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Factors Associated with English Language Learning Difficulties among Students at Somali National University, Somali

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Abstract

English proficiency is essential for academic achievement and professional advancement; however, many university students in Somalia continue to experience challenges in English language acquisition. This study examined factors associated with English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University, Somalia. A quantitative cross-sectional analytical design was employed among 454 students recruited from 12 faculties using a faculty-based quota sampling approach. Data were collected electronically using KoboToolbox and analyzed using Stata. Logistic regression analysis was conducted to assess associations between demographic characteristics, academic background, English exposure, and reported learning difficulties. The findings showed that students experienced varying levels of English exposure and use across digital, academic, and interpersonal contexts. Significant associations were identified between English learning difficulties and selected age groups, faculty affiliation, and English exposure factors, including hearing English outside classes and watching English videos. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening English learning opportunities within university environments through improved exposure and supportive learning strategies.

1. Introduction

English has become the predominant language of academic communication, scientific knowledge dissemination, international collaboration, and professional advancement in higher education worldwide (Sharaf-Addin & Al-Shehabi 2026; Tai & Zhao 2024). In countries where English is learned as a second or foreign language, university students face increasing pressure to develop English proficiency, as institutions adopt English-medium instruction (EMI) policies that require students to communicate in English both inside and outside the classroom (Islam & Stapa 2021). English competence functions as a gatekeeper for academic achievement and future career opportunities, with reading and writing proficiency playing a particularly decisive role in students' academic success (Luan et al. 2024; Gabow & Mohamud 2026) .

Despite the recognized importance of English, many university students experience persistent difficulties in developing adequate proficiency. Students at EMI universities identify writing and speaking as the most challenging language skills (Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose 2021), with common difficulties including limited speaking ability, pronunciation problems, inadequate vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and poor listening comprehension (Ghafar & Amin 2022; Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Many students also report lack of confidence, limited classroom participation, and difficulty using English for academic purposes (Xuan Mai, Ngoc & Thao 2024; Ghafar & Amin 2022). These challenges persist even among students who have studied English for multiple years, suggesting that prolonged formal instruction alone does not guarantee proficiency (Umar 2021) .

In Somalia, these challenges are particularly significant because English occupies a central position in higher education despite students’ limited opportunities for authentic English exposure outside academic settings. Somali university students often learn English in multilingual environments where

Somali and Arabic remain dominant languages in daily communication, creating additional linguistic challenges for English acquisition (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025; Islam & Stapa 2021) .

Language learning difficulties are shaped by interconnected factors rather than any single cause. Individual characteristics such as motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy interact with linguistic background, instructional practices, learning environment, and exposure to English to determine the severity of challenges students face (Sahan, Kamaşak & Rose 2023; Umar 2021). Understanding these multiple determinants is essential for designing effective interventions and improving English language education in higher education contexts (Taye & Mengesha 2024; Aldayel, Pravitasari & Fadillah 2026) .

Despite growing research on English language learning difficulties in different EFL contexts, empirical evidence from Somalia remains limited. Existing studies among Somali learners have mainly focused on specific language skills, such as speaking, listening, or academic performance, while limited attention has been given to the broader determinants of English learning difficulties among university students. Furthermore, little is known about how demographic characteristics, academic background, and English exposure factors jointly influence students' experiences of language learning challenges. Addressing this gap is important because Somali universities increasingly rely on English as a medium of instruction, yet evidence-based strategies for supporting students with language difficulties remain insufficient (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025; Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose 2021) .

In Somalia and other EFL contexts, the importance of English is particularly evident because universities increasingly depend on English for academic instruction, access to scientific knowledge, and professional preparation. However, many students enter higher education with insufficient English proficiency, creating barriers to effective learning and academic achievement. (Sharaf-Addin & Al-Shehabi 2026). The global expansion of EMI programs has made English proficiency a prerequisite for academic success across disciplines, as all instructional materials and course books are typically published in English (Kamaşak & Sahan 2024; Luan et al. 2024). Students who lack adequate English competence face significant barriers to academic achievement, as reading and writing skills have emerged as the strongest predictors of academic performance among EFL learners (Gabow & Mohamud 2026; Kamaşak & Sahan 2024) .

In EFL contexts, university students encounter difficulties across all four language skills. Writing is widely regarded as the most challenging skill for second language learners, requiring complex cognitive processes and mastery of academic conventions (Luan et al. 2024; Aldayel, Pravitasari & Fadillah 2026). Speaking difficulties stem from inhibition, fear of making errors, and insufficient vocabulary (Ghafar & Amin 2022), while listening comprehension is impeded by unfamiliar accents, fast speech rates, and vocabulary unfamiliarity (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). These challenges are compounded by limited classroom participation and lack of confidence, which further restrict opportunities for authentic language practice (Xuan Mai, Ngoc & Thao 2024; Rajendran et al. 2024) .

The determinants of these learning difficulties span multiple dimensions. Student-related factors include low motivation, anxiety, and inadequate practice (Rajendran et al. 2024; Pratiwi & Ika Sunardi 2024),

while teacher-related factors encompass traditional teaching methods, poor English proficiency among instructors, and inadequate classroom management (Rajendran et al. 2024; Islam & Stapa 2021). Environmental factors such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and lack of internet access further constrain language learning opportunities (Rajendran et al. 2024). Because these determinants operate interactively, understanding their combined effects is essential for improving English language education (Luan et al. 2024; Sahan, Kamaşak & Rose 2023) .

Students' English learning difficulties may also vary according to individual and academic characteristics, including previous educational experiences, academic discipline, opportunities for English practice, and engagement with English learning resources. Previous studies suggest that students with greater exposure to English through reading, digital platforms, and academic activities tend to develop stronger language abilities because they receive more opportunities for language input and practice. However, evidence regarding these relationships among Somali university students remains limited (Peters et al. 2019; Lee & Dressman 2018) .

First language background significantly shapes the nature and severity of English learning difficulties. Students from different L1 backgrounds report significantly different levels of linguistic challenges, with difficulties varying by academic discipline, L1 background, and prior EMI experience (Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose 2021; Shepard & Rose 2023). Vocabulary limitations and pronunciation challenges are among the most commonly reported linguistic barriers across EFL contexts (Rajendran et al. 2024; Zhangli et al. 2025), with mother tongue interference further complicating English speaking and writing development (Ghafar & Amin 2022; Islam & Stapa 2021). In Somalia specifically, the linguistic environment is complex: Somali is the official language, Arabic holds religious and cultural significance, and English serves as the predominant medium of instruction in higher education (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Somali students begin acquiring formal English relatively late and receive minimal external exposure, making listening comprehension particularly challenging (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Previous English learning experiences also contribute to differential difficulty levels, as students without solid foundational skills from elementary and secondary education face greater burdens at the university level (Pratiwi & Ika Sunardi 2024; Sharaf-Addin & Al-Shehabi 2026) .

Classroom conditions and instructional practices significantly contribute to English learning difficulties. Traditional teacher-centered methods, inadequate teacher English proficiency, and poor classroom management restrict students' opportunities for meaningful language practice (Rajendran et al. 2024; Islam & Stapa 2021). Large class sizes reduce opportunities for personalized instruction and corrective feedback, with teachers often assigning writing as homework due to the prohibitive effort of editing large volumes of student work (Luan et al. 2024). Insufficient and ineffective course materials, along with limited student-centered learning opportunities, further impede language development (Rajendran et al. 2024; Ghafar & Amin 2022). In Somali higher education, instruction is predominantly conventional and lecture-based, with limited integration of interactive elements or multimedia tools (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Teacher professional development has been identified as a necessary response to these instructional deficiencies (Xuan Mai, Ngoc & Thao 2024; Islam & Stapa 2021).

The learning environment outside the classroom plays a critical role in English language development. Limited exposure to English in everyday situations, restricted mobility, and inadequate access to resources constrain language learning opportunities (Sharaf-Addin & Al-Shehabi 2026). Lack of internet access and absence of model audio-visual materials further restrict students' ability to practice English independently (Rajendran et al. 2024). The university language environment, including the extent to which English is used and promoted on campus, influences students' engagement with the language (Islam & Stapa 2021; Kamaşak & Sahan 2024). Social support, including peer networks and opportunities for authentic communication, affects language learning outcomes, as students who participate in social activities requiring English demonstrate enhanced speaking competence (Tai & Zhao 2024; Pratiwi & Ika Sunardi 2024). Environmental factors such as limited opportunities for academic discourse with peers and lecturers have a measurable, though lesser, impact on students' engagement with academic language tasks (Aldayel, Pravitasari & Fadillah 2026) .

Despite the growing body of research on English language learning in higher education, significant gaps remain. Previous studies have predominantly examined individual language skills—such as writing (Taye & Mengesha 2024), speaking (Rajendran et al. 2024), or listening rather than comprehensively investigating the multiple determinants of English learning difficulties simultaneously (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Most empirical evidence derives from Asian and Western EFL contexts, including Turkey, Bangladesh, Iraq, Indonesia, Yemen, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, creating a limited understanding of African higher education settings (Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose 2021; Ghafar & Amin 2022; Shepard & Rose 2023). African research has emphasized insufficient audio resources, overcrowded classrooms, and teacher-centered approaches, yet comprehensive multi-determinant studies remain scarce. Somalia is particularly underrepresented in English language education research. Existing Somali studies have examined specific skills such as listening comprehension at SIMAD University and English language skills among Somali students in Ugandan preparatory programs, but have not sufficiently investigated multiple determinants of learning difficulties simultaneously among university students (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). There is no empirical evidence from Somali National University regarding the individual, linguistic, instructional, and environmental factors associated with students' English language learning difficulties.

Somali National University, as the oldest and largest public university in Somalia, represents an important setting for understanding English learning challenges in Somali higher education. The university serves students from diverse linguistic backgrounds who navigate a multilingual environment in which Somali, Arabic, and English coexist, and where English functions as the primary medium of academic instruction (Mohamud, Gabow & Abdi 2025). Therefore, this study aims to identify the factors Associated with English Language Learning Difficulties among Students at Somali National University, Somalia.

By investigating individual, linguistic, instructional, and environmental factors simultaneously, this study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from an underrepresented Somali university context, identifying key factors associated with English learning difficulties, informing English curriculum

development, and supporting evidence-based teaching strategies and student interventions (Aldayel, Pravitasari & Fadillah 2026; Kamaşak & Sahan 2024). Although English learning difficulties are influenced by multiple individual, instructional, and environmental factors, the present study specifically focuses on demographic characteristics, academic background, and English exposure-related factors that could be measured among university students.The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the individual, linguistic, instructional, and environmental determinants of English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University? (2) To what extent do these determinants predict students' English language learning difficulties? (3) Are there significant differences in English learning difficulties across demographic groups based on gender, academic discipline, and year of study?

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the determinants of English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University, Somalia. Specifically, the study investigated whether demographic characteristics, academic faculty, and English exposure factors were associated with students' reported English learning difficulties. By identifying the factors contributing to these challenges, the study seeks to provide evidence that can support targeted interventions and improve English language learning outcomes in Somali higher education institutions.

1. Methodology

2.1 Sample size determination and sampling procedure

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional analytical design to examine the determinants of English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University, Somalia. A cross-sectional design was selected because data were collected from participants at a single point in time to assess associations between students' demographic characteristics, English exposure factors, and reported learning difficulties.

The study employed a faculty-based quota sampling approach to ensure representation of students from different academic disciplines at Somali National University. The university consists of 12 faculties, each representing distinct academic fields and student populations. Including participants from all faculties was considered important to capture diverse perspectives and enhance the institutional coverage of the study.

Prior to data collection, the researcher reviewed the university structure and identified the 12 faculties as the main sampling units. However, an updated and complete distribution of the student population by faculty was not available at the time of the study. Consequently, proportional allocation according to faculty size could not be conducted. Instead, a balanced quota sampling strategy was applied, whereby approximately equal numbers of respondents were recruited from each faculty. The number of respondents obtained from individual faculties ranged from 36 to 42 participants. This approach ensured that all faculties contributed respondents to the study and this approach ensured that all

faculties contributed respondents and provided broad coverage of different academic disciplines within the university context.

1.1. Data collection procedures

Data were collected electronically using KoboToolbox, a digital data collection platform that supports efficient survey administration, data management, and quality control. The questionnaire was distributed among students from the 12 faculties of Somali National University. The use of KoboToolbox facilitated standardized data collection, minimized potential errors associated with manual data entry, and enabled systematic organization of responses for subsequent analysis.

1.2. Data management and statistical analysis

A total of 454 completed questionnaires were collected and included in the final analysis. The required sample size was determined based on the expected statistical requirements for multivariable analysis. The final sample of 454 respondents exceeded the minimum recommended sample size, providing sufficient statistical power for estimating associations between explanatory variables and English learning difficulties. The collected data were exported from KoboToolbox, cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Stata statistical software. Data preparation procedures included checking completeness, identifying missing values, verifying consistency, and preparing variables for statistical analysis. Stata was used for descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to examine the study variables and evaluate the proposed relationships among the variables. The use of Stata supported systematic data management and ensured transparent and reproducible statistical analysis.

1.3. Study area and population

The inclusion of respondents from all 12 faculties increased the diversity of the sample by incorporating students from different academic disciplines and educational backgrounds. Although faculty-level population estimates were unavailable to enable proportional sampling, the balanced faculty representation improved coverage of different academic disciplines within the university context.

1.4. Variables and measurements

The outcome variable was English language learning difficulties, measured using questionnaire items assessing students' reported challenges in English language acquisition. Independent variables included sociodemographic characteristics and English exposure-related factors, including age, sex, faculty affiliation, English reading practices, and online English use.

The questionnaire items were measured using a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. This response format was selected because the study aimed to assess the frequency with which students experience English language learning difficulties and related learning factors. Frequency-based Likert scales are appropriate for measuring the occurrence of behaviours, experiences, and educational phenomena because they allow respondents to indicate how often a particular situation or activity occurs (Boateng et al. 2018). The measurement items were adapted from relevant previous

studies to ensure theoretical consistency and alignment with established research on language learning difficulties and factors influencing English language learning outcomes (Boateng et al. 2018).

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in English language education and research methodology to ensure content validity and clarity of the measurement items. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha in Stata, with values of ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable for research purposes (Boateng et al. 2018) .

2. Results

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants (N = 454)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age group	18–22	247	54.41
	23–27	118	25.99
	28–32	19	4.19
	33–37	22	4.85
	38+	48	10.57
Sex	Male	257	56.61
	Female	197	43.39
Faculty	Faculty of Agriculture	36	7.93
	Faculty of Economics	37	8.15
	Faculty of Education	38	8.37
	Faculty of Engineering	39	8.59
	Faculty of Health Sciences	42	9.25
	Faculty of Languages	38	8.37
	Faculty of Law	38	8.37
	Faculty of Medicine & Surgery	37	8.15
	Faculty of Science	36	7.93
	Faculty of Sharia & Islamic Studies	37	8.15
	Faculty of Social Sciences	38	8.37
	Faculty of Veterinary Medicine & Animal Husbandry	38	8.37
Year of study	First Year	88	19.38
	Second Year	67	14.76
	Third Year	107	23.57
	Fourth Year	133	29.30
	Fifth Year	37	8.15
	Sixth Year or above	22	4.85

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Years studying English	Less than 1 year	122	26.87
	1–2 years	199	43.83
	3–4 years	72	15.86
	5–6 years	17	3.74
	7 + years	44	9.69
Total		**454**	**100.00**

As presented in Table 1, the study included 454 university students with diverse sociodemographic and academic characteristics. The majority of participants were young adults, with more than half aged 18–22 years (54.41%), followed by those aged 23–27 years (25.99%). Older age categories represented smaller proportions, including 38 years and above (10.57%), indicating that the sample primarily reflected the typical age distribution of undergraduate students. The sex distribution showed that males constituted 56.61% of participants, while females accounted for 43.39%. Participants were drawn from all faculties, with relatively equal representation across academic disciplines, providing representation across different academic disciplines. Regarding academic level, fourth-year students formed the largest group (29.30%), followed by third-year students (23.57%). English learning experience varied, with most students reporting 1–2 years of English study (43.83%), followed by less than one year (26.87%) (Table 1). Variation in learners' demographic and educational backgrounds is important because age, academic experience, and previous language exposure may influence motivation, engagement, and language learning achievement (Richardson, Abraham & Bond 2012; Dörnyei 2014) .

Table 2
Distribution of Responses to English Exposure Items (N = 454)

English Exposure Item	Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
English Hearing	Never	64	14.10
	Rarely	79	17.40
	Sometimes	212	46.70
	Often	49	10.79
	Always	50	11.01
English Videos	Never	15	3.30
	Rarely	23	5.07
	Sometimes	142	31.28
	Often	119	26.21
	Always	155	34.14
English Audio	Never	26	5.73
	Rarely	42	9.25
	Sometimes	185	40.75
	Often	87	19.16
	Always	114	25.11
English Reading	Never	27	5.95
	Rarely	59	13.00
	Sometimes	193	42.51
	Often	92	20.26
	Always	83	18.28
Online English	Never	44	9.69
	Rarely	48	10.57
	Sometimes	166	36.56
	Often	80	17.62
	Always	116	25.55

As presented in Table 2, students demonstrated different levels of exposure to English through hearing, videos, audio, reading, and online resources. English exposure through listening activities was moderate,

with 46.70% of participants reporting that they sometimes heard English, while only 21.80% reported often or always hearing English. In contrast, exposure through English videos was substantially higher, as 60.35% of students reported watching videos often or always. Similarly, English audio exposure showed that 44.27% of participants frequently engaged with audio materials (often/always). Reading exposure was also common, with 38.54% reporting often or always reading English materials. Online English exposure indicated that 43.17% of students frequently used online English resources. Students reported higher exposure to English through digital and multimedia sources compared with direct interpersonal exposure. These findings indicate that students reported greater exposure to English through digital and multimedia sources compared with direct interpersonal exposure, suggesting variation in the contexts through which students encounter English outside formal classroom settings.

Table 3
Distribution of English Use Items Among Participants (N = 454)

English Use Item	Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Peer Communication	Never	48	10.57
	Rarely	87	19.16
	Sometimes	199	43.83
	Often	63	13.88
	Always	57	12.56
External Communication	Never	96	21.15
	Rarely	125	27.53
	Sometimes	170	37.44
	Often	36	7.93
	Always	27	5.95
English Writing	Never	54	11.89
	Rarely	69	15.20
	Sometimes	203	44.71
	Often	73	16.08
	Always	55	12.11
Online Searching	Never	25	5.51
	Rarely	24	5.29
	Sometimes	102	22.47
	Often	118	25.99
	Always	185	40.75
Academic Use	Never	34	7.49
	Rarely	43	9.47
	Sometimes	158	34.80
	Often	86	18.94
	Always	133	29.30

Note: Values are presented as frequency (n) and percentage (%). Percentages are calculated separately for each item and sum to 100%.

As presented in Table 3, participants demonstrated varying patterns of English use across interpersonal, academic, and digital contexts. For peer communication, the majority of students reported using English sometimes (43.83%), while 26.44% reported using English often or always, suggesting moderate engagement in English conversations with classmates. English use for external communication was comparatively limited, with most participants reporting sometimes (37.44%) or rarely (27.53%), whereas only 13.88% indicated frequent use (often/always). Regarding English writing, nearly half of the participants reported using English sometimes (44.71%), while 28.19% used English frequently. The highest level of English use was observed in online searching, where 66.74% of students reported often or always using English, followed by academic use, with 48.24% reporting frequent use. Overall, the findings indicate that students primarily use English for digital information access and academic activities rather than social communication.

Table 4

Bivariate logistic regression analysis of factors associated with English difficulty among university students

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
Age	18–22 (Ref)	118	129	1.00	–
	23–27	69	49	0.65 (0.42–1.01)	0.056
	28–32	14	5	0.33 (0.11–0.93)	0.037*
	33–37	8	14	1.60 (0.65–3.95)	0.308
	38+	16	32	1.83 (0.96–3.50)	0.069
Sex	Male (Ref)	130	127	1.00	–
	Female	95	102	1.10 (0.76–1.59)	0.618
Faculty	Agriculture (Ref)	17	19	1.00	–
	Economics	27	10	0.33 (0.12–0.88)	0.027*
	Education	14	24	1.53 (0.61–3.88)	0.367
	Engineering	18	21	1.04 (0.42–2.59)	0.926
	Health Sciences	20	22	0.98 (0.40–2.40)	0.972
	Languages	17	21	1.11 (0.44–2.76)	0.830
	Law	17	21	1.11 (0.44–2.76)	0.830
	Medicine & Surgery	21	16	0.68 (0.27–1.72)	0.416

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
	Science	15	21	1.25 (0.49–3.18)	0.635
	Sharia & Islamic Studies	27	10	0.33 (0.12–0.88)	0.027*
	Social Sciences	14	24	1.53 (0.61–3.88)	0.367
	Veterinary Medicine	18	20	0.99 (0.40–2.48)	0.990
Study year	First Year (Ref)	42	46	1.00	–
	Second Year	28	39	1.27 (0.67–2.41)	0.462
	Third Year	53	54	0.93 (0.53–1.64)	0.802
	Fourth Year	75	58	0.71 (0.41–1.21)	0.207
	Fifth Year	17	20	1.07 (0.50–2.32)	0.856
	Sixth Year or above	10	12	1.10 (0.43–2.80)	0.849
English learning years	< 1 year (Ref)	60	62	1.00	–
	1–2 years	98	101	1.00 (0.64–1.57)	0.991
	3–4 years	36	36	0.97 (0.54–1.73)	0.912
	5–6 years	8	9	1.09 (0.39–3.01)	0.870
	7 + years	23	21	0.88 (0.44–1.76)	0.725

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
English exposure factors					
Hearing English Outside Classes	Never (Ref)	21	43	1.00	–
	Rarely	36	43	0.58 (0.29–1.16)	0.123
	Sometimes	120	92	0.37 (0.21–0.67)	0.001**
	Often	25	24	0.47 (0.22–1.01)	0.052
	Always	23	27	0.57 (0.27–1.23)	0.153
Watching English Videos	Never (Ref)	3	12	1.00	–
	Rarely	6	17	0.71 (0.15–3.41)	0.667
	Sometimes	58	84	0.36 (0.10–1.34)	0.128
	Often	74	45	0.15 (0.04–0.57)	0.005**
	Always	84	71	0.21 (0.06–0.78)	0.019*
English Audio/Podcasts	Never (Ref)	9	17	1.00	–
	Rarely	15	27	0.95 (0.34–2.66)	0.927
	Sometimes	92	93	0.54 (0.23–1.26)	0.153
	Often	53	34	0.34 (0.14–0.85)	0.021*

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
	Always	56	58	0.55 (0.23–1.33)	0.184
Reading English Materials	Never (Ref)	4	23	1.00	–
	Rarely	34	25	0.13 (0.04–0.42)	0.001**
	Sometimes	105	88	0.15 (0.05–0.44)	0.001**
	Often	39	53	0.24 (0.08–0.74)	0.013*
	Always	43	40	0.16 (0.05–0.51)	0.002**
English Websites/Social Media	Never (Ref)	14	30	1.00	–
	Rarely	26	22	0.39 (0.17–0.93)	0.032*
	Sometimes	76	90	0.55 (0.27–1.12)	0.099
	Often	48	32	0.31 (0.14–0.68)	0.003**
	Always	61	55	0.42 (0.20–0.87)	0.020*
English use factors					
Speaking with Classmates/Friends	Never (Ref)	13	35	1.00	–
	Rarely	48	39	0.30 (0.14–0.65)	0.002**
	Sometimes	105	94	0.33 (0.17–0.67)	0.002**

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
	Often	30	33	0.41 (0.18–0.91)	0.030*
	Always	29	28	0.36 (0.16–0.82)	0.014*
Outside Classroom Communication	Never (Ref)	37	59	1.00	–
	Rarely	68	57	0.53 (0.31–0.90)	0.020*
	Sometimes	91	79	0.54 (0.33–0.91)	0.019*
	Often	17	19	0.70 (0.32–1.52)	0.367
	Always	12	15	0.78 (0.33–1.86)	0.580
Writing Messages/Posts	Never (Ref)	20	34	1.00	–
	Rarely	34	35	0.61 (0.29–1.25)	0.176
	Sometimes	100	103	0.61 (0.33–1.12)	0.111
	Often	40	33	0.49 (0.24–1.00)	0.049*
	Always	31	24	0.46 (0.21–0.98)	0.045*
Online Information Search	Never (Ref)	4	21	1.00	–
	Rarely	9	15	0.32 (0.08–1.23)	0.096
	Sometimes	46	56	0.23 (0.07–0.72)	0.012*

Variable	Category	No English Difficulty	English Difficulty	OR (95% CI)	P-value
	Often	64	54	0.16 (0.05–0.50)	0.002**
	Always	102	83	0.15 (0.05–0.47)	0.001**
Academic English Activities	Never (Ref)	12	22	1.00	–
	Rarely	19	24	0.69 (0.27–1.74)	0.430
	Sometimes	71	87	0.67 (0.31–1.44)	0.305
	Often	49	37	0.41 (0.18–0.94)	0.035*
	Always	74	59	0.43 (0.20–0.95)	0.037*

As presented in Table 4, bivariate logistic regression analysis identified factors associated with English difficulty among university students. Age and faculty were significantly related to English difficulty; students aged 28–32 years had lower odds of difficulty compared with those aged 18–22 years (OR = 0.33, 95% CI: 0.11–0.93, p = 0.037), while students from the Faculty of Economics and Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies also showed reduced odds (OR = 0.33, 95% CI: 0.12–0.88, p = 0.027). English exposure and use factors demonstrated protective associations. Students who frequently engaged with English videos, reading materials, online resources, and academic English activities were less likely to report English difficulty. Similarly, regular English communication with classmates was associated with reduced difficulty. These findings suggest that increased exposure to authentic English input and active language use in academic and digital environments may enhance students' language competence and reduce learning barriers (Peters et al. 2019) .

In the bivariate logistic regression analysis, several factors showed significant associations with English learning difficulties. Age group 28–32 years was associated with lower odds of reporting English difficulty compared with students aged 18–22 years (OR = 0.33, 95% CI: 0.11–0.93, p = 0.037). Significant differences were also observed across some faculties, including Economics and Sharia & Islamic Studies compared with Agriculture. Among English exposure factors, students who reported sometimes hearing English outside classes and those who often or always watched English videos showed lower

odds of English difficulty compared with students reporting no exposure. Other demographic and academic characteristics did not show statistically significant associations.

Table 5
Multivariable logistic regression analysis of factors associated with English learning difficulty among university students

Variable	Category	AOR	95% CI	P-value
Age	18–22 years	Reference	–	–
	23–27 years	0.70	0.37–1.31	0.262
	28–32 years	0.15	0.04–0.59	0.006
	33–37 years	1.09	0.35–3.42	0.880
	38 + years	1.84	0.85–4.00	0.122
Sex	Male	Reference	–	–
	Female	1.67	1.01–2.75	0.044
Faculty	Reference faculty	Reference	–	–
	Faculty of Economics	0.29	0.08–1.02	0.053
	Faculty of Education	1.69	0.50–5.66	0.396
	Faculty of Engineering	0.88	0.28–2.75	0.822
	Faculty of Health Sciences	1.19	0.40–3.58	0.757
	Faculty of Languages	0.93	0.31–2.80	0.897
	Faculty of Law	1.11	0.37–3.29	0.855
	Faculty of Medicine & Surgery	0.67	0.21–2.16	0.503
	Faculty of Science	1.64	0.54–4.96	0.379
	Faculty of Sharia & Islamic Studies	0.18	0.05–0.66	0.010
	Faculty of Social Sciences	1.05	0.34–3.23	0.927

Variable	Category	AOR	95% CI	P-value
	Faculty of Veterinary Medicine & Animal Husbandry	0.75	0.24–2.30	0.612
Study year	First Year	Reference	–	–
	Second Year	1.89	0.78–4.60	0.160
	Third Year	1.33	0.57–3.11	0.513
	Fourth Year	0.88	0.39–1.98	0.756
	Fifth Year	0.90	0.28–2.85	0.856
	Sixth Year or above	2.47	0.65–9.30	0.182
Years learning English	Less than 1 year	Reference	–	–
	1–2 years	1.14	0.60–2.18	0.682
	3–4 years	1.45	0.62–3.40	0.393
	5–6 years	1.06	0.28–4.09	0.930
	7 + years	1.10	0.41–2.95	0.846
English Hearing	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	0.93	0.37–2.32	0.882
	Sometimes	0.45	0.20–1.03	0.060
	Often	0.95	0.34–2.65	0.922
	Always	1.31	0.47–3.68	0.608
English Videos	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	3.12	0.39–25.06	0.285

Variable	Category	AOR	95% CI	P-value
	Sometimes	1.36	0.21–8.76	0.746
	Often	0.52	0.08–3.46	0.499
	Always	0.63	0.09–4.20	0.635
English Audio	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	1.57	0.33–7.55	0.572
	Sometimes	1.62	0.40–6.64	0.501
	Often	1.29	0.29–5.80	0.737
	Always	2.67	0.57–12.56	0.214
English Reading	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	0.17	0.03–0.99	0.049
	Sometimes	0.21	0.04–1.21	0.081
	Often	0.39	0.06–2.41	0.314
	Always	0.24	0.04–1.51	0.128
Online English	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	0.22	0.06–0.78	0.019
	Sometimes	0.55	0.19–1.62	0.278
	Often	0.22	0.07–0.70	0.011
	Always	0.35	0.11–1.11	0.073
Peer Communication	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	0.78	0.24–2.51	0.681

Variable	Category	AOR	95% CI	P-value
	Sometimes	0.59	0.19–1.83	0.362
	Often	0.54	0.15–1.91	0.341
	Always	0.59	0.15–2.32	0.448
External Communication	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	0.68	0.31–1.51	0.346
	Sometimes	0.67	0.30–1.54	0.350
	Often	1.01	0.31–3.30	0.983
	Always	0.87	0.24–3.22	0.838
English Writing	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	1.05	0.39–2.82	0.927
	Sometimes	1.69	0.69–4.16	0.252
	Often	1.73	0.62–4.83	0.295
	Always	1.31	0.44–3.93	0.629
Online Searching	Never	Reference	–	–
	Rarely	1.09	0.16–7.37	0.928
	Sometimes	0.38	0.09–1.71	0.210
	Often	0.29	0.06–1.33	0.112
	Always	0.23	0.05–1.07	0.061
Academic Use	Never	Reference	–	–

Variable	Category	AOR	95% CI	P-value
	Rarely	1.34	0.36–5.03	0.667
	Sometimes	2.07	0.66–6.45	0.211
	Often	1.37	0.40–4.70	0.612
	Always	1.64	0.47–5.70	0.435

Model summary

Number of observations = 454; LR $\chi^2(65) = 125.16$; $p < 0.001$; Pseudo $R^2=0.1989$.

As presented in Table 5, the multivariable logistic regression analysis identified several independent factors associated with English learning difficulty among university students. After adjustment for other covariates, age, sex, faculty, English reading, and online English use remained significant predictors. Compared with students aged 18–22 years, those aged 28–32 years had significantly lower odds of experiencing English learning difficulty (AOR = 0.15, 95% CI: 0.04–0.59, p = 0.006). Female students had higher odds of reporting English difficulty compared with male students (AOR = 1.67, 95% CI: 1.01–2.75, p = 0.044). Students from the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies were less likely to experience English difficulty compared with the reference faculty (AOR = 0.18, 95% CI: 0.05–0.66, p = 0.010). In relation to language exposure, reading English materials rarely was associated with reduced odds of difficulty (AOR = 0.17, 95% CI: 0.03–0.99, p = 0.049), while online English use was significantly associated with lower difficulty among students who used English online rarely (AOR = 0.22, 95% CI: 0.06–0.78, p = 0.019) and often (AOR = 0.22, 95% CI: 0.07–0.70, p = 0.011). The overall model was statistically significant (LR $\chi^2(65) = 125.16$, $p < 0.001$) with a pseudo R^2 of 0.1989, indicating that the selected predictors explained approximately 20% of the variation in English learning difficulty (Table 5). These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that frequent engagement with language input, literacy activities, and technology-mediated English learning environments can improve second-language development by increasing opportunities for practice and meaningful interaction (Kormos & Csizér 2014; Lee & Dressman 2018).

3. Discussion

This study examined the associated factors of English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University and identified several factors associated with students' reported challenges. The logistic regression analysis identified several factors significantly associated with students' reported English learning difficulties. The findings demonstrate that English learning challenges among university

students are associated with a combination of individual characteristics and opportunities for language engagement rather than by a single factor.

Gender was not significantly associated with English language learning difficulties in this study, suggesting that male and female students reported similar levels of English learning challenges within the university context. Similar differences have been reported in second-language learning research, where social expectations, confidence, classroom participation patterns, and access to language practice opportunities may shape learners' experiences differently across genders (MacIntyre et al., 2019). However, these differences should be interpreted within the specific sociocultural context of Somali higher education.

This association may indicate that older students differ in previous educational experiences, learning strategies, or patterns of English engagement compared with younger students. However, these mechanisms were not directly examined in this study. Students aged 28–32 years showed lower odds of experiencing difficulties compared with younger students. This finding may reflect differences in learning experience, maturity, motivation, and accumulated exposure to English. Previous research indicates that individual learner characteristics and previous language learning experiences influence second-language development, as learners develop different strategies and levels of confidence over time (Dörnyei & Ryan 2015).

The study found that English reading and online English use were associated with lower odds of reporting English learning difficulties. The findings further indicate that some forms of English exposure outside formal classroom settings were associated with lower levels of reported learning difficulties. Exposure through listening activities and English videos showed significant associations, suggesting that opportunities to encounter English through multimedia resources may contribute to students' language learning experiences (Lee & Dressman 2018; Peters et al. 2019). These findings highlight the importance of examining not only classroom learning but also informal contexts in which students interact with English. Students who engaged more frequently with English materials and online resources reported fewer challenges. Students who engaged with English materials and online English resources were less likely to experience language difficulties. This finding supports previous evidence that extensive exposure to authentic language input, digital resources, and self-directed learning opportunities contributes to vocabulary development, comprehension, and overall second-language proficiency (Lee & Dressman 2018). In contexts where opportunities for English communication outside the classroom may be limited, online platforms can provide valuable opportunities for independent practice and increased language exposure.

Differences across faculties were also observed, with students from the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies reporting lower odds of English learning difficulties compared with the reference faculty. These differences may reflect variations in academic environments, disciplinary demands, or patterns of English use among students from different faculties; however, these explanations require further

investigation. Similar research has shown that disciplinary contexts influence students' language demands and the types of English skills required for academic success (Kamaşak, Sahan & Rose 2021).

Overall, the findings highlight that improving English proficiency among Somali university students requires interventions that extend beyond classroom instruction. Universities should strengthen English reading opportunities, promote digital English learning resources, and provide targeted support for students who experience greater language challenges.

4. Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the identified factors and English language learning difficulties. Although significant associations were observed between demographic characteristics, English exposure factors, and learning difficulties, the temporal direction of these relationships cannot be confirmed. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be affected by recall bias and social desirability bias, as students may overestimate or underestimate their actual English learning experiences and behaviours. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting students' perceived English learning difficulties rather than objectively measured language proficiency.

Third, although the study included students from all 12 faculties of Somali National University, the use of a faculty-based quota sampling approach rather than proportional sampling may limit the extent to which findings can be generalized to the entire university population based on faculty size differences. The study adopted approximately equal numbers of respondents from each faculty because faculty-level population estimates were unavailable. Therefore, findings should be generalized cautiously beyond the university context. Fourth, the study focused on selected demographic and English exposure factors; therefore, other potentially important determinants, such as students' motivation, anxiety, previous educational experiences, teacher characteristics, classroom practices, and socioeconomic conditions, were beyond the scope of the present study and warrant investigation in future research.

Despite these limitations, the study has important strengths. It included students from all academic faculties, achieved an adequate sample size of 454 respondents, collected data systematically through KoboToolbox, and applied logistic regression analysis to identify independent factors associated with English learning difficulties. The findings provide valuable empirical evidence from a Somali higher education context, where quantitative evidence on English learning challenges remains limited.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, Somali National University should strengthen English language support programs that provide students with additional opportunities to improve reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Since English reading was identified as an important factor associated with learning difficulties, universities should promote extensive reading

activities, establish English resource centres, and encourage students to engage with academic materials in English.

Second, greater attention should be given to technology-supported English learning. The findings indicate that online English engagement is associated with support students' English learning experiences, highlighting the potential role of digital platforms, online courses, educational videos, and language-learning applications in expanding students' exposure to English. Universities should integrate digital language resources into English instruction and provide guidance on effective independent learning strategies.

Third, faculty-specific language support should be considered because students from different academic disciplines may experience different levels of English-related challenges. English support activities may consider disciplinary differences and students' specific academic language needs.

Finally, strengthening lecturers' professional development in student-centred English teaching approaches may provide additional support for improving students' opportunities to engage with English. A coordinated institutional strategy involving curriculum improvement, digital resources, and continuous language support is needed to reduce English learning difficulties and enhance students' academic success in Somali higher education.

6. Conclusion

This study provides important evidence regarding the determinants of English language learning difficulties among students at Somali National University, Somalia. The findings demonstrate that English learning challenges are associated with multiple interacting factors rather than a single educational or individual characteristic. The logistic regression analysis identified significant associations between English learning difficulties and selected demographic, academic, and English exposure-related factors.

The results particularly highlight the importance of English exposure and active engagement with language resources. Students who regularly interacted with English through reading and online environments reported lower odds of English learning difficulties, suggesting that opportunities for meaningful language practice beyond the classroom play an important role in language development. The findings also indicate that academic and demographic differences contribute to variation in students' English learning experiences.

Improving English proficiency in Somali higher education requires a comprehensive approach that combines classroom-based improvements with expanded opportunities for independent language practice. Universities should strengthen English reading initiatives, promote digital English learning resources, and develop supportive learning environments that encourage students to use English more frequently for academic and communicative purposes. Future research should adopt longitudinal

designs and examine additional psychological, instructional, and institutional factors to provide deeper understanding of how English learning difficulties develop over time.

Declarations

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Benaadir Research, Consultancy & Evaluation Centre (BRCE) Research Ethics Committee (Certificate No. BRCE/ETH/2026/026), dated February 25, 2026. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and relevant national and international guidelines.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to data collection. All participants in this study were adults aged 18 years or older. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

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Author Contribution

A.D.S. conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, conducted the data analysis, interpreted the findings, and wrote the main manuscript text. R.A.M., B.A.O., H.X., H.M.H., A.A.M., A.A.M.[1], A.A.M.[2], B.H.W., M.A.M., M.A.O., M.H.A., M.A.A., and Z.M.Y. contributed to the literature review, data collection, manuscript review, editing, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures

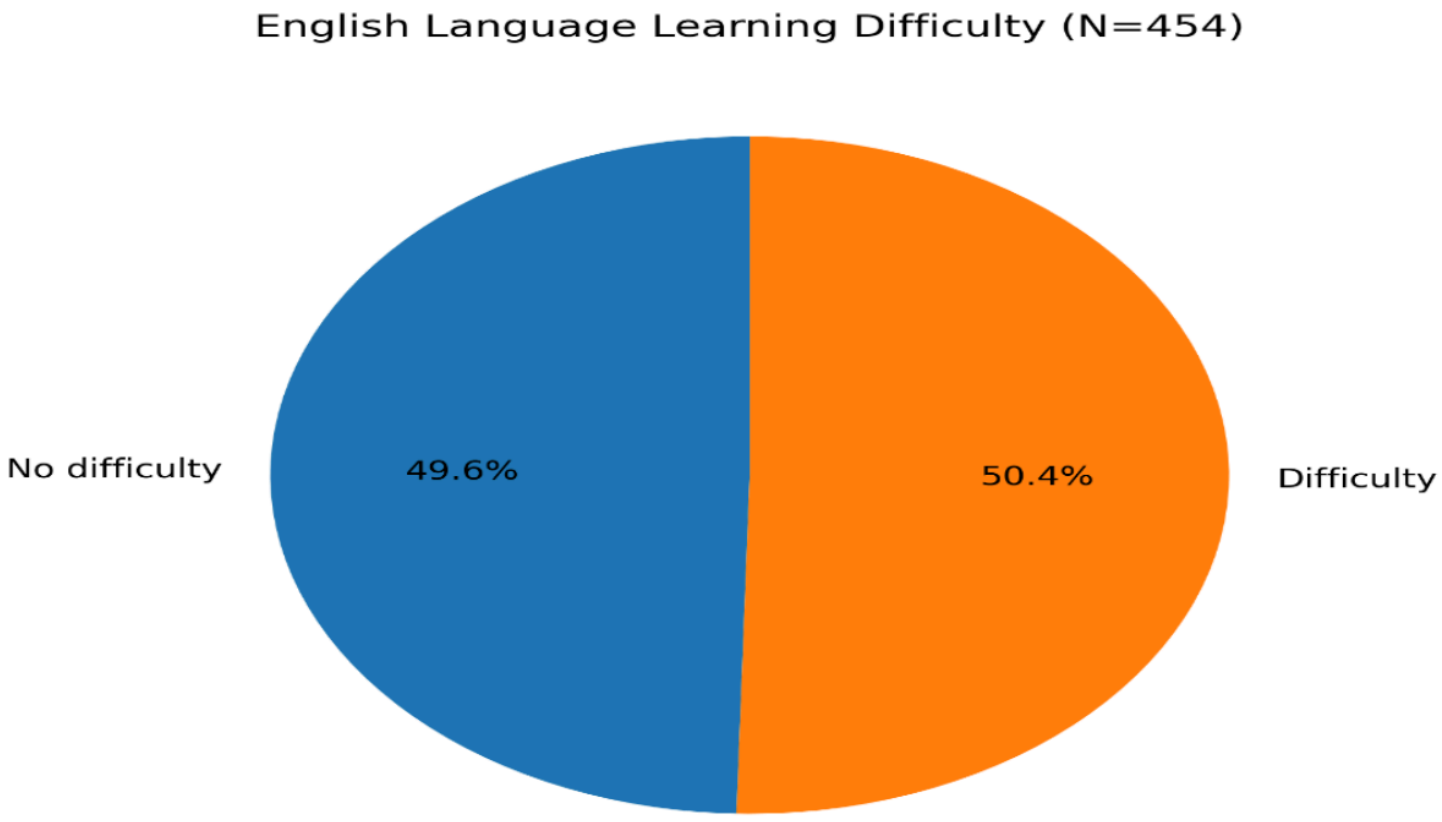


Figure 1

Unnumbered image in the 2. Results section.