-semester English Department students at the Muslim University of Indonesia in achieving effective English proficiency. It is a qualitative descriptive research approach. Data were collected from five participants through observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, enabling an in-depth exploration of cognitive, affective, and environmental factors. The findings highlight six principal obstacles: insufficient practice, limited vocabulary, unsupportive learning environments, lack of interest, low self-confidence, and difficulties with pronunciation. Additionally, participants reported five key coping strategies, including regular vocabulary expansion, consistent practice, seeking training partners, enhancing learning motivation, and developing self-confidence. These strategies underscore the importance of addressing both linguistic and psychological dimensions of language acquisition. The results align with prominent theories in second language acquisition, emphasizing the role of socially mediated interactions, motivation, and affective factors. Practically, the study suggests implementing collaborative learning approaches, structured practice sessions, and confidence-building activities in English language curricula to foster communicative competence. Although this investigation focuses on a single private university context and has a limited sample size, its insights hold relevance for educators, policymakers, and institutions seeking to improve English language instruction. Future research could investigate broader populations, alternative instructional settings, and longitudinal assessments of student progress. Therefore, the study contributes valuable perspectives on how to overcome persistent English language difficulties among university students in similar EFL settings.

Keywords: *English language learning, EFL, second language acquisition, motivation, self-confidence*

INTRODUCTION

English has established itself not only as an academic subject in many educational systems worldwide but also as a primary medium for international communication, professional collaboration, and access to global knowledge networks. Historically, the spread of English gained momentum through colonial expansion, diplomatic ties, and the ascendancy of the United States as a leading economic and cultural force in the aftermath of World War II (Crystal, 2003). Over time, this expansion has led to English becoming the dominant language of science, technology, commerce, and even entertainment. Consequently, governments and academic institutions in various non-Anglophone regions have integrated English into curricula as a compulsory subject from primary schooling through university education. The expectation behind these efforts is that mastering English will enhance students' competitiveness in the global marketplace, increase their academic opportunities, and improve their overall ability to engage with international communities. However, these aspirations often remain unmet due to persistent and multifaceted challenges in English language teaching and learning. Many students exit their formal education with inadequate communicative competence, indicating a substantial gap between policy objectives and actual outcomes in language proficiency (Bianchi & Martini, 2023). The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative descriptive approach, aiming to illuminate the specific difficulties learners face in achieving effective English language learning and to propose pragmatic strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the pivotal role English plays in academic and professional advancement, research and anecdotal evidence continue to show that a considerable proportion of students graduate with limited speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. These limitations often manifest most clearly when learners attempt to communicate in real-world contexts, such as giving oral presentations, participating in academic discussions, or composing research-based essays. In many educational environments where English is designated as a Foreign Language (EFL), the classroom remains the primary venue for exposure to the language. Large class sizes, traditional teacher-centered methodologies, and limited instructional resources can compromise the quality of language input and reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Simultaneously, learners frequently grapple with psychological and social barriers, including foreign language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The culmination of these factors often results in suboptimal language development, as students may resort to rote memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary lists without acquiring the spontaneous communicative skills necessary for practical language use.

A myriad of scholarly interventions has been proposed in an attempt to bolster English language proficiency. For instance, task-based learning methods emphasize the use of authentic tasks and real-life communication scenarios (Willis & Willis, 2007). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) shifts the instructional focus from grammar instruction to interactive, student-centered activities, encouraging learners to experiment with language while receiving context-appropriate feedback (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Other research highlights the importance of affective variables. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, for example, sheds light on motivation and integrativeness as key drivers for

successful second language acquisition. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis suggests that comprehensible input material slightly above learners' current level fosters acquisition, provided the affective filter is low. Although these theories and approaches have certainly enriched language pedagogy, their success in practice is often contingent upon contextual factors, such as institutional support, class size, teacher preparedness, and resource availability. Moreover, student backgrounds, personal goals, and previous learning experiences can significantly influence their engagement and ultimate success in English classrooms, thus complicating the implementation of a single "best practice" method.

Given this complexity, it becomes evident that challenges in English language learning emerge from a confluence of learner-related, pedagogical, and institutional variables. Learner-related issues, for instance, include restricted lexical knowledge, pronunciation difficulties, grammar anxiety, and the lack of confidence to speak publicly. Pedagogical variables can include didactic teaching styles that fail to encourage active participation, overreliance on form-focused drills, and minimal use of authentic materials such as news articles or multimedia content. Institutional dimensions may involve insufficient financial and technological support, large student-to-teacher ratios, or rigid curricula that limit instructors' flexibility in adopting innovative teaching methods (Fareh, 2010). In some contexts, the English curriculum remains test-oriented, prioritizing short-term memorization of grammar and vocabulary items over meaningful, long-term skill development (Nakata, 2010). Each of these hurdles, whether individual or systemic, can significantly impede students' progress toward English language proficiency.

The research problem that this qualitative descriptive study seeks to address is the persistent difficulty learners experience in achieving effective English language skills within tertiary education, especially in contexts marked by limited institutional resources and heterogeneous student populations. While much has been written about the role of motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), and teaching methodology (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), fewer studies adopt a holistic framework that synthesizes these diverse strands of inquiry while also attending to the lived experiences of students and instructors in particular institutional settings. The qualitative descriptive approach is especially suited to this type of investigation, as it aims to present a comprehensive, context-sensitive portrayal of the phenomena under study (Sandelowski, 2000). Rather than testing a pre-defined hypothesis or seeking to prove a causal relationship, the method focuses on describing and interpreting the complexities of the participants' experiences, drawing upon in-depth interviews, observations, reflective journals, or focus group discussions as primary data sources. By centering the voices of students who have struggled with English learning, as well as the insights of instructors who deliver English courses, the study can reveal how theoretical constructs like anxiety or communicative competence unfold in real-world classroom environments.

An essential objective of this study is thus to identify, categorize, and understand the constellation of factors cognitive, affective, pedagogical, and institutional that collectively hinder students' progress. Special attention is paid to the ways these factors intersect in a private university context, where class sizes may be relatively large, resources comparatively limited, and student preparedness variable due to diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. In doing so, the study not only charts the obstacles but also explores how learners navigate or negotiate these barriers. For instance, students with high anxiety might develop coping mechanisms, such as rehearsing presentations repeatedly or resorting to code-switching, while others may simply withdraw from classroom activities. Through systematic

collection and analysis of these narratives, the research aims to highlight patterns that can guide more informed interventions.

By generating a detailed portrayal of students' lived experiences, this research also aspires to make a practical contribution to teaching strategies, curriculum design, and policy-making. On a micro-level, instructors could benefit from insights regarding which classroom practices pair work, group projects, or extensive reading programs are most effective in alleviating speaking anxiety or improving vocabulary retention. On a macro-level, administrators and policymakers may glean a clearer understanding of how resource distribution, scheduling, or assessment policies either facilitate or hinder robust language development. The significance here extends to broader educational goals: equipping students with the communicative skills necessary for research, professional engagements, and cross-border cooperation. In an era where industries and academic collaborations increasingly transcend geographic boundaries, English can function as a gateway for students to interface with multinational companies, international conferences, and culturally diverse teams.

Furthermore, the study offers a theoretical contribution by situating its findings within the larger discourse of second language acquisition. Traditional theories often isolate specific variables like input, output, or intrinsic motivation and examine their effects. Yet real-world learning environments are inevitably more entangled, as students bring unique backgrounds and institutions enforce particular policies. By synthesizing the experiences of students, instructors, and the institutional constraints within a single qualitative descriptive framework, the research can illustrate the reciprocal interactions among these elements. Such a nuanced perspective may illuminate why, for instance, certain teaching methodologies fail to yield expected outcomes if not supported by adequate resources and training. Likewise, it may uncover how personal factors such as self-efficacy beliefs interact with external factors like peer support or exposure to authentic English materials. This integrated view enriches scholarly conversations by suggesting that efforts to improve English proficiency must be multilayered, addressing not just the learner but also the environment in which learning unfolds.

The originality of this investigation arises in part from its context, focusing on a private tertiary institution environment often characterized by unique financial, administrative, and pedagogical challenges. Whereas many studies concentrate on public universities or specialized language institutes, private institutions are sometimes understudied despite comprising a significant portion of the higher education landscape in many countries, including Indonesia. These institutions can exhibit greater heterogeneity in student intake, often enrolling individuals with a wide spectrum of initial language proficiencies and aspirations. They may also be constrained by limited funding, which affects the quality of facilities, the availability of technology, and the ratio of language instructors to learners. By delving into this underexplored milieu, the study underscores the necessity for context-responsive solutions and mitigates the risk of proposing one-size-fits-all policies that fail to consider localized realities.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges students face in achieving effective English learning. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the complexity of real-life experiences and present them in a narrative form that highlights both the context and the participants' perspectives. By examining students' learning processes

and the factors that hinder their progress, the study aims to describe the various difficulties encountered and provide insights into how these challenges might be addressed.

The research took place at the Faculty of Letters, English Department of Universitas Muslim Indonesia (UMI) in Makassar. Five fifth-semester English Department students participated in this study, selected through a purposive sampling strategy that focused on individuals who were actively engaged in their courses and willing to share detailed information about their experiences. Data collection spanned two weeks and was designed to accommodate both the participants' availability and the depth of investigation required by the qualitative descriptive method.

Three primary instruments were employed to gather data. First, observations were conducted by the researcher to examine the classroom environment, teaching methods, and patterns of interaction between instructors and students. These observations provided contextual background on how English learning is typically approached in this academic setting. Second, semi-structured interviews served as the main method of probing into students' subjective experiences. The researcher developed a set of open-ended questions aimed at exploring specific areas of difficulty such as vocabulary, pronunciation, or confidence while remaining flexible enough to pursue new topics that arose during the conversation. Third, relevant documentation, including personal notes, journals, and photographs, was collected to supplement observational and interview findings. These documents offered further evidence of participants' learning processes and helped validate or expand upon issues raised in the interviews.

Data collection followed a structured procedure that began with preliminary observations of the learning environment and general classroom activities. This initial phase helped the researcher identify potential participants who were both forthcoming and reflective. After selecting the five students, the researcher scheduled semi-structured interviews, during which participants discussed their perceptions of their own language learning challenges and the strategies or resources they believed could facilitate improvement. Throughout this stage, the researcher also gathered any supplementary documents participants were willing to share, such as personal study notes or reflective journals. These materials provided nuanced illustrations of how students perceive and address their English language difficulties, and they offered a broader view of the learning context as a whole.

All collected data comprising observation notes, interview transcripts, and documentation were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which consists of four primary stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction phase, the researcher systematically reviewed and coded transcripts and notes, focusing on segments that specifically addressed the difficulties students face. Redundant or irrelevant information was filtered out to maintain a clear focus. The remaining data were organized into themes related to areas such as pronunciation challenges, lack of confidence, and limited opportunities to practice. These themes were then displayed in a coherent narrative, which allowed the researcher to identify relationships among the factors under investigation. In the final stage, the researcher drew conclusions by interpreting the patterns that emerged within and across the thematic categories, continually checking the results against the original data to ensure credibility. Any inconsistencies were resolved by re-examining transcripts, clarifying with participants if necessary, and refining the thematic categories accordingly. Through this iterative process, the study developed a context-rich picture of the specific obstacles students encounter in learning English effectively and illuminated potential pathways for intervention.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study took place at the Muslim University of Indonesia (UMI) and involved five fifth-semester students from the English Department, Faculty of Letters. Data were collected through a combination of observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to analyze and interpret the data, enabling the researcher to explore the factors contributing to students’ difficulties in learning English effectively and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

All five participants were selected based on their active engagement in English coursework and willingness to share detailed insights. Observations provided contextual information regarding classroom dynamics, teaching methods, and students’ interactions, while interviews yielded in-depth, personal accounts of the obstacles and facilitating factors influencing English language acquisition. Relevant documents, including personal notes and schedules, were also consulted to confirm and elaborate upon the interview data.

Table 1 provides a concise summary of the factors identified by each participant. Some of these factors overlap across participants, offering a clearer picture of the most pervasive challenges.

Table 1. Summary of identified factors

No.	Participants	Factors Difficulties
1.	P1	Practice (A), Vocabulary (B)
2.	P2	Vocabulary (B), Not Interested (D)
3.	P3	Environmental (C), Not Confident (E)
4.	P4	Not Confident (E), Pronunciation (F)
5.	P5	Environmental (C)

During the interviews, each participant was asked two central questions:

1. *What are the factors that cause students’ difficulties in learning English effectively?*
2. *How do you overcome these difficulties to achieve more effective English learning?*

Their responses were transcribed verbatim in the original language (Bahasa Indonesia) and then coded to identify key themes and recurring patterns. Selected excerpts from the interviews (presented here in both the original language and brief English paraphrases) illustrate the nature of the difficulties and solutions.

1. Factors That Hinder Effective English Learning

1.1. Lack of Practice

A recurring theme among participants was the insufficient amount of time dedicated to practicing English. Participant 1 highlighted the importance of practice:

“In my opinion, the problem is the lack of practice, such as not reviewing materials that have already been studied....”

Frequent, structured practice is essential to reinforce newly acquired knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. When practice sessions are sporadic or entirely absent, learners often forget newly learned words and lose confidence in spoken communication.

1.2 Limited Vocabulary

Several participants (P1, P2) mentioned that a narrow vocabulary range poses a serious obstacle to communicating in English. They stressed the difficulty of memorizing and retaining new words, especially when confronted with synonyms, slang, or idiomatic expressions:

“I find it challenging to memorize vocabulary because there are always new or slang terms that appear.”

This lack of vocabulary extends beyond speaking; it also impacts reading comprehension and listening skills. Students who cannot readily understand key terms in lectures or reading materials may become discouraged, thereby reducing their willingness to continue practicing.

1.3 Environmental Factors

Participants 3 and 5 drew attention to an unsupportive environment as a significant barrier:

“In my opinion, the difficulty... comes from the lack of an environment that understands and uses English...”

Students emphasized that regularly interacting with people who also speak or learn English helps reinforce language use. In contrast, living and studying in an environment where English is seldom spoken limits exposure to authentic communication situations, thus slowing the development of fluent speech and listening comprehension.

1.4 Lack of Interest

Participant 2 noted that some students struggle simply because they lack intrinsic interest in English. Apathy or disinterest in certain types of learning materials can lead to boredom and a superficial engagement with course activities:

“In my opinion, the problem is that students are not interested in learning certain materials....”

Such a lack of engagement can undermine motivation and make it difficult to sustain consistent effort over time.

1.5 Low Self-Confidence

Participants 3 and 4 brought up the issue of self-confidence, stating that anxiety about making mistakes particularly in grammar or pronunciation often inhibits students from speaking up in class:

“I don’t feel confident in using English because there are many pronunciation errors... so it’s embarrassing if I make a mistake.”

Low self-confidence can create a cycle of reduced practice, as learners avoid speaking opportunities that could otherwise bolster their fluency and build resilience against making errors.

1.6 Pronunciation Challenges

Participant 4 highlighted pronunciation as an additional hurdle, pointing out that many words in English have irregular or unfamiliar sounds:

“...pronouncing words incorrectly and making grammar mistakes is embarrassing....”

When students are unsure how to produce certain sounds or stressed syllables, they often become hesitant to participate in class discussions or casual conversations, further limiting their opportunities to improve.

2. Strategies to Overcome Learning Difficulties

In addition to identifying these obstacles, participants provided insights into effective strategies for mitigating them. Table 2 summarizes the primary solutions participants suggested.

Table 2. Summary of Strategy Use

No.	Participants	Obstacles
1.	P1,P2	Expand Vocabulary (A)
2.	P1,P2,P3	Practice More (B)
3.	P3,P5	Looking for a Training Partner (C)
4.	P4	Increase Learning Motivation (D)
5.	P4	Increase Self Confidence (E)

2.1 Expanding Vocabulary

Both Participants 1 and 2 noted that a systematic approach to vocabulary building could alleviate many of their challenges. Suggestions included setting a daily or weekly vocabulary goal and using sticky notes around the home:

“I deal with it by creating sticky notes of vocabulary I want to memorize, then sticking them on my bedroom wall....”

Apps and games in English such as Duolingo were mentioned as useful tools for learning new words, particularly when classroom-based instruction alone is insufficient.

2.2 Increasing Practice

Participants consistently emphasized frequent, structured practice as a cornerstone for overcoming difficulties. P1, P2, and P3 all suggested allocating regular time for speaking, listening, reading, and writing:

“...I set aside a little time each day to practice my English.”

Listening to English-language music, watching films with English subtitles, and attempting to translate daily conversations can build fluency and reduce apprehension over time.

2.3 Looking for a Training Partner

P3 and P5 noted that having at least one partner to practice English with significantly boosts confidence and language retention:

“Studying with a friend who also wants to learn English... so we can practice together without feeling shy.”

Interactive peer collaboration encourages consistent use of English in a low-stakes environment, thereby lowering anxiety about making errors in front of large groups.

2.4 Increasing Learning Motivation

Participant 4 highlighted motivation as a key driver for maintaining consistent study habits:

“...enhancing the motivation to learn English is important... it offers good opportunities for the future...”

Personal goal-setting, such as aspiring to study abroad or secure employment in an international setting, can keep learners focused during challenging phases of language acquisition.

2.5 Building Self-Confidence

Finally, P4 also stressed the importance of self-confidence in tackling speaking anxiety:

“...by increasing our confidence, we find it easier to learn...”

Overcoming the fear of making mistakes is crucial. Participants recommended celebrating small achievements and treating errors as a natural part of the learning curve. Once learners accept that mistakes are inevitable, they become more willing to participate in discussions and extend their use of English.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the primary difficulties that hinder fifth-semester English Department students at the Muslim University of Indonesia in achieving effective English learning and to explore practical strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles. The findings revealed six key factors—lack of practice, limited vocabulary, unsupportive learning environments, lack of interest, low self-confidence, and pronunciation challenges and five core approaches for addressing these issues: expanding vocabulary, increasing practice, finding a training partner, enhancing learning motivation, and building self-confidence. This section interprets these results in light of the study's objectives, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks, and then discusses their implications, limitations, and opportunities for future research.

The results illustrate a multifaceted set of obstacles that align with both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. Participants consistently stressed the importance of frequent and structured practice to reinforce newly acquired language skills. This finding corroborates prior research suggesting that oral and written language proficiency thrive on regular rehearsal and communication (Brown, 2007). When practice is sporadic or non-existent, participants reported declining confidence and retention. Moreover, limited vocabulary emerged as a major impediment, reflecting the essential role of lexical knowledge in facilitating comprehension and production in a second language (Nation, 2013). Students lacking sufficient vocabulary found it challenging to interpret authentic materials, compose coherent texts, or maintain fluid conversations.

In addition to cognitive factors, participants highlighted the influence of unsupportive environments, noting that having few peers or instructors who communicate in English impedes natural usage of the language. This environmental constraint intensifies the difficulty of implementing newly learned grammar and vocabulary in daily contexts, thus underscoring the social and contextual nature of language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, lack of interest and low self-confidence emerged as crucial affective barriers that hindered participants' willingness to engage in communicative tasks. These findings echo Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) description of foreign language anxiety, suggesting that negative emotions can create psychological filters that block language input and output.

Finally, pronunciation challenges were noted as a key impediment to fluent communication. Students expressed concern that mispronunciations would expose them to embarrassment, undermining their willingness to speak. This resonates with existing literature on how pronunciation inaccuracies can lead to communication breakdowns and heighten learners' fears of negative evaluation (Gilakjani, 2012). Thus, the current study highlights an interplay of linguistic, psychological, and environmental elements that collectively complicate students' progress toward effective English proficiency.

The study also revealed five practical strategies that learners employ. Expanding vocabulary and increasing practice are clearly foundational and complement each other: a broader lexicon enhances the effectiveness of practice, and repeated use of language solidifies vocabulary. Finding a training partner emerged as a powerful catalyst for language improvement, permitting low-stakes, interactive conversations and consistent feedback features that mirror collaborative or communicative approaches in second language acquisition theory (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Additionally, participants underscored the need to enhance learning motivation by linking English proficiency to future career goals and personal aspirations. This aligns with Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) emphasis on the pivotal role of motivation in sustained language learning. Finally, building self-confidence was a

critical step in mitigating speaking anxiety and allowing students to experiment with the language without the fear of making mistakes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective English learning necessitates a holistic approach one that addresses both external conditions, such as environmental support, and internal traits, such as affective dispositions and motivation. While the interplay of factors may vary from one learner to another, the overall conclusion is that language competence evolves from ongoing practice, meaningful interactions, and psychological resilience.

This study's results align with established theories of second language acquisition. First, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) posits that learners need comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. The participants' emphasis on environmental support and exposure to English aligns with the notion that immersion in an English-speaking milieu provides ample comprehensible input. However, this environment was largely missing for many students, limiting their opportunities for organic language growth.

Second, the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) offers insight into how lack of confidence and anxiety can block or diminish input assimilation. Participants who cited fear of mistakes and embarrassment corroborate Krashen's argument that high anxiety levels impede the internalization of language input. Similarly, Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985) underscores the pivotal role of attitudes and motivation in language learning. Where participants described boosting motivation by envisioning future career prospects, they effectively engaged in a process of building integrative or instrumental motivation components central to Gardner's framework.

Furthermore, the emergence of peer collaboration as a solution resonates with Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which argues that learning is fundamentally a socially mediated process. By working with a partner, students create a supportive zone of proximal development, receiving immediate feedback and scaffolding that accelerates their language skills. This scaffolding was especially evident in the ways participants described helping each other correct pronunciation and grammar.

Finally, the significance of repeated, deliberate practice is compatible with Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007). This perspective suggests that expertise in a skill such as speaking in a second language is acquired through a cycle of explicit knowledge becoming proceduralized. Hence, participants' calls for consistent rehearsal, daily goal-setting, and immersive activities underscore the process by which declarative knowledge (knowing the rules) transforms into procedural fluency (using language spontaneously).

The identification of lack of practice, limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, and environmental constraints suggests that higher education institutions should design curricula and learning activities that promote active language use. Implementing speaking clubs or conversation circles, alongside structured vocabulary-building programs, can enhance students' engagement and language proficiency (Mohammadi, 2017; Huang, 2024; Kilic, 2023). Additionally, language labs equipped with interactive software can facilitate independent practice, fostering ownership over learning progress (Sholeh, 2022; Cheng et al., 2012). A communicative approach that incorporates small group tasks encourages continuous interaction among students, which is essential for language development (Huang, 2022; Bourgoin & Bouthillier, 2021; Yildiz, 2020). Furthermore, interventions such as counseling or workshops aimed at boosting self-confidence can alleviate anxiety, enabling students to participate more fully in classroom activities (Dirgeyasa, 2018; Wang, 2023; Ruan et al., 2015).

By integrating socio-cognitive, affective, and environmental considerations, this study underscores the multifaceted nature of language acquisition. The findings add empirical support to theories that emphasize the synergy between comprehensible input, affective factors, and social interaction (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015; Chen et al., 2022). The strong emphasis on partner-based practice also advocates for continued research into collaborative language learning models and the role of peer scaffolding in EFL settings (Monshizadeh et al., 2016; Tahir, 2024). This underscores a potential gap in existing literature, where typically teacher-student interactions take precedence over peer-led initiatives (Macapagal, 2024; Samifanni, 2020).

Although the findings offer rich insights into learners' difficulties and coping strategies, several limitations warrant caution in interpreting and generalizing results. First, the small sample size (five participants) may not fully represent the diversity of learners in the English Department or in other universities. Future studies with larger and more varied samples could yield a broader understanding of the phenomena observed. Second, contextual constraints such as institutional policies, socio-economic backgrounds, or available resources might limit the direct application of these findings to other environments. The study was conducted in a single private university context, potentially narrowing transferability to public institutions or different national settings. Third, self-reporting biases could have influenced participants' responses. Interviews rely on students' willingness to disclose information accurately, and certain difficulties might have been overlooked or underemphasized due to personal reservations or recall limitations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges that fifth-semester English Department students at the Muslim University of Indonesia face in achieving effective English learning. The main obstacles identified limited practice, vocabulary deficits, unsupportive learning environments, lack of interest, low self-confidence, and pronunciation difficulties collectively hamper learners' progress. Participants shared practical strategies to overcome these barriers, including expanding vocabulary, regular practice, seeking a training partner, cultivating motivation, and enhancing self-confidence. By examining both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, the study sheds light on why certain students struggle to attain communicative competence and what can be done to support their development.

The significance of these findings lies in their contribution to both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice. The results support existing theories on second language acquisition that emphasize the importance of input, motivation, and social interaction, while also highlighting the role of personal and contextual factors in shaping learner outcomes. For practitioners, the insights garnered here suggest that targeted interventions—such as creating environments conducive to regular English use, integrating more communicative and collaborative tasks, and offering confidence-building activities can significantly bolster students' proficiency and overall engagement.

From a practical standpoint, these strategies may be adopted within university curricula, language clubs, and instructor-led programs to foster a more holistic approach to language teaching. Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on a single private university may not reflect the diversity of learner experiences in other contexts. Despite these constraints, the study provides a robust foundation for future inquiries, which could expand

the participant pool, employ longitudinal methods, or explore how technological tools and online communities further enhance students' motivation and competence in English.

In proposing areas for future research, it would be valuable to investigate the interplay between institutional policies and student learning outcomes, examine diverse linguistic and cultural settings, or incorporate quantitative metrics to triangulate the qualitative insights reported here. In doing so, subsequent work can build upon the present study's conclusions and refine our collective understanding of effective English language learning strategies. Ultimately, by highlighting both the barriers' students encounter and the ways they surmount them, this research serves as a stepping stone for educators, policymakers, and academics committed to improving English language education in higher education settings. The enduring contribution of this study lies in its holistic portrayal of learner experiences and its guidance for practical, evidence-based reforms to better facilitate communicative competence in English.

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