INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND PHILOLOGY

Learning English in Higher Education: Students' Preferences, Experiences, and Challenges

Laureta Kadrijaj Qerimi, Besa Krasniqi

https://doi.org//10.69648/PMCM6818

International Journal of Education and Philology (IJEP), 2026; 7(1): 91-99.

ijep.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2671-3543

Application :17.04.2026

Revision :20.05.2026

Acceptance :24.06.2026

Publication :26.06.2026

Kadrijaj Qerimi, L., & Krasniqi, B. (2026). Learning English in higher education: Students' preferences, experiences, and challenges. International Journal of Education and Philology, 7(1), 91-99.

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Laureta Kadrijaj Qerimi[1], Besa Krasniqi[2]

[1]Alma Mater Europaea Campus College "Rezonanca"- Republic of Kosovo, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6294-6890

[2]Alma Mater Europaea Campus College "Rezonanca"- Republic of Kosovo, https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7823-2879

Besa Krasniqi Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laureta Kadrijaj Qerimi.

Email: laureta.kadrijaj@rezonanca-rks.com

BALKAN JOURNALS

Abstract

The English language serves as lingua franca worldwide, and in most educational systems it is taught as a separate subject. This study examines students' experiences and challenges in learning English at the tertiary level, with a particular focus on English Language and Literature programs, where students are expected to acquire advanced knowledge to become specialized and competent in the English language. However, many students continue to face difficulties in developing English language skills, which may affect their academic performance and overall learning outcomes. To collect comprehensive data on students' learning experiences, a quantitative questionnaire, which also included several open-ended questions, was used. This study explores specific factors such as students' preferences, experiences, and challenges, highlighting how these factors influence learning outcomes and how they can be effectively addressed by English language teachers. This study aims to enrich knowledge that leads to improved teaching and learning practices, with the aim of increasing students' engagement, motivation and overall success in acquiring English language skills in higher education institutions.

Keywords: English, higher education, learning preferences, experiences, challenges

Introduction

With the rapid trends and developments happening worldwide, English has become a global medium of communication in all fields, including education, law, economics, medicine, and information technology. Consequently, learning English is essential at all levels of education, including higher education. Mastering English at the tertiary level is crucial for preparing future professionals to meet academic demands such as research and scholarly communication, as well as for enhancing their global employability and professional interaction in an increasingly interconnected world.

In the Western Balkans, as in other European regions, English has become an inevitable component of the educational process at all levels and fields of education, either as an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) subject within various study programs or as a full degree program in English Language and Literature. The latter is typically chosen by students who aim to pursue careers in English teaching, translation, or other language-related professions.

At the university level, English language proficiency becomes even more important, especially for students enrolled in English Language and Literature study programs. These students are expected to achieve advanced competence in all components of the English language, so that in the future they can effectively deliver it, translate different types of texts or engage in academic studies. For this reason, it is particularly important to consider students' perspectives regarding their preferences, experiences and challenges in learning English. A better understanding of these perspectives can help teachers identify potential barriers and adapt their teaching approaches to better support students in acquiring the required skills.

Literature Review

Learning English at the university level of study is a challenging process, as it requires students to acquire specific language skills, related to particular subjects, that will later enable them to perform effectively in their professional careers. Language learning goes beyond simple memorization of vocabulary, it requires the integration of new lexical items within the student's existing linguistic knowledge, thus facilitating their transformation into meaningful and functional knowledge (Brown, 2000).

In this context, it is of particular importance to initially recognize students' learning styles, their prior experiences, and the challenges they face during learning process. Understanding these individual characteristics, helps teacher to better support students' language development and adapt instructions based on their needs. The learning styles model classifies students according to the way they receive and process information (Felder, 1988). Understanding this model enables teachers to adapt teaching to the different needs of students. Identifying students' individual preferences in the learning process represents a crucial step in equipping them with the necessary language skills and enables teachers to effectively individualize, organize and manage relevant activities (Boström, 2011). As mentioned, students have different learning style preferences, and recognizing these differences helps to increase students' awareness of their preferred ways of learning, while also promoting an understanding of alternative learning approaches (Mkonto, 2015). However, learning styles are not fixed or absolute; students can adopt different learning styles depending on the context and learning task. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to use a variety of approaches and create different learning conditions that enable students to engage and develop different learning styles. Such flexibility in teaching can increase learning effectiveness and create an environment where students are able to achieve maximum success (Xudoyberdiyeva, 2024).

Even in English language learning, different students have different learning styles. Some are kinesthetic learners, while others prefer auditory or visual styles (Norhasanah et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to use a teaching method that incorporates all three styles in order to meet the different needs of students.

The literature suggests a strong connection between students' learning experiences, their preferences, and the challenges they face. Positive experiences with interactive activities tend to increase students' preference and motivation for learning the language. On the other hand, negative experiences, such as frequent corrections by the teacher, can negatively affect students' internal language development (Loewen & Reinders, 2011). Limited opportunities to speak without being judged can also reduce motivation and increase anxiety, which can further hinder language learning (Liu, 2023). These learning experiences play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes towards the English language. During the process of learning English, students can develop positive or negative attitudes, which significantly affect their learning outcomes. Students who develop positive attitudes towards language tend to achieve greater success, which in turn strengthens their motivation and engagement. Conversely, students who develop negative attitudes may

encounter difficulties in language learning, leading to poor results and negative experiences that further hinder the learning process (Elyıldırım & Ashton-Hay, 2006).

When students' learning styles and preferences are not considered, they are likely to face challenges in learning English, which can affect their classroom experiences, attitudes and overall development in relation to the language. Research shows that, despite the fact that higher education students already possess prior knowledge of English, as it is taught as a subject at previous educational levels, they continue to face difficulties due to previous learning experiences and failure to take teaching styles into account.

University-level students face a number of challenges, including language difficulties such as limited vocabulary and low speaking skills, mainly because many language teachers still prefer traditional teacher-centered teaching methods (Ismeti, 2022). This approach not only limits students' opportunities for language improvement, but also reduces their motivation. Other affective barriers, such as anxiety and lack of self-confidence, are additional challenges that students face (Zrekat & Al-Sohbani, 2022). Furthermore, contextual factors, including large class sizes and limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, may further hinder language development.

The literature shows that students' preferences, experiences and challenges in the English language learning process are closely interrelated and should be carefully considered and addressed by teachers, in order to provide students with appropriate learning styles for effective language acquisition.

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate students' preferences, experiences, and challenges in learning English in higher education. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire.

Population

The participants in the study were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language and Literature program at a public university in Skopje. The sample comprised of first- and second-year students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Their responses provided valuable insights regarding their preferences, experiences, and challenges in learning English at the tertiary level.

Instruments

A paper-based questionnaire was employed to carry out this study; as described in the sections below. Questionnaire was designed to collect data on students' perceptions of English language learning, preferred learning styles, teaching methods, instructional materials, and the use of literature in English language courses. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions, including both closed-ended and open-ended items. The closed-ended questions used multiple-choice response options, allowing participants to select one or more answers, while the open-ended questions provided opportunities for students to express their opinions and suggestions in their own words. The questionnaire was administered anonymously to encourage honest responses, and the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the open-ended responses.

Results

The questionnaire consisted of eight questions designed to explore students' preferences, experiences, and challenges related to English language learning in higher education. The first three questions focused on students' preferred learning styles, the teaching methods they found the most effective, and the types of materials they considered most helpful in their English courses. Two open-ended questions asked students to describe the qualities they believe make teaching materials more effective and to recommend ways in which literature-based learning could be improved. Other questions observed perceived benefits of studying literature for language development as well as the challenges that the students face when learning English through literary texts. The final open-ended question asked students to describe what their ideal English course would include in terms of methods, activities, and materials.

The results are presented below in the order of the questionnaire items.

Table 1

Students' Preferred Ways of Learning English

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Discussion/communication	8	40%
Reading/analysis	3	15%
Writing/creative tasks	2	10%
Lectures and note-taking	1	5%
Digital/multimedia	6	30%
Other	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Note. Based on authors' own research

As specified in the table, discussion and communication was the most preferred learning method, selected by 8 students (40%). This was followed by digital and multimedia-based learning, preferred by 6 students (30%). Reading and analysis was chosen by 3 students (15%), while writing and creative tasks were preferred by 2 students (10%). The least preferred method was lectures and note-taking, selected by 1 student (5%). No student selected the "Other" category.

Table 2

Most Effective Teaching Methods as Perceived by Students

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Communicative Language Teaching	19	95%
Task-Based Learning	2	10%
Literature-Based Approach	0	0%
Project-Based Learning	4	20%
Grammar-Translation	6	30%
Blended Learning	4	20%
Other	0	0%

Note. Based on authors' own research. Percentages may sum to more than 100%

Participants were asked to select all options that applied to their preferences.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of students (95%) chose Communicative Language Teaching as the most effective method for learning English. Other methods such as Grammar-Translation (30%) and Project-Based or Blended Learning (20% each) were moderately preferred, while Task-Based Learning (10%) and Literature-Based Approaches (0%) were less preferred.

Table 3

Materials Students Find Most Helpful in English Courses

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Course textbooks	8	40%
Original literary works	4	20%
Short stories or excerpts	0	0%
Films, adaptations, or videos	16	80%
Online platforms and digital resources	2	10%
Teacher-prepared handouts or slides	8	40%
Podcasts or audio materials	2	10%
Other	0	0%

Note. Based on authors' own research

Participants were asked to select all options that applied to their preferences.

Table 3 shows students' observations regarding materials they find the most helpful in English courses. Films, adaptations, or videos were selected by the majority of students (80%), followed by course textbooks and teacher-prepared handouts or slides (40% each). Original literary works were considered helpful by 20% of students, while online platforms and podcasts were selected less (10% each). Short stories, excerpts, and other materials were not selected by any student.

The fourth question was open-ended asking about the qualities that make teaching materials effective and engaging. Twelve out of twenty students responded, and their answers highlighted several key qualities: clarity and understandability (e.g., "It should be clear and understandable"), interesting and visually appealing content, interactive exercises and group activities that encourage creative thinking (e.g., "It should contain exercises that engage creative thinking and writing"), opportunities to develop language skills, especially speaking, and the use of digital resources such as videos or podcasts. Overall speaking, students preferred materials that are clear, engaging, interactive, and skill-oriented.

Table 5

Aspects of Literature Study That Improve Students' English Skills

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Expanding vocabulary	4	20%
Understanding grammar and structure	12	60%
Learning about culture and context	3	15%
Developing critical thinking and interpretation	6	30%

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Improving writing or speaking skills	2	10%
Other	0	0%

Note. Based on authors' own research

Participants were asked to select all options that applied to their preferences.

Participants were asked to select aspects of literature study that improve students' English skills. As indicated in Table 5, understanding grammar and structure was selected by the majority of students (60%), followed by developing critical thinking and interpretation (30%) and expanding vocabulary (20%). Learning about culture and context (15%) and improving writing or speaking skills (10%) were selected less frequently. No student selected other aspects.

Table 6

Challenges of Learning English Through Literature

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Complex language and vocabulary	6	30%
Cultural differences	4	20%
Difficulty understanding literary themes	6	30%
Lack of background knowledge	8	40%
Uninteresting or outdated materials	3	15%
Other	0	0%

Note. Based on authors' own research

Participants were asked to select all options that applied to their preferences.

Table 6 presents the challenges that students reported in learning English through literature. The most frequently chosen challenge was a lack of background knowledge, reported by 8 students (40%). Complex language and vocabulary and difficulty understanding literary themes were each selected by 6 students (30%). Cultural differences were noted by 4 students (20%), and uninteresting or outdated materials were mentioned by 3 students (15%). No other challenges were reported.

The seventh open-ended question invited students to suggest ways teachers could enhance literature-based learning. Ten students responded to the open-ended question about how teachers can make literature-based learning more engaging and effective. Their answers emphasized several strategies to make literature-based learning more effective and engaging. Students noted the use of interactive and visually attractive activities (e.g., "Include more interactive and funny activities";

"Use material that attracts our attention visually"), providing clear explanations of the topics (e.g. "Give clear explanation related to the topic"), and allowing students to express themselves freely. They also suggested using multimedia resources, assigning tasks related to literature, and connecting the material to the real-life contexts (e.g. "Relate the material with real life examples"). In general, students preferred literature-based learning that is interactive, clear, participatory, and relevant to real-life experiences.

The eighth open-ended question asked students to design their ideal English course and suggest the methods, activities, or materials they would include. Nine out of twenty students answered the open-ended question about the methods, activities and materials that they would include in their ideal English course. They highlighted several key preferences: the use of technology and multimedia resources to make lessons more engaging (e.g. "I would use technology, in order to make exercises related to the lesson more interesting"; "include more music, movies etc."), interactive activities such as group work, projects and discussions (e.g. "Group works, projects, digital activities and essays"; "I would include interactive activities such as group work") , and game-based learning including quizzes, word games and board games (e.g. "Games, quizzes and questions at the end of the class to test our understanding"). Students also suggested inclusion reading assignments, grammar-focused activities (e.g. "Grammar slides exploring how and when to use grammar units by giving examples, word games or board games, short films/podcasts"), and real-life examples to make learning more meaningful.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that students in higher education strongly prefer interactive and communicative ways of learning English, with discussion-based activities and multimedia resources being the most popular. This suggests that learners value active participation and engaging materials that make learning more interesting and motivating. Although literature-based approaches are part of the curriculum, students did not find them highly effective, potentially because literary texts can be complex and difficult to understand. They also noted challenges such as limited background knowledge and difficulty in interpreting themes, emphasizing the need for teaching material that is clear, interactive, and associated to real-life situations. These results support earlier studies showing that communicative methods and multimedia tools improve language learning.