

Investigating Chalanges Faced By Elt Students : Sociolinguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges faced by English Language Teaching (ELT) students in choosing English as their academic major from a sociolinguistic perspective. It aims to identify both internal factors—such as motivation, interest, academic confidence, and career expectations—and external factors, including family and societal expectations, peer influence, availability of resources, and university curriculum, that influence students' academic decisions and experiences. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method, collecting data through interviews and Likert-scale questionnaires administered to second-semester ELT students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. Data were analyzed thematically and visualized using charts and diagrams. The findings reveal that academic challenges and family expectations are among the most dominant influences, with some students demonstrating high motivation and confidence while others struggle with language anxiety and limited support. Sociolinguistic elements, such as cultural norms and peer dynamics, also play a significant role in shaping academic choices. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding students' sociocultural backgrounds in designing effective educational strategies. These results provide valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and academic advisors in supporting ELT students' learning and career development.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a major is one of the most crucial decisions for university students, as it shapes both their academic journey and future career prospects. For students majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT), this decision requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to navigate a variety of academic and sociocultural expectations. English, as a global language, demands mastery in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing skills. At Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, many second-semester students face difficulties in meeting these academic demands, which in turn causes hesitation, self-doubt, and challenges in their commitment to the field. Without adequate academic support, these challenges can hinder students' confidence and affect their long-term success.

In the Indonesian educational context, the choice of a university major is not solely determined by personal interest. Cultural norms and family expectations often play a significant role in shaping students' academic paths. In many cases, students are encouraged to choose majors perceived as more prestigious or financially rewarding, such as medicine, engineering, or law. This societal perception can cause internal conflict for students who are genuinely interested in English but are concerned about its perceived lower economic value. Such tensions highlight the interplay between individual aspirations and social pressures in educational decision-making. Previous studies have shown that academic challenges, such as low proficiency in speaking or writing, can discourage students from selecting English as a major. Research by Anggrisia and Robah (2020) emphasized that speaking difficulties are a major obstacle for many Indonesian learners of English, while Humairoh (2019) found that writing anxiety can negatively affect students' engagement. Beyond linguistic skills, Alwasilah (2018) noted that cultural expectations and educational structures also shape students' academic choices. These findings underline the need for a comprehensive investigation that considers both academic and sociolinguistic dimensions.

In addition to personal and social factors, institutional support plays a vital role in students' success. Access to learning resources, supportive lecturers, and effective curriculum design can greatly influence students' confidence and motivation. In the absence of such support, students may struggle with academic adaptation, especially during the early stages of their university education. This is particularly relevant for students from rural areas, such as those in Sidrap, where exposure to English language environments may be limited. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies that consider the unique needs of the student population. The researcher's interest in this topic stems from the observation that English, despite being a valuable global skill, is often overlooked as a field of study compared to disciplines with more immediate career guarantees. However, English proficiency can lead to diverse career paths, including teaching, translation, tourism, and international business. The challenge lies in ensuring that students understand these opportunities and receive adequate support to pursue them. Investigating the challenges faced by ELT students is therefore essential to unlocking their academic and professional potential.

Students from rural backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to sociolinguistic pressures, as they may be influenced by community attitudes that undervalue English studies. In such contexts, the decision to major in English often reflects a delicate balance between personal ambition and external expectations. This study aims to explore how these dynamics shape students' decision-making processes and to identify the most pressing challenges they encounter. Such insights can inform policies and practices that make English studies more accessible and attractive.

Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang provides an ideal setting for this research due to its diverse student body, which includes individuals from various rural and urban backgrounds. This diversity allows for the examination of multiple perspectives on the challenges of majoring in English. By focusing on second-semester students, the study captures experiences during a critical adjustment period, when initial enthusiasm may be tested by academic realities and external pressures. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how academic, social, and cultural factors interact to influence students' educational choices. By adopting a sociolinguistic approach, the study aims to highlight the role of language attitudes, cultural expectations, and peer influence in shaping the ELT learning experience. The findings are expected to provide valuable recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and academic advisors, enabling them to create more supportive environments that foster student success in the field of English language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decision to major in English has been widely discussed in language education research, as it intersects with issues of motivation, identity, and social context. English is recognized globally as a gateway to academic advancement, intercultural communication, and career mobility. In Indonesia, the choice to study English at the tertiary level is often shaped by both individual aspirations and broader societal factors. Gardner's (1985) work on social psychology and second language learning highlights that learners' attitudes and motivation significantly determine their success in acquiring a language. This perspective is relevant to understanding why some students embrace the challenges of English studies, while others hesitate or withdraw.

One of the most prominent internal factors influencing students' choice is motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), intrinsic motivation—stemming from personal interest and enjoyment—can foster persistence and resilience in language learning. Conversely, extrinsic motivation, such as pursuing English for job prospects or social recognition, can also drive students' decisions but may be less sustainable if not paired with genuine engagement. In the context of ELT students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, both types of motivation are evident, often interacting with each other in complex ways.

Another critical internal factor is perceived competence, or students' self-assessment of their ability to succeed in an English-speaking academic environment. Students with high self-confidence in language skills are more likely to choose English as a major and persevere through its challenges. Those with lower self-confidence may avoid English altogether or experience heightened anxiety once enrolled. Research in Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) supports this notion, emphasizing that self-efficacy directly affects both academic choices and performance.

External influences, particularly family and societal expectations, also play a central role in shaping students' academic trajectories. In collectivist cultures like Indonesia, family opinions can carry significant weight in decision-making. Parents may either encourage or discourage English studies based on perceptions of its economic value. Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of educational choice suggests that such decisions are embedded in broader life histories and social contexts, meaning that personal preference is often negotiated within familial and cultural frameworks.

Peer influence is another sociolinguistic factor that cannot be overlooked. Students often take cues from friends and classmates when considering a major. A supportive peer group can reinforce a student's confidence and interest in English, while a dismissive peer environment may contribute to self-doubt. Social Influence Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains that modeling, encouragement, and social reinforcement can significantly shape learning behaviors and academic pathways.

Institutional factors, such as curriculum quality and teaching methods, are equally influential. A well-structured curriculum that balances theory and practice can enhance students' engagement and language proficiency. Conversely, a rigid or outdated curriculum may fail to meet students' expectations, discouraging them from continuing in the program. Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory (1983) suggests that students weigh their perceived likelihood of success against the value they assign to the outcomes, meaning that curriculum design directly impacts these perceptions.

The availability of learning resources, including libraries, language laboratories, online platforms, and mentorship programs, also shapes students' experiences. Access to adequate resources can ease academic challenges and promote independent learning. As Wulandari et al. (2020) point out, when universities invest in supportive learning environments, they not only improve academic outcomes but also enhance students' motivation and commitment to their chosen field.

Previous research has consistently shown that the challenges faced by ELT students are multifaceted, involving an interplay of linguistic, psychological, social, and institutional factors. Studies by Titus (2004), Zhou and Lee (2017), and Liu (2019) all underscore the importance of understanding these dynamics to better support students in their academic journeys. The present study builds upon this body of literature by integrating a sociolinguistic perspective, examining not only the internal and external factors influencing major selection but also the cultural and interpersonal contexts in which these decisions are made

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the challenges faced by English Language Teaching (ELT) students in choosing English as their major from a sociolinguistic perspective. The descriptive approach was selected to systematically capture and present the realities experienced by students in an accurate and detailed manner. The qualitative orientation allowed the researcher to gather in-depth insights into the personal, educational, and environmental factors that influence students' decision-making processes. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative methods are particularly suited for understanding the meanings and interpretations individuals assign to their experiences.

The research was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, focusing on second-semester students in the English Education Department from the 2024 academic cohort. This group was chosen because they were at a transitional stage in their academic journey, having experienced both the initial excitement of enrollment and the emerging realities of academic and social challenges. Targeting this cohort allowed the study to capture both early-stage enthusiasm and the adjustments required to meet program expectations.

The population of this study comprised all students in the second semester of the English Education program during the 2024 academic year. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. According to Arikunto (1996), purposive sampling involves selecting subjects deliberately based on their potential to provide rich and relevant data. In this case, the chosen students had direct experience with the academic, social, and cultural factors under investigation. Three main techniques were used for data collection: questionnaires, interviews, and documentation. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items designed to measure the perceived significance of various internal and external factors influencing students' choice of major. This instrument provided a quantitative overview that complemented the qualitative data. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to follow a prepared set of questions while remaining flexible to explore emerging themes. Documentation was used to gather supporting information, such as academic records and institutional profiles, to contextualize the findings.

The questionnaire served as the primary tool for identifying patterns and trends among the participants. It included items related to personal motivation, confidence in academic abilities, family expectations, peer influence, job market perceptions, curriculum quality, departmental reputation, and societal perceptions of the English major. Responses were recorded and tabulated to identify dominant factors influencing students' decisions. The inclusion of multiple factors was intended to reflect the multifaceted nature of educational choice in a sociolinguistic context. Interviews provided a deeper understanding of students' personal experiences and perceptions. Each interview session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. The structured format ensured consistency across participants, while follow-up questions allowed the researcher to clarify and expand on key points. Interview transcripts were later coded thematically to align with the analytical framework of internal and external influencing factors.

Documentation complemented the primary data sources by offering objective records that could validate or contrast with students' reported experiences. This included syllabi, curriculum outlines, and policy documents related to academic support services. The triangulation of questionnaire results, interview narratives, and documentation enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings, ensuring that interpretations were well-grounded in multiple forms of evidence. For data analysis, the study employed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction phase, raw data from questionnaires and interviews were filtered to retain only information relevant to the research objectives. The display stage involved organizing the data into charts, diagrams, and thematic summaries to facilitate interpretation. Finally, in the conclusion drawing phase, the researcher synthesized the patterns and themes into coherent insights, linking them back to the theoretical framework and previous research. This systematic approach ensured that the findings accurately reflected the complex interplay of academic, social, and cultural factors influencing ELT students' choice of major.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented based on data collected from questionnaires, interviews, and documentation involving 23 second-semester ELT students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. The findings are organized according to the main factors influencing students' decision to major in English, as outlined in the research objectives. Overall, the questionnaire results show that students' decisions are influenced by both internal and external factors, with varying levels of significance. Internal factors include personal motivation, academic confidence, and career expectations, while external factors involve family expectations, societal perceptions, peer influence, curriculum quality, departmental reputation, and the availability of academic support.

Table 1 below summarizes the percentage distribution of responses for each factor:

Factor	Very Significant (%)	Significant (%)	Neutral (%)	Insignificant (%)	Very Insignificant (%)
Personal Motivation	47.8	30.4	21.7	0	0
Academic Confidence	17.4	43.5	39.1	0	0
Academic Support	17.4	47.8	34.8	0	0
Family Expectations	39.1	30.4	30.4	0	0
Job Market Prospects	39.1	30.4	30.4	0	0
Curriculum Quality	39.1	30.4	30.4	0	0
Departmental Reputation	52.2	30.4	17.4	0	0
Societal Perception	30.4	52.2	17.4	0	0

The data indicate that departmental reputation (52.2% "Very Significant") and personal motivation (47.8% "Very Significant") are among the most influential factors, followed closely by family expectations, job market prospects, and curriculum quality. Academic support and peer influence also play important roles, though they are perceived as moderately significant for some students. Interviews provided deeper insight into how these factors operate in students' decision-making. Many students reported that family support was important but not coercive; they were given freedom to choose, yet their decision was often shaped by encouragement from relatives. Personal interest in English, especially in speaking and listening, emerged as a strong motivator.

Several students expressed moderate to high confidence in their academic abilities, though grammar, pronunciation, and writing were frequently cited as ongoing challenges. Despite these difficulties, many viewed such weaknesses as opportunities for growth

rather than deterrents. The desire to improve language skills was often linked to career aspirations in teaching, tourism, or translation.

Academic challenges reported included adapting to teaching methods, managing workload, and meeting performance expectations. Students mentioned using strategies such as regular practice, online learning resources, and peer collaboration to overcome these issues. Support from lecturers and the availability of internet-based resources were described as crucial in this process. Peer influence was noted as both direct and indirect. Some students were encouraged by friends who also chose English, fostering a supportive learning community. Others mentioned that positive peer attitudes reinforced their confidence in their choice of major.

Societal perceptions of English as a major varied, with some students reporting that community members undervalued the degree compared to STEM fields. Nevertheless, these perceptions did not significantly deter students who were intrinsically motivated or had clear career goals. The curriculum and teaching methods were generally perceived positively. Students appreciated interactive lessons and opportunities for practical language use, such as speaking and listening activities. A well-structured curriculum was seen as essential in building confidence and competence in English.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal that both internal and external factors play substantial roles in influencing ELT students' decision to major in English. Departmental reputation emerged as the most influential factor, aligning with previous research (Titus, 2004) that highlights the importance of institutional image in attracting students. A strong reputation likely reassures students about program quality, employability, and learning outcomes. Personal motivation was the second most influential factor. This finding supports Gardner's (1985) assertion that motivation is a key determinant of language learning success. Students who are intrinsically motivated demonstrate resilience when facing academic challenges and are more likely to engage actively in their learning.

Family expectations also ranked highly, reflecting the collectivist nature of Indonesian society. Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of educational choice explains that such decisions are often embedded in familial relationships and cultural traditions. However, in this study, family influence was largely supportive rather than restrictive, which may contribute to higher student satisfaction and persistence. Job market prospects were perceived as significant by most participants, suggesting that pragmatic considerations remain important in students' decision-making. This aligns with Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory (1983), which posits that individuals weigh potential success against the value of expected outcomes. English proficiency was viewed as a skill with broad applicability across various professional sectors.

Academic confidence was moderately significant, with many students acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses in their abilities. This finding corresponds with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in shaping career-related choices. Notably, students who lacked confidence still chose English if they were motivated to improve, indicating that motivation can sometimes override self-doubt.

The role of academic support and curriculum quality was also notable. Students valued supportive lecturers and accessible learning resources, which facilitated adaptation to academic demands. Positive perceptions of the curriculum suggest that well-designed academic programs can reinforce students' commitment to their chosen field, even in the presence of external challenges. Peer influence, while not the most dominant factor, contributed to a sense of belonging and mutual encouragement. Social Influence Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains how shared experiences and reinforcement from peers can enhance engagement and persistence in academic pursuits.

Finally, societal perceptions of English varied but were not decisive for most students. While some community attitudes undervalued the major, strong internal motivation and institutional support appeared to mitigate these effects. This suggests that targeted outreach and public education about the value of English studies could further enhance the attractiveness of the program.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the challenges faced by English Language Teaching (ELT) students in choosing English as their major from a sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on both internal and external influencing factors. The findings indicate that students' decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of personal motivation, academic confidence, family and societal expectations, job market perceptions, peer influence, and the quality of academic support and curriculum. Among these, departmental reputation, personal motivation, and family encouragement emerged as the most influential factors. While some students displayed high confidence in their academic abilities, others experienced challenges in grammar, pronunciation, and writing; however, these challenges often served as motivation to improve rather than as deterrents.

The results also highlight that academic and sociocultural environments play a crucial role in supporting students' persistence in the English program. Family influence in this context was generally positive, providing encouragement without imposing strict career choices. Supportive lecturers, interactive teaching methods, and accessible learning resources further contributed to students' engagement and adaptation to academic demands. Peer influence created a sense of community that enhanced learning experiences, while societal perceptions, though mixed, had limited impact on those with strong intrinsic motivation. Understanding the multifaceted factors that influence ELT students' academic decisions is essential for developing targeted strategies to support them. Educational institutions should continue to strengthen their academic programs, enhance support systems, and engage families and communities in promoting the value of English studies. By addressing both academic and sociolinguistic dimensions, universities can help students navigate challenges more effectively, enabling them to achieve their educational and career goals in the field of English language education.

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