



Perceived Challenges in English Language Learning: A Mixed-Methods Study of Turkish University Students

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Abstract: *This study explores the perceived challenges and motivational strategies of university students in English language learning environments. Focusing on the development of core language skills reading, writing, listening, and speaking the research adopts a mixed-methods design to investigate how students navigate instructional, affective, and environmental barriers in English preparatory and ELT programs. Quantitative data, gathered from 122 students through a standardized difficulty scale, revealed an overall low level of perceived challenge; however, specific difficulties were reported in vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and productive skills such as speaking and writing. Qualitative responses provided further insight into learner motivation, emphasizing the role of future goals, enjoyment, and peer interaction. Students frequently referenced self-initiated strategies, including the use of digital tools, music, and conversations, to supplement classroom instruction. The findings highlight the importance of creating supportive, engaging, and learner-centered environments that address both instructional and emotional dimensions of language learning.*

Index Terms - English language learning, learner perceptions, learning environment, speaking anxiety, motivation, vocabulary, university students

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential part of academic and professional life, particularly in higher education where it functions as a common language for communication across different contexts. In many cases, being proficient in English is no longer simply an advantage but a requirement for accessing knowledge, participating in global academic environments, and pursuing career opportunities (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2015). For this reason, universities in many countries place strong emphasis on developing students' English language skills, especially in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language.

Despite this growing importance, many university students continue to face difficulties while learning English. Developing a foreign language involves working on multiple skills at the same time, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Although these skills are fundamental for communication, they are not always easy to master (Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1991). Students often report challenges such as remembering vocabulary, pronouncing words accurately, using grammar correctly, and feeling confident enough to express themselves in the target language.

Research in second language acquisition suggests that these challenges are rarely caused by a single factor. Instead, they tend to emerge from a combination of influences, including teaching practices, the nature of learning materials, individual learner differences such as motivation and anxiety, and the overall classroom environment (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). For example, classrooms that encourage interaction and meaningful communication can support language development, whereas those that focus heavily on accuracy and error correction may unintentionally increase learners' anxiety and reduce participation.

In addition to instructional and environmental factors, learners' emotional experiences also play an important role in shaping how they engage with language learning. Students who feel anxious or lack confidence may hesitate to participate, particularly in speaking activities (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). On the other hand, learners who are motivated often find ways to support their own learning. Many students turn to informal strategies such as using digital tools, watching films, listening to music, or practicing English outside the classroom (Oxford, 2017).

Although there is a substantial body of research on language teaching and learning, fewer studies focus specifically on how learners themselves perceive the difficulties they encounter. This perspective is important because learners' perceptions can influence both their motivation and the strategies they choose to use (Dörnyei, 2001; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2019). Gaining insight into these perceptions can therefore help educators design more effective and supportive learning environments.

In the context of English language education in higher education, understanding students' experiences becomes particularly relevant. Exploring how learners perceive their difficulties can provide valuable information about the factors that shape their learning process and outcomes. Such insights can also guide teachers and curriculum designers in improving instructional practices.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily examined language learning difficulties through either quantitative or qualitative approaches, the present study adopts a mixed-methods design to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences. Additionally, while existing research has often focused on general EFL contexts, this study specifically examines Turkish university students, whose learning experiences are shaped by limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a predominantly exam-oriented educational system. By integrating learners' perceived challenges with their self-reported motivational strategies, this study offers a more holistic perspective and highlights the role of instructional practices as a key factor influencing perceived difficulty.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What challenges do university students perceive in learning English as a foreign language?
2. Which dimensions of language learning (learning materials, teaching practices, learner-related factors, and learning environment) are perceived as the most challenging?
3. How do students describe their motivational strategies and coping mechanisms in response to language learning difficulties?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Skills in Foreign Language Learning

Language learning can be characterized as a strategy or an instrument that students use to complete learning activities based on their language skills, such as writing, listening, reading, and speaking (Faraj et al. 2021).

Foreign language learning is generally built around four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Together, these skills form the basis of communicative competence and are widely accepted as key components of language proficiency (Nunan, 1991; Harmer, 2007). Reading and listening focus on understanding language input and are therefore considered receptive skills, while speaking and writing involve producing language and are typically described as productive skills.

These skills do not develop in isolation. Instead, they are closely connected and often support one another. Progress in one area can contribute to improvement in others. For example, reading can help expand vocabulary and support writing development, while listening activities may enhance pronunciation and speaking fluency (Johnson, 2017; Nation, 2013). More recent studies also suggest that integrating these skills in classroom practice can lead to more meaningful language use and deeper learning (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Richards, 2015).

However, despite this understanding, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms still tend to focus more on certain skills than others. In particular, receptive skills are often emphasized because they are easier to manage in classroom settings, whereas productive skills such as speaking and writing may receive less attention. This imbalance can limit students' opportunities to actively use the language in real-life communication (MacIntyre et al., 2019).

The Role of Learning Environments

A suitable learning environment helps learners to concentrate and improve their learning efficiency (Yang & Yan, 2023). The environment in which language learning takes place plays an important role in shaping students' experiences. This environment is not limited to the physical classroom; it also includes factors such as the overall atmosphere, the materials used, teaching approaches, peer interaction, and relationships between teachers and students (Fraser, 2012).

Research has shown that supportive and interactive classroom settings can encourage greater engagement and help learners become more autonomous. From the perspective of self-determination theory, environments that support learners' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are more likely to foster intrinsic motivation and lead to more meaningful learning experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In language classrooms, such conditions can make students feel more comfortable taking risks, using the target language, and participating in communicative activities.

Recent studies also highlight the value of learner-centered classrooms in promoting both language development and motivation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In contrast, environments that focus heavily on error correction, competition, or limited interaction may have the opposite effect. These conditions can increase anxiety and make students less willing to participate, especially in speaking activities (MacIntyre et al., 2019).

In many EFL contexts, students have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom. As a result, the classroom often becomes the main space where learners can practice the language and develop their communicative skills.

Affective Factors in Language Learning

Affective variables such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence play a crucial role in second language learning. The topic of language learners' confidence is particularly critical, as many ELLs struggle to navigate their college studies due to confidence barriers related to the English language to achieve certain college levels (Kalinowska, 2023). Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that emotional factors influence the extent to which learners are able to process and internalize language input. When learners experience high levels of anxiety or low confidence, their affective filter may prevent them from fully benefiting from language exposure.

Foreign language anxiety has been widely studied as a major factor affecting language performance. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified three main components of language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These factors can significantly influence learners' willingness to participate in classroom interactions, particularly in speaking activities.

Recent research further highlights the importance of emotional experiences in language learning. Studies on foreign language enjoyment suggest that positive emotions can enhance learners' motivation and engagement, helping them overcome difficulties in the learning process (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Creating classroom environments that support emotional well-being and encourage learner participation is therefore considered essential for successful language learning.

Motivation and Language Learning Strategies

Motivation is widely recognized as one of the most powerful predictors of success in language learning. According to Dörnyei (2001), motivation influences the amount of effort learners invest in language learning and their persistence when encountering difficulties. Motivation can be categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to learning driven by curiosity, interest, or enjoyment of the language itself, while extrinsic motivation is often related to external goals such as academic achievement, career opportunities, or studying abroad (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Recent research also emphasizes that learner motivation interacts with emotional experiences and classroom engagement, shaping students' persistence in language learning (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). The relationship between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and learner persistence in language learning is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

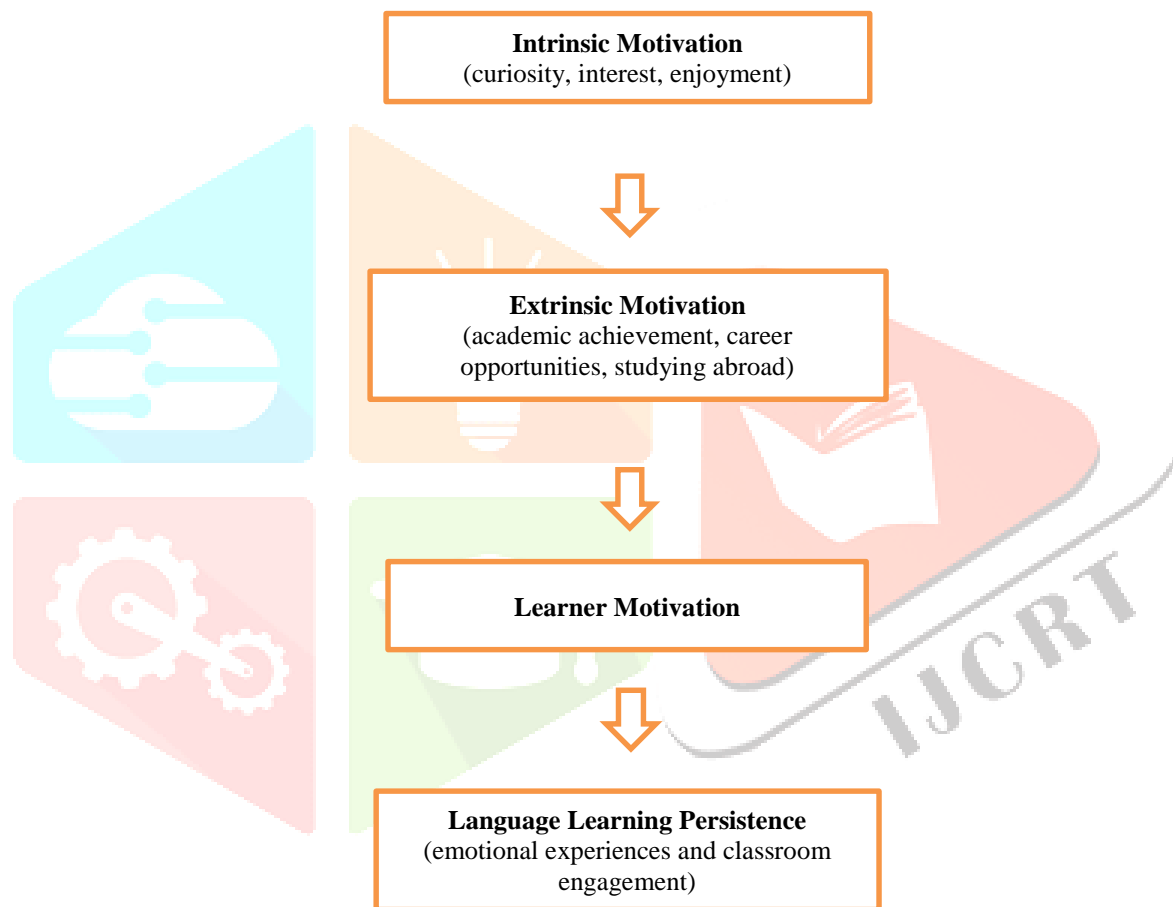


Figure 1. The relationship between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and persistence in language learning.

Motivated learners are more likely to adopt effective learning strategies and seek opportunities to practice the language. Research shows that students often engage in self-directed learning practices such as watching films, listening to music, using language learning applications, or communicating with international peers through digital platforms (Oxford, 2017). These informal learning activities can significantly complement classroom instruction and contribute to long-term language development.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The literature reviewed above indicates that language learning challenges emerge from multiple interacting factors rather than a single source. Instructional practices, learning materials, learner-related factors, and the broader learning environment all influence students' experiences in language learning.

In the present study, perceived language learning difficulties are conceptualized as a multidimensional construct shaped by four main dimensions: learning materials, teaching and learning processes, learner-related factors (e.g., confidence, anxiety, and motivation), and the learning environment.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the factors influencing perceived language learning difficulties among university students.

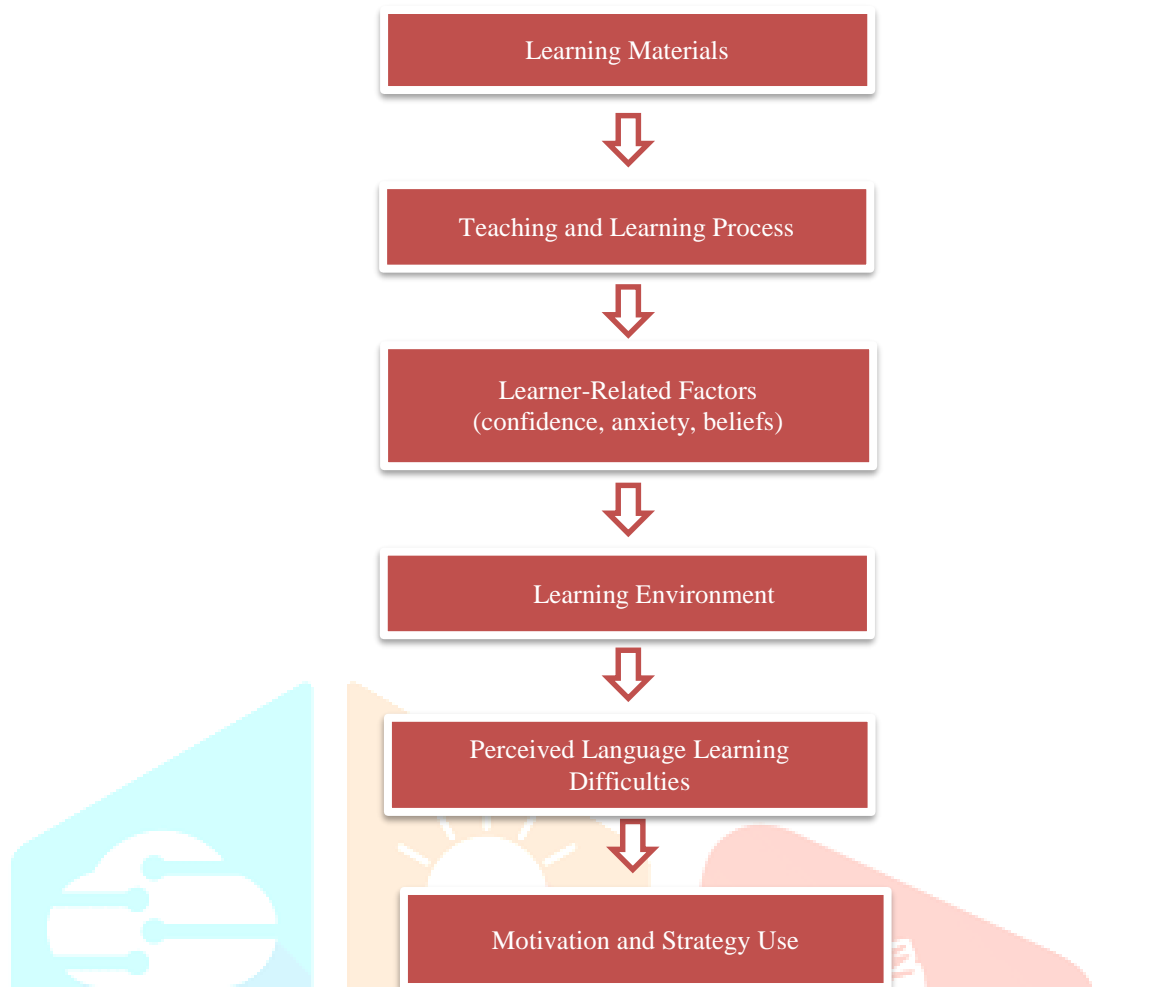


Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework guiding the present study. Based on the literature, language learning difficulties are assumed to be influenced by several interconnected factors including learning materials, teaching practices, learner-related factors, and the broader learning environment. These factors shape students' perceptions of difficulty in learning English. In response to these perceived challenges, students develop various motivational orientations and learning strategies that help them cope with language learning demands.

Methodology

The study is based on a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' perceived challenges in learning English.

Participants

A total of 122 university students participated in the study. Convenience sampling was employed, as participants were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate. The sample included students enrolled in both English preparatory programs and ELT departments. Of the participants, 64 were female and 57 were male (add if possible), with ages ranging from 18 to 21.

Research Instruments

The quantitative data were collected using the Foreign Language Learning Difficulties Scale (PLLD) developed by Özmat (2017) (check Appendix A). The scale was later used by Özmat et al. (2022) to investigate preparatory school students' perceived difficulties in learning English. The scale consists of 30 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low difficulty) to 5 (very high difficulty). The items reflect four conceptual dimensions: learning materials, teaching and learning process, learner-related factors, and learning environment. Although the scale is originally one-dimensional, the items were grouped conceptually under these four categories to facilitate interpretation. The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and the results indicated satisfactory internal consistency for the instrument ($\alpha = .87$). Although the scale was originally developed and validated by Özmat (2017), its reliability was re-examined for the current sample. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the overall scale was found to be $\alpha = .87$, indicating good internal consistency. In addition, item-level analysis confirmed that all items contributed adequately to the overall construct. In addition to the closed-ended items, the questionnaire included five open-ended questions that invited students to describe their experiences in greater detail. These questions aimed to explore students' perceived challenges in language learning, motivational factors, and strategies used to improve their language skills outside the classroom.

In addition to the closed-ended items, the questionnaire included five open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into students' language learning experiences (Appendix B). These questions aimed to explore learners' perceived challenges, sources of motivation, and strategies used to improve their English language skills outside the classroom. The open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying recurring patterns and grouping them into broader themes related to language learning difficulties and motivational strategies.

Data Collection

Procedure

The data collection process was conducted over a two-week period during the academic semester. The questionnaire was distributed through an online survey platform, allowing students to complete the survey conveniently.

Before completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. Participation was voluntary, and students had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. After the survey period ended, the responses were compiled and prepared for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study, and all data were collected anonymously to protect participants' privacy.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods.

The quantitative data obtained from the Likert-scale items were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to identify general trends in students' perceived learning difficulties across different dimensions.

The qualitative responses obtained from the open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic content analysis. First, all responses were read several times to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated by identifying recurring expressions and key ideas in students' responses. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes such as vocabulary difficulties, pronunciation challenges, motivation sources, and learning strategies.

To enhance the reliability of the qualitative analysis, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers. After the initial coding stage, the researchers compared their coding results and discussed discrepancies until agreement was reached. This process helped ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

Finally, the results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were integrated in order to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of students' language learning experiences.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the three research questions. Quantitative results obtained from the Language Learning Difficulty Scale are presented first, followed by qualitative insights derived from students' open-ended responses.

Research Question 1

What challenges do university students perceive in learning English as a foreign language?

To examine the overall level of perceived difficulty, descriptive statistics were calculated for the Language Learning Difficulty Scale. The results indicated that students generally reported low levels of difficulty in learning English, with an overall mean score of $M = 2.45$ ($SD = 0.74$) on a five-point Likert scale.

Although the overall difficulty level was relatively low, several specific challenges emerged from the data. Students most frequently reported difficulties related to vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and productive language skills such as speaking and writing. Many participants indicated that remembering new vocabulary and using it in communication remained challenging. In addition, students expressed uncertainty about correct pronunciation, which often affected their confidence when speaking English.

These findings suggest that while students do not perceive English learning as highly problematic overall, certain aspects of language production still require additional support.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Language Learning Difficulties by Skill Area

Dimension / Skill Area	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Level of Difficulty
Vocabulary acquisition	2.61	0.88	Moderate
Pronunciation	2.57	0.85	Moderate
Speaking	2.53	0.82	Low–Moderate
Writing	2.49	0.80	Low–Moderate
Listening	2.38	0.77	Low
Reading	2.21	0.73	Low
Overall Scale	2.45	0.74	Low

Research Question 2

Which dimensions of language learning are perceived as the most challenging?

To explore the sources of difficulty more closely, mean scores were calculated for the four dimensions of the scale: learning materials, teaching and learning process, student-related factors, and learning environment. Among these dimensions, the teaching and learning process had the highest mean score ($M = 2.53$), indicating that students perceived instructional practices as slightly more challenging than other aspects of language learning.

More specifically, some students reported that they were not provided with sufficient strategies for improving listening comprehension or remembering new vocabulary. A notable proportion of participants also indicated that certain classroom activities, particularly reading and listening tasks, were not always engaging or relevant to their interests.

In contrast, student-related factors and the learning environment received the lowest mean scores, suggesting that learners generally did not attribute their difficulties to a lack of motivation or a negative classroom atmosphere. Instead, students appeared to perceive instructional approaches and course materials as more influential factors shaping their language learning experiences. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the four dimensions of perceived language learning difficulties.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Language Learning Difficulty Dimensions

Difficulty Dimension	Mean (M)	SD	Level of Difficulty
Learning Materials	2.34	0.81	Low
Teaching and Learning Process	2.53	0.86	Low-Moderate
Student Related factors	2.15	0.70	Low
Learning environment	2.12	0.72	Low

To examine the overall level of perceived difficulty in learning English, descriptive statistics were calculated for the Language Learning Difficulty Scale. The results indicated that students generally reported low levels of difficulty, with an overall mean score of $M = 2.45$ ($SD = 0.74$) on a five-point Likert scale.

Although the overall level of perceived difficulty was relatively low, some specific areas of language learning appeared to be more challenging than others. In particular, students frequently reported difficulties related to vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and productive language skills such as speaking and writing. Many participants indicated that remembering new vocabulary and using it effectively in communication remained challenging. In addition, some students expressed uncertainty about correct pronunciation, which often affected their confidence when speaking English. This is presented on Table 3:

Table 3: Items with the Highest Perceived Difficulty

Item	Description	Mean	SD
Item 14	Translating from Turkish before speaking	3.08	0.92
Item 16	Speaking fluently without mistakes	3.04	0.88
Item 19	Limited vocabulary when speaking	2.89	0.85
Item 1	Reading texts are not interesting	2.98	0.87
Item 3	Too many unfamiliar words	2.74	0.82

These findings suggest that while students do not perceive English learning as highly problematic overall, certain aspects of language production may require additional instructional support.

Difficulties Related to Teaching and the Learning Process

Students reported relatively low levels of difficulty related to the learning materials used in English classes ($M \approx 2.34$). However, several items indicated that some learners experienced challenges in engaging with course content.

For instance, 29.51% of participants moderately agreed that the reading texts used in English coursebooks were not particularly interesting. Similarly, 18.85% agreed and 15.57% strongly agreed, suggesting that a portion of students perceived the materials as lacking relevance or engagement.

Another issue concerned vocabulary load within reading texts. Although 47.93% of students disagreed with the statement that unfamiliar words made reading difficult, a noticeable proportion of learners still indicated moderate or higher levels of difficulty, suggesting that vocabulary density may occasionally hinder comprehension.

Listening materials also produced mixed responses. While some students reported boredom during listening activities, others disagreed with this statement, indicating varied perceptions of the relevance and engagement of listening tasks in the classroom.

Overall, while learning materials were not perceived as a major barrier, the findings suggest that topic relevance and vocabulary accessibility may influence students' engagement with course content.

Difficulties Related to Student Habits and Efforts

Among the four dimensions, the teaching and learning process received the highest mean score ($M = 2.53$), indicating that students perceived instructional practices as a slightly greater source of difficulty compared to other factors. One of the most frequently mentioned issues was the lack of explicit listening strategy instruction. Approximately 21.49% of students strongly agreed with the statement that listening strategies were not sufficiently taught in English lessons. At the same time, 23.97% disagreed, suggesting that students' experiences varied depending on classroom context. Similarly, responses regarding vocabulary learning strategies were somewhat divided. Around 22.95% of participants agreed that they were not provided with effective strategies for remembering new words, whereas 26.23% disagreed, indicating that some classrooms may offer more structured vocabulary support than others. These findings imply that while many students feel supported by classroom instruction, others may benefit from more explicit strategy training, particularly in listening comprehension and vocabulary learning.

Difficulties Related to the Learning Environment

Student-related factors were perceived as the least problematic dimension ($M = 2.15$). Many students appeared to take an active role in their language learning and did not attribute their difficulties primarily to personal limitations.

For example, 41.80% of students disagreed with the statement that they do not allocate time to learning English outside the classroom. This suggests that a substantial number of participants engage in self-directed learning activities such as watching English media, listening to music, or practicing with peers.

Similarly, most students did not report extremely low motivation or negative attitudes toward English learning. In fact, 71.31% strongly disagreed with the statement “I am not interested in learning English,” indicating that overall motivation remained relatively high.

These findings suggest that while students may encounter specific learning challenges, many remain motivated and willing to invest effort in improving their language skills.

Findings from Open-Ended Questions

To complement the quantitative results, students were also asked to respond to five open-ended questions about their language learning experiences. Thematic content analysis of these responses revealed several recurring themes, including vocabulary difficulties, pronunciation challenges, speaking anxiety, and motivational strategies.

Most Challenging Aspects of Language Learning

Many students identified vocabulary acquisition as the most difficult aspect of language learning. Several participants explained that although they try to memorize new words, they often forget them quickly, which also affects their ability to understand spoken language.

One participant explained:

“I find the vocabulary part difficult because I forget the words quickly. When I do not know the words, listening and speaking also become harder.”

Another frequently mentioned challenge was pronunciation. Students reported feeling insecure when speaking because they were unsure about correct pronunciation or intonation.

“It is easy to think of words in my head, but pronouncing them correctly is difficult.”

Motivation and Learning Strategies

Despite these challenges, students described several strategies they use to stay motivated. Many participants mentioned future goals, such as studying abroad or pursuing international careers, as important sources of motivation.

Others reported using informal learning strategies, including watching movies, listening to music, using language learning applications, and interacting with foreign friends online.

One participant summarized this approach:

“I stay motivated by watching English movies, listening to music, and talking with foreign friends. It helps me practice the language in a natural way.”

Overall, the findings indicate that Turkish university students experience relatively low levels of difficulty in learning English. However, specific challenges were identified in areas such as vocabulary retention, pronunciation, and strategy use in listening activities. While students did not generally view themselves or their learning environments as major barriers, the results highlight the importance of effective teaching strategies and engaging learning materials in supporting language learning.

The qualitative findings further reinforce the quantitative results by revealing that students actively develop personal strategies to overcome learning difficulties and remain motivated throughout the language learning process.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how Turkish university students perceive the challenges they face while learning English and how they maintain their motivation despite these challenges. The results showed that although students generally reported low levels of difficulty, some areas of language learning were still perceived as more challenging. In particular, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and productive skills such as speaking and writing emerged as the most frequently mentioned difficulties.

These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting that productive language skills often present greater challenges for learners than receptive skills. For instance, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) note that speaking in a foreign language can create anxiety, especially when learners worry about making mistakes or being negatively evaluated. Similarly, MacIntyre et al (2019) emphasize that communication anxiety can reduce learners' willingness to participate in speaking activities. The findings of the present study support this view, as several students indicated that concerns about pronunciation and vocabulary use affected their confidence when speaking English.

Another noteworthy finding of the study is that instructional practices were perceived as slightly more challenging than other dimensions of language learning. Among the four dimensions examined, the teaching and learning process had the highest mean score. This suggests that students tend to associate their difficulties more with classroom practices and instructional approaches than with their own motivation or the learning environment. Previous research in language education has also highlighted the importance of effective teaching practices in shaping students' learning experiences (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Richards, 2015). When students are not provided with sufficient opportunities to practice language skills or learn effective strategies, they may perceive language learning as more challenging.

At the same time, the findings showed that student-related factors and the learning environment were perceived as the least problematic dimensions. Most students did not report low motivation or negative attitudes toward learning English. On the contrary, many participants described themselves as motivated and willing to improve their language skills. Several students mentioned that they engage in additional learning activities outside the classroom, such as watching English-language movies, listening to music, or using digital language learning tools. This finding supports Dörnyei's (2001) view that motivated learners tend to actively seek opportunities to practice and develop their language skills beyond the classroom.

The qualitative findings also provided further insight into students' learning experiences. Many participants reported using self-directed learning strategies to overcome difficulties in language learning. Informal activities such as watching movies, listening to music, and interacting with international peers were frequently mentioned as motivating and helpful practices. Previous research on informal language learning similarly highlights the positive role of digital media and authentic communication opportunities in supporting language development (Oxford, 2017).

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that greater emphasis on productive language skills and learning strategies may be beneficial in university language programs. Providing students with clearer guidance on vocabulary learning, pronunciation practice, and speaking strategies may help reduce their perceived difficulties and increase their confidence in using English. In addition, incorporating more engaging and student-centered classroom activities may further enhance student participation and motivation.

A key contribution of this study is the finding that instructional practices were perceived as a greater source of difficulty than learner-related or environmental factors. This contrasts with previous studies that have emphasized individual differences such as anxiety and motivation (MacIntyre et al., 2019). The present findings suggest that pedagogical design and classroom practices may play a more central role than previously assumed.

Overall, the results of this study highlight the importance of addressing both the instructional and emotional aspects of language learning. While students appear motivated and willing to improve their English skills, they may still need additional support in developing the strategies and confidence required for effective communication.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Turkish university students perceive the challenges they encounter while learning English as a foreign language and how they maintain their motivation despite these challenges. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research provided insights not only into the level of difficulty students experience in different aspects of language learning but also into the strategies they use to cope with these difficulties.

The findings indicate that although students generally reported relatively low overall levels of difficulty, certain areas of language learning continue to present challenges. In particular, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and productive language skills such as speaking and writing were identified as the most demanding aspects for many learners. These difficulties appear to influence students' confidence when using English, especially in communicative situations where spontaneous language production is required.

At the same time, the results suggest that students do not primarily attribute their difficulties to their own motivation or to the classroom environment. Instead, instructional practices and classroom activities were perceived as slightly more challenging than learner-related or environmental factors. Despite these challenges, many students demonstrated strong motivation to improve their English skills and reported engaging in self-directed learning practices, such as watching English-language media, listening to music, and interacting with international peers online.

These findings support recent research emphasizing that language learning difficulties are shaped by a combination of instructional, cognitive, and emotional factors rather than a single source (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Similarly, studies on language learner psychology highlight that students' perceptions and emotional experiences play an important role in shaping their engagement and persistence in language learning (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2019). Understanding learners' perspectives can therefore provide valuable insights for improving language teaching practices and creating more supportive learning environments in higher education contexts.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications for language educators and curriculum designers working in university language programs.

First, the results highlight the need to place greater emphasis on productive language skills, particularly speaking and writing. Since many students reported difficulties related to pronunciation, vocabulary use, and speaking fluency, language courses may benefit from incorporating more communicative and interactive activities that allow learners to practice these skills in meaningful contexts. Creating opportunities for authentic communication can help students develop both confidence and fluency in using the target language.

Second, the findings suggest that students may benefit from explicit strategy instruction, especially in areas such as vocabulary learning and listening comprehension. Teaching learners practical strategies for remembering new vocabulary, improving pronunciation, and managing listening tasks can help reduce perceived difficulties and promote more effective language learning. Third, classroom materials and activities should be designed to be engaging and relevant to students' interests and experiences. Some participants indicated that certain classroom tasks were not always motivating or meaningful. Integrating authentic materials, digital resources, and real-world communication tasks may therefore increase learner engagement and promote more active participation in the learning process.

Finally, the results highlight the importance of supporting informal and self-directed learning practices. Many students reported using digital tools, media content, and online communication as part of their language learning routine. Encouraging these practices and integrating technology into language instruction may help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-life language use (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2021).

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective language instruction should not only focus on linguistic accuracy but also support learners' confidence, motivation, and opportunities for meaningful communication both inside and outside the classroom.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the perceived challenges and motivational strategies of university students learning English, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted at a single university in Cyprus, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or different educational contexts. The experiences and perceptions of students in other institutions, regions, or cultural settings may vary.

Second, although the sample included students from both English preparatory and ELT programs, the study did not conduct detailed comparisons between these two groups. Differences in curriculum, language proficiency, or classroom exposure may have influenced the responses and could have provided further depth if analyzed separately.

Third, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or personal interpretation. While the open-ended responses added richness and depth, they also depended on students' willingness and ability to express their thoughts in writing.

Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of students' perceptions at a specific point in time. However, language learning is an evolving process, and students' experiences and motivations may change throughout their academic journey. To build on the findings of this study, future research could expand the participant pool to include multiple universities across different regions or countries. Comparative studies would allow for a broader understanding of how institutional context, cultural background, or educational policies shape students' experiences in English language learning.

In addition, future studies may consider conducting longitudinal research to track changes in student motivation, confidence, and language skill development over time. This would offer a dynamic view of learners' growth and the evolving nature of their challenges.

It would also be beneficial to explore the perspectives of instructors, allowing researchers to compare student and teacher perceptions of difficulties and motivation in language learning environments. Such studies could help identify gaps or mismatches between instructional practices and learner needs.

Finally, incorporating intervention-based or experimental designs such as classroom strategy training, speaking anxiety reduction workshops, or digital tool integration could provide practical evidence of what methods effectively support language learners in overcoming their challenges.

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APPENDIX A

Difficulties related to learning materials

- 1- The reading texts in our English course books are not interesting.
- 2- The reading texts in our English course books do not include topics about daily life.
- 3- I do not like reading texts because there are too many unfamiliar English words.
- 4- I am bored when we do listening practice because the topics are not interesting.

Difficulties related to the teaching and learning process

- 5- We do not do any reading practice on how to understand a text with the guidance of a teacher.
- 6- I have difficulty in writing a paragraph as we do not practice often enough in English lessons.
- 7- It is not clearly explained how to connect the topic and supporting sentences in a writing process.
- 8- There is no focus on listening strategies or how to understand a recording in English lessons.
- 9- I do not make an effort to speak English because we are allowed to speak Turkish in English lessons.
- 10- We are not given any methods to improve our spoken fluency in English.
- 11- Our English lessons do not include pronunciation classes.
- 12- We are not given any strategies to help us remember new English vocabulary.

Difficulties related to the students themselves

- 13- I do not like reading as I cannot understand a text without teacher guidance.
- 14- I can not make a sentence while writing a paragraph as I struggle with even basic grammatical topics.
- 15- I have difficulty in writing a paragraph as I lack confidence without teacher guidance.
- 16- I do not want to speak English because I always have to translate from Turkish first, so it takes me a long time to make sentences.
- 17- I do not believe I can speak English because I want to speak fluently without making a mistake.
- 18- I do not feel confident in speaking English.
- 19- I have difficulty in speaking English as I do not know enough vocabulary.
- 20- I do not know how to learn new English words.
- 21- I am not interested in learning English.
- 22- I do not allocate any time to learn English out of the classroom.
- 23- I always fall behind in English lessons due to gaps in my knowledge from previous grades.
- 24- I dislike English lessons because I do not like my English teacher.
- 25- I lack confidence in learning English because I have always received low grades in the past

Difficulties related to learning environment

- 26- I avoid speaking in English because when I do, my friends make fun of me.

27- Strong and hardworking students dominate the lessons so I do not want to participate.

28-I dislike English lessons because our teacher is usually angry and indifferent to us.

29- I do not enjoy learning English because our lessons are generally boring and monotonous.

30- I can not learn English because of discipline issues in our class.

APPENDIX B

1. What aspects of language learning do you find most challenging? Why do you find these areas difficult?
2. How do you keep yourself motivated during the language learning process? What strategies do you use to overcome challenges?
3. What mistakes are you most hesitant about making when speaking a foreign language? How would you like to improve in this area?
4. Among the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which do you find most difficult? Why?
5. How do you prefer to improve your language skills outside the classroom environment?

