Academic Challenges Faced by English-Major Freshmen in Their First Year

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Abstract

In their first year of learning at the university, freshmen are usually put in transition. Unlike other fields of study, freshmen majoring in English might encounter unique academic requirements, including language barriers, especially in a non-English-speaking country. This study aims to explore and describe the challenges in their first year and how they cope with them. Using semi-structured interviews, five freshmen were selected for data collection. The findings reveal some challenges English-major freshmen faced, including academic and language challenges, classroom experience and learning environment, and time management struggles. Due to these obstacles, participants employed various strategies to adapt, such as seeking peer support, adjusting study habits, and improving self-management. The study emphasized the importance of supporting first-year English-major students in their academic transition to achieve successful adaptation and integration. However, the use of a small number of samples and the particular institutional context in which the study was conducted limit the findings of the study.

Keywords: Academic challenges, English-major, freshmen, first year, transition

Introduction

The majority of first-year students perceive adjustments and adaptations in their academic lives when they move from high school to university (Lan et al., 2024) Freshmen face multiple difficulties during their transition to university, such as time management, increased workload, and others' expectations (Brooker et al., 2017; Mulaudzi, 2023). These challenges could not be avoided because they are facing a new living environment and educational system that are different from what they have experienced before. Even though the fresh start of being a freshman is exciting, nervousness and distress also come with it, so they need more support, especially in adapting to the new era (Cabello et al., 2022). Students' diverse backgrounds and identities multiply the pressures that shape their experiences with integration and academic demands (S. Hassan, 2024; Tenkorang et al., 2020). Ali et al., (2021) also pinpointed that when students from diverse cultural backgrounds enroll in universities, they must adjust to new social and educational structures, norms, and expectations. The uniqueness of challenges faced by English major freshmen has led the researches to investigate further to find out the real academic problems.

Among these, academic challenges, including struggles with coursework and assignments, time management, and adapting to university-level learning, are considered an important part for students who are still in the transition phase to university level (van

Rooij et al., 2018). The inability to manage these challenges prevents their motivation and increases school-leaving. Moreover, English freshmen also face additional academic demands like high expectations in reading, writing, speaking, and analytical thinking. Some previous research has found that English-major students frequently struggle with language proficiency, critical analysis, written English expressions, and a lack of opportunity to practice (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Hang et al., 2023; Suryadi & Hendra, 2021).

Several studies have examined academic challenges faced by university freshmen (Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024; Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Ivashova et al., 2020). While there is a growing literature on general academic challenges freshmen encounter, studies focusing specifically on English freshmen remain limited. Much of the existing work tends to generalize across disciplines or focuses on language learners in broader contexts, leaving a gap in understanding the nuanced experiences of English major freshmen. Studies such as Alder (2018), Hassan and Haque (2023), Huang et al., (2022) highlight issues in language barriers, identity transformation, and insufficient classroom support.

This study is guided by Tinto's Theory of Student Integration (1993, 2012), a conceptual framework that emphasizes the role of academic and social integration in shaping student success and persistence in higher education. Although originally developed to explain student retention, the theory's emphasis on integration has been widely adopted to examine students' early academic transitions and adjustment processes. In this study, the concept of academic integration is intentionally foregrounded as the primary analytical lens to investigate how English-major freshmen respond to academic challenges during their first year. Social and emotional dimensions are deliberately excluded to maintain a focused examination of academic adaptation. Drawing on interview data with first-year English education students, this research aims to explore the academic difficulties they encounter and the strategies they employ to address them. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of early academic adjustment and to inform the design of targeted academic support initiatives.

The selection of Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) as the guiding framework is strongly supported by recent empirical studies that continue to adapt and validate the model across diverse educational and cultural contexts. For instance, a culturally adapted application of Tinto's theory in Colombian higher education demonstrates how academic integration operates differently across institutional and sociocultural settings while remaining a robust explanatory framework for undergraduate adjustment (Castro-Montoya et al., 2025). Similarly, research on blended and synchronous learning environments highlights how instructional design and academic interaction significantly influence students' academic and social integration, reinforcing the relevance of Tinto's model in contemporary higher education contexts (Lakhal et al., 2020).

Moreover, a systematic review of first-year seminar programs analyzed through Tinto's theories confirms that academic integration remains a central factor in student transition and persistence, particularly in the early stages of university study (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). These findings align with comparative research on foundation-year and non-foundation students, which shows that structured academic preparation and early academic support significantly affect students' performance and adjustment (Shahid et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies affirm that academic integration—manifested through engagement with coursework, language demands, classroom practices, and time

management—is a critical mechanism through which first-year students negotiate academic challenges.

Guided by Tinto's framework, this study organizes prior research thematically around academic integration, grouping existing findings on academic rigor, language-related difficulties, and time management as key dimensions of early academic adjustment. This theoretical structuring enables a coherent transition to the findings and discussion sections, where identified challenges—academic workload, classroom experience, and time management—are interpreted as barriers to successful academic integration. By situating English-major freshmen's experiences within this well-established theoretical tradition, the study offers a theoretically grounded and contextually sensitive contribution to research on first-year university transitions.

Method

This research adopted a descriptive case study design to investigate the academic challenges faced by English-major freshmen in the first year. A case study was adopted because this research focuses on a particular group in a real-life setting and tries to explore their experiences in depth. A descriptive case study is applicable for this study, as this study does not test a theory or seek cause-and-effect relationships. The approach of descriptive case study research helps the researchers focus on "what is happening" in a situation, based on the real stories and experiences shared by the participants. According to Creswell (2009), case study research is used to explore an issue through one or more cases within a bounded system, allowing the researcher to collect in-depth information and understand the situation thoroughly. Furthermore, according to Yin (2018), a case study is suitable when it focuses on current proceedings in a real-life setting, and the researchers have little control over the events. This research emphasizes capturing the participants' voices as they navigate the academic demands of their early university life.

The study was conducted at an English Education Department of a university located in an urban area in Indonesia, which provides access to various academic resources, such as libraries, language laboratories, and digital platforms. However, many first-year students still find it difficult to adjust to university-level coursework. Therefore, this research context provided a relevant setting for exploring academic challenges among English-major freshmen.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling with random selection. It is a method of selecting participants based on their ease of access and their availability to contribute to the study (Etikan, 2016). The participants were selected through the following considerations. They were: (1) enrolled as English-major freshmen, (2) currently completing or having recently completed the second semester, and (3) able to clearly communicate their academic experiences. A total of six participants initially agreed to join, but only five were finally interviewed due to scheduling issues. The recruitment process involved contacting a class leader, who shared the call for participation with eligible students. All participants gave their informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Researchers used semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect the data. The interview protocol covered academic expectations, learning challenges, time management, and adaptations to coursework lasted approximately 50 minutes. As Creswell (2018) stated, semi-structured interviews allow participants to freely express their experiences while still providing a clear structure to guide the conversation. The interviews were conducted between May 7 and 8, 2025, and all sessions were audio recorded with participants' permission. Then, the TurboScribe online platform was used to transcribe the data, followed by manual editing to ensure accuracy. To analyse the data, the study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) Familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. An inductive approach was used to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data without applying a predefined coding structure. Even though Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration guided the overall conceptual framework, it was not used during the coding stage. Instead, the theory is applied at the discussion stage to help interpret the findings, especially related to students' academic integration.

The study met ethical research standards involving human subjects. All participants obtained consent forms for inclusion before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the process.

Findings and Discussion

The Result of Thematic Analysis

Based on thematic analysis of interview data through an inductive approach, three major themes emerged: *Academic and Language Challenges, Classroom Experience and Learning Environment, and Time and Task Management.* The detailed themes are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Recap the challenges faced by English-major freshmen

Themes	***Sub-Themes***
1. Academic and language challenges	• *Struggles with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary* • *Difficulty adjusting to university-level English* • *Overwhelmed by new academic expectations*
2. Classroom experience and learning environment	• *Unclear teaching styles and instructions* • *Limited interaction and passive learning* • *Barriers to online learning settings*
3. Time and task management	• *Difficulty managing overlapping deadlines and workload*

- *Balancing academic and organizational responsibilities*

Each theme will be elaborated in the following part.

1. Academic and Language Challenges

Participants consistently expressed struggles with basic language skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as difficulties adjusting to the expectations of university-level English learning.

Struggles with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary

Many students entered the program with weak foundations in grammar and limited vocabulary, resulting in ambiguous writing and speaking tasks. Pronunciation issues also affected their confidence in class. These problems made it difficult for them to follow lessons, complete assignments, and participate actively in the class discussion.

> *"Then my difficulty when I was here was pronunciation, because I was really stiff. I couldn't speak naturally. It was still shaky. Then the grammar too, I cried."* (Participant 1)

Foreign language learners often face difficulties in their language learning; in fact, they have made much effort to be fluent. Otherwise, a lack of language proficiency will affect other skills too.

> *"What was really burdensome was grammar from the beginning... I don't really follow grammar, so when I talk, I just blurt it out."* (Participant 4)

To address these problems, students responded by making extra efforts to study independently using online tools like Grammarly and Quillbot, seeking peer help, reviewing materials repeatedly, and preparing in advance with guidance from senior students.

> *"I studied. I was stealing a start little by little, asking seniors what the future material would be like."* (Participant 1)

Difficulty adjusting to university-level English

Students found university English much more advanced than what they encountered in high school. They were surprised by the speed, the amount of material, and the academic tone expected in class activities and assignments. The participants' educational background also affected how they experienced reality in college. Having a different academic background implied that they might have different educational experiences in school or even levels of intelligence. This shaped their expectations of university life.

> *"In high school, I feel smart, but when I go to college, I feel stupid... I don't think English in high school is like this."* (Participant 5)

> *"I was an active student and had achievements in an Islamic boarding school, but when I got here... I feel like I'm nothing. It was really shocking."* (Participant 2)

To adjust, students adopted a more ambitious attitude, practiced more, sought peer motivation, and embraced the academic culture of the English major. They pushed themselves to adapt by studying harder and accepting that they were in a new environment.

Overwhelmed By New Academic Expectations

Students reported stress due to frequent tasks, unfamiliar teaching styles, and a workload that exceeded their expectations. Some felt that they were not yet ready for the level of independence required at the university. Many still relied on school-style learning, which contradicts the independent study in college. Regarding presentation, they are required to use a full-English presentation. In fact, they are still unfamiliar with a full English-speaking class, which makes it stressful for the students.

> *"This 2nd semester with a lot of assignments, I got overwhelmed... a lot of new materials I didn't understand."* (Participant 5)
>
> *"Honestly, I personally am not very good at independent learning. Maybe it's just still from high school... I still want to be guided."* (Participant 5)
>
> *"If the presentation in the first semester was still allowed to mix with Indonesian, now in the second semester, it must use all English."* (Participant 3)

In response, they began preparing presentations more seriously, practiced English more often, and even created weekly "English Day" routines to increase their language exposure and to help them get used to speaking in English more regularly.

> *"We had an English Day. Since then, it was like wow.. it really improved."* (Participant 1)

2. Classroom Experience and Learning Environment

Students faced several classroom challenges, starting from unclear instructions to passive teaching methods and an ineffective online learning setup.

Unclear Teaching Styles and Instructions

Some lecturers used fast, even complicated language in their explanation that students could not follow. Others deliver the materials in a low voice, which makes the students understand. This created confusion during lectures and often left students unsure of what they must do.

> *"Sometimes there are lecturers who give assignment instructions that are not clear."* (Participant 1)
>
> *"There was a lecturer who explained it in a low voice...even though I sat in front, I couldn't hear it."* (Participant 5)

Students coped by clarifying instructions with peers or instructors, adjusting expectations, and engaging in self-study to solve the confusion.

"I fill my free time by reviewing materials." (Participant 3)

Limited Interaction and Passive Learning

Many participants mentioned that one-way teaching with minimal feedback reduced their engagement and confidence. They felt less motivated in these situations, and it was harder for them to stay focused or gain understanding. Students are willing to be active in the class if the learning method provides space for their involvement. So, the lecturers contribute to shaping students' experience in their schooling.

> *"This second semester... the lecturer says 'listen to me' while scrolling through the PowerPoint slides. I end up playing games in the back."* (Participant 4)
>
> *"I want to answer, but when I try, it's wrong again and again. Then I stop being active."* (Participant 4)

Though they are discouraged, students adapt by limiting their participation or seeking help outside the class.

Barriers to Online Learning Settings

Online learning created difficulties with concentration, technical problems, and an unfamiliar platform. The participants felt disconnected and distracted. Online learning also reduces interaction between the lecturers and students.

> *"If the lecturer isn't watching and we are off-cam, I do other things. I get distracted easily on Zoom.* (Participant 3)
>
> *"I was confused about how to use the platform at first. I didn't know what anything was for*. (Participant 1)

To overcome these barriers, students relied on friends to help explain missed lectures during the online class and gradually adapted to online platforms through trial and error.

3. Time and Task Management

Managing time effectively was a significant struggle for first-year students as they had new routines. They faced multiple deadlines and difficulties in coping with academic work and organizational activities. They encountered numerous deadlines and struggled to handle both their studies and organizational activities

Managing Overlapping Deadlines and Academic Load

The sudden increase in assignments caused stress, confusion, and even emotional breakdowns for some participants. Moreover, they felt pressured on the coincidental due assignments. The unexpected increase in assignments created stress, confusion, and emotional struggles for some participants.

> *"There were 5 midterm exams in all. The deadlines were the same next week. I cried."* (Participant 1)

> *"How come there are so many assignments? Yesterday, there was only one assignment, now there are four."* (Participant 5)

To handle the pressure, students managed their workload by breaking tasks from easiest to hardest, and creating to-do lists to track the deadlines.

> *"I look at the tasks again, which one can be done easiest first. Then I do it bit by bit."* (Participant 5)

Balancing Academic and Organizational Responsibilities

Some participants were active in student organizations and found it difficult to balance and allocate time between their academic demands and their organization's responsibilities. This led to increased stress and time conflicts.

> *"I was under pressure with assignments and involved in two organizations... it was difficult to divide my time*. (Participant 1)

Students coped by prioritizing the task, restructuring their daily schedules, and sometimes reducing involvement in other activities to focus on studies. This adjustment was crucial for staying on track academically.

The findings of this study show that English-major freshman face a variety of academic challenges during their first year in university. These challenges are influenced by their transition from high school to a new educational environment that demands greater independence, stronger language proficiency, and higher levels of academic performance. Many students struggled with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which led to confidence in both writing and speaking. This situation aligns with previous studies by Afshar and Asakereh (2016) and Hang et al. (2023), who also found that EFL freshmen often encounter difficulties with productive language skills and experience anxiety due to performance pressure. They also experienced feelings of insecurity and shock when realizing that the expectations were higher than they anticipated.

In addition to language-related issues, students also faced difficulties in understanding teaching styles, unclear instructions, and passive classroom methods. The unfamiliarity with university-level English instruction and the academic pace left many students feeling unprepared. These conditions often made them feel lost or disengaged. Online learning added another layer of difficulty, especially with poor internet access and unfamiliarity with digital learning platforms. Online learning also reduces the learning interaction between instructors and students. As Ilham (2023) stated, even though online platforms provide communication tools, they may not be as beneficial for spontaneous interactions and the informal social connections that often develop in traditional classrooms. Despite these challenges, students resorted to various coping strategies such as self-study, asking peers for help, using online tools, preparing more thoroughly for assignments, and gradually adjusting their expectations.

Time and task management also appeared as a major issue. Participants frequently reported being overwhelmed by overlapping deadlines and frequent tasks. Similar to studies by Cameron and Rideout (2022) and Akhtar and Akhtar (2024), this research confirms that freshmen often need additional support to adapt to university workloads and develop self-regulated learning habits. Those involved in organizations found it

particularly difficult to balance academic responsibilities and organizational commitments. These results align with Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration, highlighting that academic success and retention are strongly related to how well students adapt to educational demands. When students feel that they cannot keep up, it affects their confidence, engagement, and sense of belonging. When students are academically integrated, persist, and perform well in higher education, they can meet learning demands and feel supported in doing so, they are more educated. This study emphasizes the importance of academic support systems, especially in the early stages of university, language proficiency development assistance, time, and classroom engagement.

Conclusion

Having investigated the academic challenges faced by English-major freshmen during their first year of university, how they managed those challenges, and the ways they overcame difficulties, the findings revealed three prominent problem areas, including academic and language barriers, classroom and learning environment concerns, and time and task management struggles. These three challenges illustrate the complexities of academic adjustment that participants experience as they enter higher education. Despite obstacles, the participants demonstrated resilience by employing various coping strategies in improving their study habits, seeking help from peers, using digital learning tools, and developing better time management skills. Although the research focused solely on academic issues and involved a limited group of participants, its contribution to a profound understanding of how first-year English students manage their academic transition is appreciated. The research highlighted the need for academic support and university approaches to help students' success.

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