



Why Students Choose English Studies at an Islamic University

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Abstract

This study investigates students' perceptions and motivation in choosing English Studies at an Islamic university, offering an interdisciplinary perspective on educational aspirations in the digital era 5.0. Employing a quantitative research design complemented by qualitative insights, data were collected from (N = 96) undergraduate students through a structured questionnaire grounded in motivation theory and followed by semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores) to identify motivational patterns, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to enrich the interpretation of students' academic choices. The findings reveal strong intrinsic motivation (mean score: 80%) and high autonomous motivation (mean score: 73.75%), whereas extrinsic valuation (mean score: 60%) and controlled motivation (mean score: 47%) were at a moderate level. Interview findings indicate that students' decisions were primarily influenced by personal interest, the perceived relevance of English in the contemporary digital landscape, and future career aspirations. From an interdisciplinary standpoint, English is viewed not merely as an academic discipline but as a strategic medium for accessing global scientific and digital knowledge. These findings underscore the role of English Studies at Islamic universities in fostering interdisciplinary learning and preparing students for meaningful participation in the digital era 5.0 within an Islamic educational context.

Keywords: English Studies, Student Motivation, Islamic Higher Education, Interdisciplinary Learning, Digital Era 5.0

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language that plays a crucial role in various aspects of contemporary life, including communication, education, trade, technology, and scientific development (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). In the context of globalization and rapid digital transformation, English is no longer perceived merely as an additional skill, but rather as a fundamental competence that enables individuals to access global knowledge, participate in international collaboration, and engage with digital, scientific, and technological resources (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Jenkins, 2015). As a response to these global demands, higher education institutions, including Islamic universities, have increasingly offered English Studies or English Education programs to prepare graduates who are linguistically proficient and professionally equipped to navigate complex global and digital environments (Borg, 2018).

Within Islamic higher education, education is widely regarded as a strategic instrument for fostering social transformation and preparing future generations who are ethical, democratic, and globally competitive while remaining rooted in Islamic values (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Azra, 2015). English Studies programs at Islamic universities are therefore positioned not only to develop

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students' language proficiency, but also to support their educational aspirations within an institutional framework that integrates academic excellence with religious identity (Rohmah, 2012). However, despite the increasing global relevance of English, students' decisions to choose English Studies are not always grounded in strong personal interest or informed awareness of long-term academic and career opportunities. Prior research suggests that students may select their field of study due to limited access to information, environmental influences, or pragmatic considerations, such as perceiving the program as an alternative or secondary option rather than a primary aspiration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Al-Harthi, 2011).

Students' perceptions play a critical role in shaping their academic choices and learning engagement. Perception refers to the process through which individuals organize, interpret, and assign meaning to information based on prior experiences, values, and expectations (Gibson et al., 2012). In higher education contexts, students' perceptions of a study program, including its relevance, learning environment, and perceived career prospects, have been shown to significantly influence their motivation, persistence, and academic success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Yorke, 2016; Collins et al., 2016). Positive perceptions of English Studies, particularly regarding employability, global engagement, and interdisciplinary relevance, may therefore enhance students' commitment and long-term achievement within the program.

Motivation is another key factor influencing students' choice of major and their engagement in learning. Motivation is commonly conceptualized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to internal drives such as interest, enjoyment, and personal fulfillment, whereas extrinsic motivation is associated with external rewards, social expectations, and career considerations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of English Studies at Islamic universities, students' motivation may also be shaped by the aspiration to integrate academic goals with religious values and a desire to contribute positively to society through education and professional practice (Ismail & Ahmad, 2018). Choosing English Studies thus represents a commitment not only to mastering the English language but also to developing academic, pedagogical, and communicative competencies that are increasingly relevant across interdisciplinary and digital settings in the contemporary era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation in Language Learning and Academic Choice

Motivation is widely recognized as a crucial factor in achieving educational goals, particularly in second language learning. Motivation influences learners' engagement, persistence, and success throughout the learning process (Arifin & Listyaningrum, 2023). Learning and motivation are mutually reinforcing processes, as motivation determines the reasons behind learners' academic decisions, the duration of their engagement, and the intensity of their effort. Motivation consists of both intrinsic characteristics, such as passion, interest, and the desire to succeed, and extrinsic influences, including rewards, supportive learning environments, and stimulating learning activities (Muthoharoh, 2024).

In higher education, motivation plays a decisive role in students' choice of major. Students' academic orientation and progress are shaped by their motivational drives, which are often linked to perceptions of job opportunities, personal interests, and values they consider important (Silaban et al., 2023; Firdausi, 2020). In Islamic higher education contexts, the decision to major in English Education is frequently associated not only with career considerations but also with religious values, teaching ideals, and aspirations to contribute positively to society (Akmal et al., 2020; Alviana & Nur, 2023). This highlights the importance of examining motivation as both a psychological and socio-cultural construct.

Motivation is commonly categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to internal drives that arise naturally from personal interest, enjoyment,

curiosity, and a sense of purpose, whereas extrinsic motivation originates from external stimuli such as rewards, recognition, parental expectations, or career prospects. Intrinsically motivated students tend to engage in learning activities because they find them meaningful and satisfying, while extrinsically motivated students are driven by outcomes beyond the learning activity itself.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding motivation in educational settings. SDT emphasizes three fundamental psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which underpin intrinsic motivation. When these needs are fulfilled, students demonstrate higher engagement, stronger persistence, and better academic performance. Intrinsic motivation is characterized by curiosity, personal satisfaction, independence, and long-term learning goals, whereas extrinsic motivation is influenced by environmental factors such as rewards, praise, or fear of failure. Although extrinsic motivation can encourage learning behavior, reliance on external incentives alone may lead to decreased motivation when such incentives are removed. Therefore, balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is essential in higher education.

Perception in Educational Contexts

Perception plays a vital role in shaping students' academic behavior and decision-making. In educational contexts, perception influences how students evaluate learning environments, subject matter, instructors, and the relevance of what they learn to their personal and professional lives. McDonald defines perception as an individual's way of viewing and interpreting the world, shaped by prior experiences, socio-cultural background, and environmental interactions.

Perception is not merely a sensory process but a cognitive activity involving the organization, interpretation, and analysis of stimuli received by the brain. The processes of sensing and perceiving are inseparable, as perception gives meaning to sensory input ([Soraya, 2018](#)). Individuals selectively interpret information, constructing their own understanding of reality based on personal perspectives. Perception encompasses how individuals think about something, how they interpret sensory information, and their ability to understand or recognize meaning quickly.

In higher education, students' perceptions of a study program strongly influence their motivation, engagement, and persistence. Positive perceptions toward a program often result in favorable attitudes and behaviors, while negative perceptions may lead to disengagement or lack of commitment. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions is essential for examining their motivation in choosing a particular field of study, including English Studies.

English Education as a Field of Study

English plays a central role in the advancement of science, technology, and global communication. Proficiency in English is essential for accessing international academic resources, participating in global knowledge exchange, and engaging in professional and digital environments. In higher education, particularly at the undergraduate level, English Education programs aim to produce graduates who are linguistically proficient and pedagogically competent.

The English Education Department focuses on developing students' language proficiency, teaching methodologies, classroom management skills, assessment literacy, and understanding of linguistic and educational theories. Language teaching is inseparable from cultural understanding, as language reflects the culture of its users. Consequently, English teaching should emphasize intercultural communicative competence to enable students to navigate cultural differences effectively.

At Islamic universities, English Education programs also integrate moral, ethical, and religious values into language learning. This integration offers a distinctive context in which students seek to harmonize their academic goals with their religious identity. Choosing English

Education as a major thus represents a commitment to mastering English not only as a language but also as an academic and pedagogical discipline. Students' awareness and motivation in choosing this major play a significant role in their academic success and professional readiness. Additionally, graduates of English Education programs possess added value in instructional and communicative skills compared to graduates from non-education English programs.

Previous Relevant Studies and Research Gap

Previous studies have explored students' motivation and perceptions in choosing English-related programs. [Hatos and Abrudan \(2023\)](#) found that students' motivation to study in English was primarily driven by the desire to improve communication skills and enhance career opportunities. Similarly, students demonstrated positive perceptions toward English Education, influenced by employment prospects as well as peer and family support. Both integrative and instrumental motivation are key factors affecting students' achievement in English learning.

Other studies have examined affective and contextual factors in English education. Revealed that positive lecturer performance significantly encouraged students' classroom participation. Students' choice of English Studies was influenced by personal interest, career aspirations, learning resources, and program content, although not all variables showed significant correlations.

Despite these contributions, existing research has largely focused on general higher education contexts or non-Islamic institutions. There remains limited research examining students' perceptions and motivation in choosing English Studies within Islamic higher education institutions, particularly from an interdisciplinary perspective that addresses the challenges of the digital era 5.0. This gap underscores the need for the present study, which seeks to explore how motivation and perception shape students' academic choices within Islamic universities and how English Studies can be positioned to support interdisciplinary learning and future aspirations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, specifically an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design ([Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018](#)). In this design, quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to identify general patterns of students' perceptions and motivation in choosing English Studies, followed by qualitative data collection to further explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. The quantitative component was given priority, while the qualitative interviews served a complementary and explanatory role.

Participants and Sampling

The quantitative phase involved 96 undergraduate students majoring in English Education at several Islamic universities located on the island of Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the following inclusion criteria: (1) active enrollment in an English Education or English Studies program, (2) completion of at least one academic semester, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily. The sample size was considered adequate for descriptive quantitative analysis, as it allowed for the identification of trends and patterns in students' motivational orientations across institutions.

For the qualitative phase, 8 participants were selected from the survey respondents using maximum variation sampling to represent different motivational profiles (high, moderate, and low motivation). This approach was employed to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and to enhance the depth and credibility of the qualitative findings.

Instruments

The primary quantitative instrument was a questionnaire adapted from the Self-Determination Theory in Second Language Learning (SDT-L2) scale. The adaptation process involved several stages: (1) contextual modification of items to reflect the Indonesian Islamic higher education context, (2) expert validation by two scholars in English education and educational psychology, and (3) pilot testing with a small group of students to assess clarity and relevance. The final questionnaire consisted of 55 items measuring intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, autonomous motivation, and controlled motivation, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across all subscales ($\alpha = 0.72\text{--}0.85$). Content validity was ensured through expert judgment, while construct validity was supported by alignment with established SDT constructs.

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol developed based on the quantitative results. The interview questions focused on students' reasons for choosing English Studies, perceptions of the program, the relevance of English in the digital era 5.0, and future academic and career aspirations.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected through the administration of the questionnaire, either online or in paper-based form. Following the analysis of survey results, qualitative interviews were conducted with selected participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using mean scores and percentage distributions to identify patterns in students' perceptions and motivational orientations. The qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically following the steps of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Participants were allowed to review summaries of their interview responses to confirm accuracy.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Data integration occurred at the interpretation stage. The qualitative findings were used to explain, elaborate, and contextualize the quantitative results, particularly where survey data revealed notable trends or unexpected patterns. This integration allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and motivation in choosing English Studies at Islamic universities, strengthening the overall validity of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Demographics

A total of $N = XXX$ students participated in the quantitative phase of this study. The respondents were undergraduate students majoring in English Education from several Islamic universities in Java. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	32	33.3
	Female	64	66.7
Age	18-20	38	39.6
	21-23	44	45.8
	>23	14	14.6
Academic Year	1st – 2nd year	41	42.7
	3rd – 4th year	55	57.3
University	UIA	34	35.4
	UAD	32	33.3
	UNISMA	30	31.3

Students' Perceptions

Quantitative analysis revealed that students generally held positive perceptions toward the English Studies program, with notable differences between extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions. Extrinsic perception was categorized as moderate to high, with 46.25% of respondents classified as high and 25% as moderate. The mean score for extrinsic perception was 3.0 out of 5, which corresponds to 60% of the maximum possible score. This percentage was calculated by dividing the obtained mean score by the maximum Likert score (5) and multiplying it by 100. Based on the predefined criteria ($\leq 40\% = \text{low}$, $41-60\% = \text{moderate}$, $61-80\% = \text{high}$, $>80\% = \text{very high}$), this result indicates a moderate level of extrinsic perception.

These findings suggest that external factors such as institutional facilities, learning environment, and academic support were perceived positively, but they were not the dominant determinants in students' decision-making process. In contrast, intrinsic perception showed substantially stronger results. A majority of students demonstrated high (58.75%) and very high (20%) intrinsic perception, with a mean score of 4.24 out of 5, equivalent to 84.74%. This indicates that students perceived English Studies as personally meaningful, relevant to self-development, and aligned with their academic aspirations. The dominance of intrinsic perception suggests that internal valuation outweighed external considerations in shaping students' academic choices.

Students' Motivation

Consistent with the perception findings, students exhibited stronger autonomous motivation compared to controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation recorded a mean score of 3.69 out of 5 (73.75%), with 73.75% of respondents categorized as high. This indicates that students' engagement with English Studies was largely driven by internalized goals such as personal interest, self-improvement, and long-term aspirations.

In contrast, controlled motivation yielded a lower mean score of 2.35 out of 5 (47%), placing it in the moderate category. While 37.5% of students reported high controlled motivation, a considerable proportion fell into moderate (26.25%) and low (28.75%) categories. This pattern suggests that external pressures, such as social expectations or instrumental demands, played a secondary role compared to autonomous drivers.

Interview Findings and Analytical Integration

To move beyond descriptive support, qualitative findings were analytically integrated to explain *why* intrinsic perception and autonomous motivation emerged as dominant patterns in the survey results. Five key themes were identified.

Theme 1: English Studies as a Pathway to Career Opportunities and Global Engagement

Survey data showed moderate extrinsic perception, and interview findings clarify this pattern by revealing that career considerations were present but not exclusive. Students acknowledged English as opening access to diverse professions beyond teaching, yet these prospects were often framed as *possibilities*, not primary motivators.

“Even if I decide not to pursue a career in teaching after graduation, I can still work as a translator or in a hospital.” - Participant 01, female, 21 years old, 3rd year, UIA

This explains why extrinsic perception was moderate rather than dominant: career value was recognized, but not sufficient on its own to drive major choice.

Theme 2: Personal Growth and Academic Development

The high intrinsic perception scores are strongly explained by students' emphasis on self-development and autonomy.

“I became more independent in finding additional resources and more proactive in improving my English skills.” - Participant 03, female, 20 years old, 2nd year, UIA

This theme clarifies why intrinsic perception reached the “very high” category: students associated English Studies with identity formation, confidence building, and intellectual growth.

Theme 3: Alignment Between Expectations and Learning Experiences

Although some challenges were reported, students perceived these as part of meaningful learning rather than deterrents.

“Although the process is challenging, it feels worthwhile in the end.” - Participant 05, male, 22 years old, 4th year, UAD

This insight adds nuance beyond the survey by showing how students reinterpret limitations positively, sustaining intrinsic motivation despite moderate extrinsic conditions.

Theme 4: Autonomous Motivation and Long-Term Aspirations

High autonomous motivation scores are explained by students' internalized goals.

“My goal was not just to pass courses, but to truly master English.” - Participant 02, female, 21 years old, 3rd year, UNISMA

This theme demonstrates that students' motivation aligns with identified and intrinsic regulation, consistent with Self-Determination Theory.

Theme 5: English as a Medium for Interdisciplinary and Digital Engagement

Students perceived English as enabling access to interdisciplinary knowledge and digital resources, which helps explain why motivation remained high despite moderate extrinsic factors.

“English helps me understand materials in journalism, tourism, and digital media.” - Participant 04, male, 22 years old, 4th year, UAD

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students' decisions to choose English Studies at Islamic universities are predominantly influenced by intrinsic perception and autonomous motivation, rather than by extrinsic or controlled factors. Quantitative results showed that intrinsic perception reached a very high level (mean = 84.74%), while autonomous motivation was also high (mean = 73.75%). In contrast, extrinsic perception (mean = 60%) and controlled motivation (mean = 47%) were categorized as moderate. These patterns indicate that students' engagement with English Studies is largely driven by internalized values and personal aspirations rather than external pressures or institutional considerations.

The dominance of intrinsic perception suggests that students perceive English Studies as personally meaningful and relevant to their self-development. This finding is supported by interview data, which revealed that students associated the program with intellectual growth, increased learner autonomy, and the development of academic skills beyond classroom requirements. Such qualitative insights help explain why intrinsic perception emerged as stronger than extrinsic perception: students valued the program not merely for its facilities or institutional support, but for its contribution to their personal and academic identity formation.

The relatively moderate level of extrinsic perception indicates that while factors such as learning facilities, campus environment, and institutional support were acknowledged, they were not decisive in students' choice of major. Interview findings clarify this pattern by showing that students recognized external resources as supportive elements rather than primary motivators. This helps explain why extrinsic perception did not reach the same level as intrinsic perception, despite generally positive evaluations of the program.

In terms of motivation, the higher level of autonomous motivation compared to controlled motivation reflects students' internalization of their academic goals. According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomous motivation is associated with engagement driven by personal interest and identified goals rather than external rewards or obligations. In this study, interview data revealed that students' motivations were closely linked to long-term aspirations, such as mastering English, gaining confidence, and preparing for diverse professional pathways. These qualitative findings provide explanatory depth to the quantitative results, illustrating how students' internal goals translated into high autonomous motivation scores.

Controlled motivation, while present, played a secondary role. The moderate mean score (47%) suggests that external expectations, such as social influence or perceived job requirements, contributed to students' decisions but did not dominate them. Interview responses further revealed that although career prospects and external recognition were considered, students tended to reinterpret these external factors as personally meaningful goals. This internalization process may explain why controlled motivation remained moderate while autonomous motivation was comparatively strong.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings highlight that students perceived English not only as a language subject but also as a strategic medium for interdisciplinary and digital engagement. Students emphasized the role of English in accessing digital resources, global information, and professional fields such as tourism, translation, and media-related domains. This perception adds nuance to the quantitative findings by showing how intrinsic and autonomous motivation is reinforced by students' awareness of English as a gateway to broader academic and professional ecosystems in the digital era 5.0.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data indicates that students' motivation to choose English Studies at Islamic universities is shaped by a dynamic interaction between personal meaning, internalized goals, and perceived future relevance. These findings suggest that institutional efforts to strengthen English Studies programs should prioritize learning

environments that foster autonomy, relevance, and interdisciplinary engagement, rather than relying solely on external incentives or structural improvements.

CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study investigated students' perceptions and motivation in choosing English Studies at Islamic universities, focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions as well as autonomous and controlled motivation. The findings reveal that students generally hold positive perceptions toward the English Studies program, with intrinsic perception and autonomous motivation emerging as the most influential factors in their academic decision-making.

Quantitative results indicate that students' intrinsic perceptions of English Studies are significantly stronger than their extrinsic perceptions. This suggests that students primarily value the program for its personal relevance, contribution to self-development, and long-term academic and professional benefits rather than external factors such as institutional facilities or external pressures. Although extrinsic aspects were perceived positively, they played a secondary role in shaping students' choices.

In terms of motivation, the dominance of autonomous motivation highlights that students are largely driven by internal goals, including personal interest, mastery of English, and future aspirations. Controlled motivation was present but less prominent, indicating that external demands or obligations were not the primary determinants of students' engagement. These findings reinforce the importance of internalized motivation in sustaining students' commitment to English Studies within Islamic higher education contexts.

The qualitative interview findings further support the quantitative results by illustrating how students perceive English as a strategic tool for personal growth, career opportunities, and interdisciplinary engagement, particularly in the digital era 5.0. Students' narratives demonstrate that English is not only viewed as a subject of study but also as a gateway to accessing global knowledge, digital resources, and diverse professional fields.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on students' academic decision-making in English education by highlighting the central role of intrinsic perception and autonomous motivation. The findings suggest that English Studies programs at Islamic universities should continue to foster learning environments that support autonomy, relevance, and personal development. Such efforts are essential to enhancing student engagement, sustaining motivation, and ensuring the continued relevance of English Studies in an increasingly global and digital academic landscape.

Future research is recommended to expand this inquiry in several directions. First, longitudinal studies could examine how students' perceptions and motivation evolve over time, particularly as they progress through different stages of their academic journey. Second, future research may adopt comparative designs to explore differences between Islamic and non-Islamic higher education institutions or across regional and cultural contexts. Third, incorporating additional variables—such as self-efficacy, digital literacy, or academic resilience—could provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing students' choice of English Studies. Finally, further qualitative research involving lecturers, alumni, and institutional stakeholders would enrich insights into how curriculum design and institutional practices shape students' motivation and perceptions.

Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a limited institutional context, focusing only on students from Islamic universities offering English Studies programs. Therefore, the findings may not be fully

generalizable to students from non-Islamic universities or other academic disciplines. Future studies could involve a more diverse range of institutions to provide broader comparative insights. Second, the quantitative data relied on self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or participants' subjective interpretations of the items. Although the instruments were designed carefully, students' responses may not fully capture the complexity of their perceptions and motivational orientations. Incorporating additional data sources, such as classroom observations or longitudinal tracking, could strengthen future research.

Third, while this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, the qualitative component involved a relatively small number of interview participants. As a result, the qualitative findings primarily serve to support and contextualize the quantitative results rather than to represent the full range of student experiences. Future research may benefit from more extensive qualitative sampling to explore deeper variations in students' motivations and perceptions.

Finally, this study examined students' perceptions and motivation at a single point in time. Motivation, however, is dynamic and may change throughout students' academic journeys. Longitudinal research designs are recommended to capture how students' motivations and perceptions toward English Studies evolve across different stages of their studies, particularly in response to curricular experiences and institutional support.

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