

Beyond the classroom: a phenomenological inquiry into the challenges of English language learning for non-ELT students at UII DALWA

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges of English learning faced by non-ELT students at Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah (UII DALWA). Situated in a unique trilingual environment dominated by Arabic and Indonesian, these students encounter distinct barriers. Through unstructured interviews with 20 participants from various non-ELT programs, the research identifies and categorizes these challenges into four main areas. The findings indicate that Linguistic-Cognitive Difficulties, such as limited vocabulary, grammar anxiety, and pronunciation issues, are the most prevalent challenges. These are closely followed by Affective-Psychological Barriers, including anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, Socio-Cultural and Motivational Factors, such as perceiving English as irrelevant to Islamic identity, and Contextual-Environmental Constraints, like limited exposure and practice opportunities, significantly hinder proficiency. The study concludes that these challenges are deeply interconnected, creating a cyclical barrier to language acquisition. It recommends developing tailored pedagogical strategies that integrate Islamic content to boost motivation and address the specific needs of this student population, suggesting avenues for further research into effective interventions.

Keywords: *Challenges, English Language Learning, Non-ELT Students*

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Background

In the 21st-century globalized academia and job market, English proficiency is an indispensable asset, often termed a "linguistic capital" that can be converted into economic, social, and symbolic advantages. In diverse contexts such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia, English skills are linked to better job prospects, higher earnings, and increased social status, especially in globalized sectors and higher education (Ramalingam & Islam, 2024; Fudiyartanto, 2024; Vu, N., et al., 2021). English proficiency is also seen as a gatekeeper for access to international education, mobility, and professional advancement. For university students, it is a gateway to international scholarship, cutting-edge research, and enhanced career mobility (Abrar-Ul-Hassan, 2021; Rose, et al., 2020). However, for students not specializing in English Language Teaching (ELT), achieving functional proficiency is often a daunting task. These Non-ELT students typically encounter English only as a compulsory subject, with limited hours and often pedagogies that may not address their specific needs and anxieties. They argue that Speaking skills are frequently identified as the most difficult area, mainly due to limited vocabulary and pronunciation issues (Zulkarnain, 2023). It shows that non-ELT students is a widespread phenomenon, where English is often relegated to a mere box-ticking requirement rather than an integrated skill. The limited hours of instruction are compounded by pedagogies that may not be tailored to their specific needs and anxieties.

Unlike ELT students who are trained to use the language, these students are often taught about the language through rigid, exam-oriented curricula. This approach neglects crucial areas like discipline-specific vocabulary, presentation skills, and communicative competence, failing to demonstrate the tangible utility of English in their future careers and thus weakening their motivation and engagement. Effective English language programs for professional or academic purposes must integrate specialized vocabulary relevant to students' fields. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches emphasize the need for targeted vocabulary instruction, as mastery of both general and technical terms is essential for future job performance and professional communication (Pilla, et al., 2025; Oštarić, & Tičić, 2022; Nychkalo, et al., 2020). The curriculum at UII DALWA mandates English through two semester-long courses, *Bahasa Inggris I* and *Bahasa Inggris II*, which are required for all first-year undergraduates regardless of their faculty or study program. This structure presents a unique challenge: as an institution without a dedicated ELT department, the responsibility for providing foundational English skills falls entirely on this limited, one-year sequence. With eight undergraduate programs and five graduate majors (including three Master's and two Doctorate programs) spanning multiple fields, the student body possesses vastly different needs and goals. Therefore, the design of these compulsory courses is critically important, as they must attempt to address a wide spectrum of language acquisition requirements without the specialized support of an ELT faculty, potentially leading to a generic approach that may not fully serve any single discipline.

This study aims to conduct a deep exploration of the specific, perceived challenges faced by Non-ELT students at the International Islamic University of Darullughah Wadda'wah (UII DALWA). This institution presents a unique context where the academic and social milieu is profoundly shaped by the intensive learning of Arabic and the pervasive use of Indonesian. This trilingual environment (Arabic, Indonesian, English) potentially creates a distinct and underexplored set of challenges for English acquisition, including issues of L1 (Indonesian)

interference, L2 (Arabic) cross-linguistic influence, and limited exposure to authentic English input. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research will employ in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to answer the following central question: What are the lived experiences of Non-ELT students at UII DALWA in grappling with English language learning amidst a dominant Arabic-Indonesian linguistic ecosystem? The findings are expected to illuminate these unique barriers and provide a foundational framework for developing more contextually responsive and effective English language support structures within the university.

Non-ELT (non-English Language Teaching) students face a range of challenges in learning English, shaped by linguistic, psychological, cultural, and instructional factors. The dominant theories highlight linguistic barriers, lack of exposure, and affective factors as primary obstacles. Linguistic Deficit deals with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and writing skills due to limited prior exposure and practice in English (Suryanto & Sari, 2021; Zulkarnain, 2023; Trinh & Pham, 2021). This deficit is not a reflection of intellectual capability but rather a gap in linguistic knowledge and automaticity that arises directly from a lack of sufficient, quality engagement with the target language. The second challenge is the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which relates to high anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes can block language acquisition, especially in speaking and classroom participation (Zulkarnain, 2023; Trinh & Pham, 2021, Rajendran, et al., 2024). The third is Sociocultural theory, which deals with cultural barriers and a lack of authentic language context that hinder comprehension and meaningful use of English, making it difficult for students to form meaning from English texts and interactions (Rintaningrum, et al 2023; Ismailov, et al, 2021). The last problem is an instructional challenge, which refers to teacher-centered methods, lack of student support, and insufficient practice (Ismailov, et al., 2021; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018; Elmahdi & Hezam, 2020). Furthermore, those common challenges in learning English for non-ELT students can be classified as follows:

Table 1. Common Challenges Types in Learning English by non-ELT Students

No	Challenge Type	Description
1	Psychological	Low confidence, language anxiety, fear of mistakes
2	Linguistic	Vocabulary shortage, grammar, pronunciation, writing difficulties
3	Instructional	Teacher-centered methods, lack of student support, insufficient practice
4	Sociocultural and Environmental	Cultural barriers, lack of real-life context, limited exposure, Limited opportunities to use English outside class, lack of resources

Based on the explanation above, this study formulates the theoretical foundation by classifying the challenges of non-ELT students in learning English into four categories as follows:

Affective-Psychological Barriers

It deals with the most prominent theory explaining psychological barriers. Several examples of these challenges are anxiety, low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and language learning stress are major obstacles. These psychological barriers reduce participation and hinder progress, especially in speaking. Regarding these barriers, teacher encouragement and emotional

co-regulation can significantly boost motivation and self-efficacy (Muslim, 2023; Ahmed, 2019; Mao, 2022; Garaeva, 2024).

Linguistic-Cognitive Difficulties

This theory posits that a learner's existing knowledge of their first language (L1) and any other known languages significantly influences the acquisition of a new language (L2). This can be negative transfer (interference), where L1 rules cause errors in L2 (e.g., incorrect word order due to L1 structure), or positive transfer, where similarities between languages facilitate learning. Common issues include limited vocabulary, grammar errors, pronunciation problems, and difficulties in writing and listening skills. Native language interference and lack of foundational knowledge further complicate learning. In this case, Cognitive strategies such as repetition, note-taking, translation, and inference are used, but their effectiveness is often limited by low motivation and weak background knowledge (Suryanto & Sari, 2021; Rao, 2024; Talok, et al, 2023; Siahaan & Sitorus, 2025; Mao, 2022).

Contextual-Environmental Constraints

Large class sizes, inadequate teaching methods, insufficient resources, and unsupportive physical environments are common barriers (Pongsapan, 2025; Getie, 2020; Mao, 2022; Yusup & Munawaroh, 2023; Ngamsom, & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). A learner's success is influenced by their attitudes towards the learning situation (e.g., the teacher, the course) and the target language community, which are shaped by the broader social environment. Limited exposure and lack of authentic communication opportunities are direct environmental constraints predicted by this model. Furthermore, language learning within its broader environment, considering the availability of input, the status of the target language, and its functional roles in society, for example, using social media, watching videos in English, can significantly compensate for a lack of formal environmental support, creating personalized and motivating language ecologies. A context where English has no daily social or academic function (a "foreign" rather than "second" language environment) creates a significant constraint.

Socio-Cultural and Motivational Factors

Motivation is shaped by career goals, parental support, cultural engagement, and peer influence. Societal attitudes that undervalue language learning, limited exposure to English, and lack of real-life practice opportunities reduce motivation (Thu, 2025; Baha, 2025; Muslim, 2023; Getie, 2020; Yusup & Munawaroh, 2023; Ngamsom, & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). In this case, learners "invest" in a language if they believe it will increase their cultural capital and provide them with a wider range of symbolic and material resources (e.g., a better job, social acceptance). If learners do not see a return on their investment, their motivation wanes. This directly links language learning to issues of identity, power, and social inequality. In addition, motivation can be classified into intrinsic motivation (doing an activity for its inherent satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (doing an activity for separable outcomes). It remains a dominant framework in motivation research.

Research Method

This study explores the unique challenges of English language acquisition faced by Non-ELT students at the International Islamic University of Darullaghah Wadda'wah (UII DALWA). The

university's distinctive environment, dominated by the intensive study of Arabic and the pervasive use of Indonesian, creates a complex trilingual dynamic. This study posits that this dynamic hinders English learning through issues such as limited exposure, motivational prioritization of Arabic, and cross-linguistic interference. To investigate these perceived barriers from the students' perspective, this qualitative research employed unstructured interviews with 20 participants from different non-ELT study program covering Islamic Education Management, Syariah Economics, Islamic Cultural History, Islamic Family Law, Arabic Education, and Islamic Communication and Broadcasting study programs. These interviews were designed to gather rich, narrative data on the challenges of English learning within two specific contexts: the immediate "mini-environment" of the UII DALWA campus and the broader general environment of the DALWA boarding school. The ultimate goal of this inquiry is to generate actionable insights that can inform the development of a more effective, contextually-responsive English language curriculum, thereby enhancing student success and global academic engagement.

The results of the interview were then analyzed by interpreting and classifying the challenges or obstacles in learning English faced by non-ELT students into four categories. The first category deals with Affective-Psychological Barriers, which manifest as profound anxiety and low self-efficacy. The second classification is Linguistic-Cognitive Difficulties, which relates to vocabulary and grammatical mastery. The third category is Contextual-Environmental Constraints, including limited authentic input and output opportunities. The last classification is Socio-Cultural and Motivational Factors, which deals with the dominance of Arabic and Indonesian, marginalizing English's perceived relevance.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the results of this research, the following chart shows that the most common challenge faced by non-ELT students of Darullughah Wadda'wah International Islamic University deals with the Linguistic Cognitive difficulties, the second common relates to Affective psychological barrier, the next challenge is socio-cultural and motivational factors, and the least common challenge is contextual environment constraints.

1) Affective-Psychological Barriers

This factor deals with challenges related to emotions, fear, and anxiety. Students' responses on this domain are as follow:

- *"Minder atau takut salah saat bicara"* (Lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes when speaking)
- *"Grogi sering salah waktu ngomong"* (Nervous, often make mistakes when talking)
- *"Grogi kalau langsung ngomong di depan orang"* (Nervous to speak directly in front of people)
- *"Ngomongnya terlalu pelan jadi ngobrol tidak lancar"* (Speaking too slowly so the conversation isn't smooth) [Often a result of anxiety or lack of confidence]

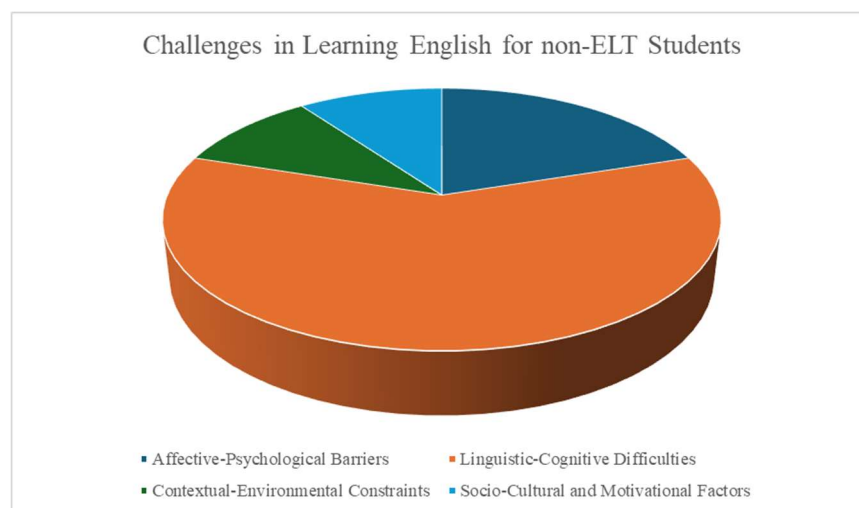


Figure 1. Challenges in Learning English for non-ELT students

Affective-psychological barriers encompass the emotional and mental obstacles that hinder language acquisition, most notably anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation. It is in line with the research by Mao (2022) on the analysis of the Psychological Barriers to Spoken English from Big Data and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. In this situation, these are not issues of intellectual capability but rather of emotional state. For non-ELT students at UII DALWA, whose primary focus is deep religious studies (*Dirasah Islamiyah*), these barriers are often particularly pronounced, as personal and social factors can profoundly shape their learning experience (Muslim, 2023). The fear of making mistakes "*minder atau takut salah saat bicara*" is rooted in a perception that errors will lead to embarrassment or judgment from peers and instructors, making them hesitant to participate actively. This phenomenon, often termed Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), is a well-documented psychological barrier that can paralyze a student's ability to speak (Ahmed, 2019). This directly manifests as "*grogi sering salah waktu ngomong*" and "*grogi kalau langsung ngomong di depan orang*"—a state of nervousness where mental blocks cause stuttering, forgetting vocabulary, and making more mistakes than they would in a relaxed setting, a common issue identified in learners facing these psychological hurdles (Garaeva, 2024). This cycle of anxiety and error often results in "*ngomongnya terlalu pelan jadi ngobrol tidak lancar*"; students speak slowly and cautiously, overly monitoring every word, which disrupts the natural flow and rhythm of conversation. They are so preoccupied with how they are speaking that the primary goal of communication is lost, a phenomenon linked to the negative effects of anxiety on cognitive processing. For DALWA students who might already feel that English is a distant, secular subject compared to their core curriculum, this lack of confidence can be reinforced, creating a significant emotional hurdle that prevents them from engaging in the consistent practice necessary to improve their skills. Consequently, overcoming these challenges requires more than just linguistic instruction; it necessitates pedagogical strategies focused on emotional support. As the theory suggests, and the students' lived experiences confirm, teacher encouragement and the creation of a safe, co-regulating classroom environment are not merely beneficial but essential to dismantling these affective filters, thereby boosting the motivation and self-efficacy necessary for students to find their voice (Muslim, 2023; Ahmed, 2019; Mao, 2022; Garaeva, 2024).

2) Linguistic-Cognitive Difficulties

These are challenges related to the language mechanics, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and listening. students' perspectives about the linguistic factor are as follows:

- “*Kosa Kata terbatas, susah cari kata yang pas saat bicara*” (Limited vocabulary, hard to find the right word when speaking)
- “*Susah mengerti kalau bule ngomong cepat*” (Hard to understand when native speakers talk fast) - Listening Comprehension
- “*Susah buat bunyi tertentu*” (contoh bedain 'th' dan 't') (Difficulty with certain sounds, e.g., differentiating 'th' and 't') - Pronunciation
- “*Masih mikir bahasa Indonesia kalau mau ngomong Inggris*” (Still thinking in Indonesian when wanting to speak English) - Interference/Translation
- “*sulit mengucapkan bahasa inggris karena terbiasa dengan bahasa daerah*” (Difficulty pronouncing English due to habit with local language) - Pronunciation/Interference
- “*menulis dalam bahasa Inggris bisa sulit*” (Writing in English can be difficult) - Writing/Grammar
- “*sulit dalam kosakatanya dan dari segi menghafalnya*” (Difficulty with vocabulary and the aspect of memorizing it)
- “*rumit dari segi mengucapkan dan menghafal*” (Complicated in terms of pronunciation and memorization)
- “*sulit untuk mengucapkan*” (Difficulty in pronouncing)
- “*dari segi rumus*” (In terms of formulas [grammar rules]) - Grammar

Linguistic-cognitive difficulties represent the core structural and mechanical challenges inherent in mastering a new language system, which are profoundly evident among non-ELT students at UII DALWA. The most frequently cited issue is “*kosa kata terbatas, susah cari kata yang pas saat bicara*” and “*sulit dalam kosakatanya dan dari segi menghafalnya*”, indicating a significant struggle with building and retrieving an adequate lexicon, which is the very foundation of communication. This challenges are relevant to Rao (2024), who exposed the Quest for Fluency of English Language Challenges for Non-Native Learners. This challenge is compounded by grammar anxiety “*dari segi rumus*”, where students grapple with the complex rules of English syntax, leading to difficulty in constructing accurate sentences, especially in writing “*menulis dalam bahasa Inggris bisa sulit*”, a common issue rooted in a lack of foundational knowledge. In addition, Talok, et al., (2023), who investigated the cognitive difficulty by tracing the Use of Cognitive Strategies by Non-English Students in Learning English, had relevant findings to this study, which revealed that a major cognitive hurdle is the persistent need for mental translation “*masih mikir bahasa Indonesia kalau mau ngomong Inggris*”, which is a direct manifestation of L1 interference. Students often rely on this strategy, but its effectiveness is limited and it severely hampers fluency and spontaneity (Suryanto & Sari, 2021). Furthermore, pronunciation presents a unique set of obstacles; students find it “*rumit dari segi mengucapkan*” and specifically struggle with unfamiliar phonemes (“*susah buat bunyi tertentu*” like /θ/ in 'think'), a problem often exacerbated by negative transfer from their first language (Indonesian) or even their “*bahasa daerah*” (local language) (Mao, 2022). This lack of phonological mastery directly impacts their listening comprehension, making it “*susah mengerti kalau bule ngomong cepat*”, as they cannot decode the stream of natural, connected speech, highlighting the interconnected nature of these

linguistic challenges (Siahaan & Sitorus, 2025). For DALWA students, whose academic exposure to English is limited, these linguistic-cognitive gaps are particularly acute. Without sufficient practice, the intricate systems of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation remain dauntingly complex, creating a formidable barrier to achieving proficiency, a situation where cognitive strategies alone are often insufficient without targeted support.

3) Contextual-Environmental Constraints

At this stage, challenges are due to a lack of practice, exposure, or opportunity. Below are the students' responses related to contextual environmental challenges.

- "*Jarang latihan langsung ngomong bahasa Inggris*" (Rarely practice speaking English directly)
- "*Jarang dengar percakapan Bahasa Inggris*" (Rarely hear English conversations)

Contextual-environmental constraints refer to the significant limitations in a learner's surroundings that restrict opportunities for natural and practical language use, a challenge acutely felt by non-ELT students at UII DALWA, where large class sizes and an unsupportive linguistic environment are common barriers (Pongsapan, 2025; Getie, 2020). The core of this issue is captured in the points "*jarang latihan langsung ngomong bahasa Inggris*" (rarely practicing direct speaking) and "*jarang dengar percakapan Bahasa Inggris*" (rarely hearing English conversations). This reflects a broader issue where English has no official or social function outside the classroom, creating a classic "foreign" language environment with profoundly insufficient exposure and a lack of authentic communication opportunities (Mao, 2022). Unlike ELT students who are immersed in an English-centric academic environment, non-ELT students at DALWA operate primarily within the linguistic spheres of Indonesian and, most dominantly, Arabic for their deep religious studies (*Dirasah Islamiyah*). Their daily academic life, social interactions, and even media consumption offer minimal organic exposure to authentic English. This lack of a supportive environment creates a critical practice gap, where inadequate resources and methods fail to compensate for the lack of real-world input (Yusup & Munawaroh, 2023). There are few natural triggers or obligatory situations that compel them to switch into English mode, leading to a cycle where skills remain dormant and underdeveloped. Without regularly hearing native or proficient speakers "*jarang dengar*", they miss out on internalizing the rhythm and speed of natural speech, which directly explains why listening comprehension and fluent speaking are so difficult. Consequently, the classroom becomes one of the only places for practice, but this limited, often structured interaction is insufficient to build the automaticity and confidence needed for real-world communication. For these students, English can feel abstract and detached from their immediate reality because their environment simply does not provide the consistent, reinforcing exposure necessary. However, research indicates that leveraging technology can mitigate these constraints. As noted by Ngamsom & Huttayavilaiphan (2025), using social media and watching videos in English can significantly compensate for a lack of formal environmental support, creating personalized and motivating language ecologies that supplement the limited classroom exposure.

4) Socio-Cultural and Motivational Factors

These Challenges are related to attitude, culture, and personal drive. Students' responses are listed below.

- “*karena kita mempelajarinya, sulit mengucapkannya, dan tidak ada keinginan untuk belajar bahasa Inggris*” (Because we learn it, it's difficult to pronounce, and there is no desire to learn English) - Lack of Motivation
- “*Karena tidak suka pelajarannya dan sulit untuk dipahami*” (Because they don't like the lesson and it's hard to understand) - Negative Attitude/Lack of Motivation
- “*karena bukan bahasanya orang islam*” (Because it's not the language of Muslims) - Cultural/Religious Perception [Note: This is a specific socio-cultural viewpoint that can affect motivation]

Socio-cultural and motivational factors delve into the deepest drivers—or lack thereof—behind language learning, encompassing personal desire, cultural identity, and perceived relevance, which present a unique and profound challenge for non-ELT students at UII DALWA. The most telling issues are a stark “*tidak ada keinginan untuk belajar bahasa Inggris*” (no desire to learn English) and a “*tidak suka pelajarannya*” (dislike for the subject itself), often stemming from a negative perception that it is inherently “*sulit untuk dipahami*” (difficult to understand). This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where a lack of motivation leads to minimal effort and poor results, a cycle exacerbated by limited exposure to English and a lack of real-life practice opportunities that reduce motivation (Getie, 2020; Yusup & Munawaroh, 2023). For many students in this religious environment, the most significant barrier is a socio-cultural perception, as illustrated by the view “*karena bukan bahasanya orang Islam*” (because it is not the language of Muslims). This perspective positions English as a cultural artifact of a secular or Western world, seemingly disconnected from their core identity. This reflects how societal attitudes that undervalue language learning can severely dampen a student's drive (Thu, 2025). Consequently, English is perceived as lacking spiritual value or practical utility within their immediate religious scholarly community. Without a clear, personally meaningful goal, the language is easily relegated to a mere academic requirement. This situation demonstrates that learners only “invest” in a language if they believe it will increase their cultural capital, for instance, by providing access to better jobs or social acceptance. When they see no such return on their investment, their motivation wanes (Baha, 2025). This fundamental lack of motivation, where the language is not seen as a tool for personal or professional advancement, is arguably the most significant overarching barrier. To counter this, pedagogical approaches that leverage students' existing environments show promise. For example, using digital tools and social media can create engaging, personalized language ecologies that enhance cultural engagement and peer influence, thereby boosting motivation (Ngamsom & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). Ultimately, as highlighted by Muslim (2023), the interplay of personal, psychological, and social factors is critical; for these students, motivation cannot be separated from their cultural identity and the relevance of English to their spiritual and communal life.

Conclusion

This study conclusively identifies and categorizes the primary challenges faced by non-ELT students at UII DALWA in learning English. The findings reveal that the most significant hurdle is Linguistic-Cognitive Difficulties, encompassing fundamental struggles with vocabulary acquisition, grammatical rules, pronunciation of unfamiliar phonemes, and listening comprehension. These core mechanical issues are compounded by a high degree of Affective-Psychological Barriers, where anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence create

a debilitating mental block that inhibits participation and practice. Furthermore, these challenges are exacerbated by underlying Socio-Cultural and Motivational Factors. A prevalent perception of English as a secular language disconnected from the students' core Islamic identity and academic focus on Arabic leads to a lack of integrative motivation and a weak personal desire to learn. Finally, these issues are perpetuated by Contextual-Environmental Constraints. The absence of a natural English-speaking environment, both inside and outside the classroom, results in a critical lack of practice and exposure, preventing students from moving theoretical knowledge toward fluent, automatic use.

In essence, the challenges are interconnected: a lack of motivation and a negative self-perception (Socio-Cultural/Affective) hinder engagement, which in turn prevents students from overcoming the core linguistic problems and seizing limited practice opportunities, creating a cyclical barrier to proficiency. Therefore, Future research should focus on creating and testing classroom strategies that use Islamic content to boost motivation and reduce anxiety. Deeper qualitative studies are needed to fully understand the cultural and motivational barriers these students face. It would also be valuable to track student progress over time and to compare the experiences of non-ELT students with those in ELT programs at the same university.

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