International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Factors Influencing Cambodian University Students' Academic Major Choices: A Focus on English Language Education

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A B S T R A C T :

This study explores the complex factors influencing Cambodian university students' academic major choices, with a focus on English language education amid the country's evolving higher education landscape. Rooted in a qualitative, exploratory design using focus group discussions with first-year students, the research reveals that decisions are shaped by parental expectations, socio-cultural norms, students' self-confidence in English, career uncertainties, and peer influences. Despite recognizing English's growing importance for economic and social mobility, many students avoid English majors due to perceived difficulty, low self-efficacy, and limited career guidance, favoring fields deemed more practical like Business or Accounting. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions such as parental awareness campaigns, enhanced emotional and academic support, proactive career counseling, and flexible study pathways to better align student motivation with national development goals and encourage meaningful engagement with English studies. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between linguistic, social, and economic factors in shaping educational trajectories in Cambodia's higher education context.

Keywords: Academic major selection, English language education, Higher education in Cambodia, Parental expectations, Career guidance, Socio-cultural influences and Motivation in language learning

1. Introduction

Cambodia's educational development has evolved through a complex historical trajectory that continues to shape its higher education system today. Beginning with informal, prehistoric learning embedded in daily life and traditional skills, formal education emerged during the Nokor Phnom (Funan) period under strong Indian cultural influence. This era introduced Sanskrit, religious studies, and specialized knowledge, primarily through monastic schools serving royal and elite males. The Khmer Empire marked a pinnacle of formal education, with temple-based universities fostering advanced scholarship and intellectual growth. These institutions produced numerous doctoral scholars and lecturers, laying the foundation for elite education and contributing significantly to national human capital (Em, Khan, & Nun, 2023).

Following the empire's decline, education became more localized in Buddhist pagodas, emphasizing religious and practical instruction mainly for boys. The French colonial period introduced Western-style curricula and formal institutions, including universities, laying essential groundwork for Cambodia's modern higher education system. However, the 20th century—particularly the Khmer Rouge regime—devastated formal education by destroying institutions and decimating the educator population. Post-1979 recovery efforts faced numerous obstacles but gradually paved the way for a resurgence and reform of the sector, blending historical legacies with contemporary educational demands (Em, Khan, & Nun, 2023).

Despite this rich historical foundation, Cambodia's higher education system remains underdeveloped compared to its more advanced ASEAN neighbors. Governance, financing, and financial management structures are not yet sufficiently robust to deliver high-quality, relevant education aligned with societal and economic needs. The rapid proliferation of higher education institutions has occurred amid weak regulation, supervision, and support, resulting in a fragmented and reactive regulatory environment. The existing legal framework perpetuates inefficiencies, and development in the subsector is largely driven by distorted market forces rather than comprehensive policy guidance or strategic state intervention (Mak, Sok, & Un, 2019).

In today's globalized, knowledge-driven economy, higher education is increasingly recognized as vital for national development and active citizenship. While classical economics emphasized physical capital, experiences across East and Southeast Asia highlight knowledge—particularly that generated through well-aligned higher education systems—as equally crucial for economic growth. Cambodia's higher education sector, after severe setbacks during the Khmer Rouge era and a post-war focus on basic education, has expanded rapidly since the late 1990s, transitioning from elite to mass access. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist, including a mismatch between educational outputs and labor market demands. Enrollment in science, engineering, and agriculture—key sectors for economic development—remains insufficient, and concerns about education quality continue. In response, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has articulated a long-term vision aligned with Cambodia Vision 2030, aiming to build a high-quality, inclusive higher education system. This vision emphasizes equitable access, relevant curricula, improved teaching and research quality, and strengthened governance to better meet socio-economic and labor market needs (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite broad systemic efforts, significant challenges remain at the student level, particularly concerning English language education and academic major selection. Cambodian students experience a pronounced tension between global English norms—especially native-speaker ideals prevalent in international and ASEAN contexts—and their local linguistic realities. Many internalize these native-speaker norms while perceiving local varieties of English as less legitimate, which undermines their confidence, attitudes toward learning English, and willingness to pursue English as a major. This tension complicates how students relate to English and envision their academic and career futures.

Building on this, socio-cultural and economic influences further shape students' major choices. Parental and community expectations, cultural norms, and concerns about career opportunities often discourage students from choosing English, which is frequently seen as difficult and culturally distant. Instead, many opt for "safer," more traditional fields such as Business or Accounting. These attitudes reflect broader systemic issues, including insufficient career guidance and unclear professional pathways for English-related careers within the local labor market.

Educational and motivational barriers exacerbate these challenges. Structural constraints such as inadequate teaching resources, large class sizes, limited teacher quality, and low student motivation at both secondary and tertiary levels hinder effective English language acquisition. These factors contribute to students' reluctance to select English majors despite the increasing importance of English in global and regional contexts.

Moreover, there is a notable gap in understanding the decision-making processes students undergo before selecting their majors. Limited research explores the specific attitudes, motivations, and social influences shaping students' academic preferences prior to major declaration. Gaining deeper insight into these early decision-making dynamics is crucial for developing policies and interventions that effectively support students as they navigate the complex linguistic, social, and economic factors influencing their academic choices.

1.2 Research Objectives

To address these challenges, the study is guided by four main objectives:

- To explore the social and personal factors influencing students' academic major choices, including parental pressure, personal interests, and career aspirations.
- To examine students' perceptions of English difficulty and their self-efficacy in English learning as factors affecting their academic decisions.
- To investigate the role of unclear career goals and limited access to reliable career information in shaping students' major selection.
- To analyze the influence of family and friends on students' academic decisions and how these social relationships impact their educational choices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English as a Lingua Franca and World Englishes

Over recent decades, the global spread of English has generated new perspectives on its use and ownership, particularly through the frameworks of World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). These paradigms challenge the traditional notion that English is the exclusive domain of native speakers. Instead, they recognize the legitimacy of diverse English varieties shaped by local sociocultural contexts (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2009). This shift is especially relevant in expanding-circle countries such as Cambodia, where English functions as a foreign language yet increasingly plays a pivotal role in education, international communication, and socioeconomic mobility.

Kachru's (1985) World Englishes model categorizes English usage into three concentric circles: the Inner (native-speaking), Outer (second-language), and Expanding (foreign-language) circles. This model underscores that English has evolved beyond its Inner Circle origins, giving rise to multiple legitimate varieties influenced by cultural and contextual factors. Advocates of this framework argue that educational policies and classroom practices should validate local English varieties and prioritize communicative competence over strict adherence to native norms (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Bolton, 2012).

Similarly, the ELF perspective frames English as a practical tool for communication among speakers of different first languages. Unlike traditional models that emphasize grammatical precision and native-like fluency, ELF research highlights the adaptability, creativity, and intercultural nature of English use in global contexts (Seidlhofer, 2011; Jenkins, 2015). ELF users frequently negotiate meaning in fluid, context-sensitive ways, drawing on their own linguistic repertoires and cultural knowledge.

These theoretical insights are particularly relevant to how students in expanding-circle contexts perceive English. Research shows that many learners internalize native-speaker norms, often leading to negative self-evaluations and diminished confidence in their English proficiency (Sung, 2016; Kubota, 2018). Moreover, family and community expectations may reinforce beliefs that English holds limited relevance for local career pathways, especially in fields perceived as domestically oriented.

In Cambodia, such perceptions are reflected in students' attitudes toward majoring in English. While some acknowledge English's global value for scholarships and international employment, others view it as difficult, culturally disconnected, or irrelevant to their career goals. These attitudes underscore broader tensions between global language ideologies and local realities. As Chen, Ren, and Lin (2020) argue, English learners often face "epistemic injustice" when their own English varieties are delegitimized in favor of unattainable native-speaker standards.

2.2 English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: Ideologies, Implementation, and Impact

English occupies a multifaceted role in Southeast Asia, particularly within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), where educational, political, and cultural dimensions intersect. As ASEAN deepens regional integration, English has emerged as a central medium for communication, governance, and economic collaboration across its ten member states, each with distinct linguistic and cultural identities (Zein, 2024; Kirkpatrick, 2020). Despite the region's remarkable linguistic diversity—encompassing over 1,000 languages—ASEAN nations broadly endorse the use of both national languages and English in education and official domains.

English's prominence in ASEAN stems more from pragmatic necessity than formal consensus, functioning as a neutral and globally recognized lingua franca (Jutatungcharoen, 2022). The ASEAN Charter (Article 34) designates English as the sole working language, reflecting its utility in diplomacy, education, and regional commerce (Jindapitak, 2019). However, significant variation exists in national implementation. Countries such as Singapore and the Philippines, with deep colonial ties to English, have institutionalized its use extensively. In contrast, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand are still working to expand English proficiency and integrate it into their education systems (Low & Ao, 2018).

The emergence of a hybrid and localized form of "ASEAN English" reflects these sociolinguistic realities (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Shaped by British and American influences as well as indigenous languages, this variety of English functions not only as a tool of instruction but also as a symbol of identity and modernity. Nonetheless, its spread has generated concerns, including fears of linguistic imperialism, marginalization of local languages, and socioeconomic inequality between English-proficient and non-proficient populations (Hashim & Leitner, 2022).

Zein (2024) emphasizes that English's value in ASEAN is shaped by both top-down policy decisions and grassroots attitudes. Students frequently cite inadequate foundational instruction as a barrier to English proficiency, mirroring teachers' concerns about the uneven rollout of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and English as a Subject in Basic Education (ESBE).

A recurring challenge among students is the perceived uncertainty of career paths linked to English degrees, reflecting broader gaps in career guidance and labor market information. As Jutatungcharoen (2022) notes, while English is institutionally entrenched within ASEAN frameworks, its practical significance in national job markets often remains unclear to young learners. Without strong intrinsic motivation or clear awareness of English's benefits—such as scholarships or international mobility—many students gravitate toward fields viewed as more practical or locally relevant.

2.3 The Role and Challenges of English Language Learning in Cambodia

In Cambodia, English is increasingly seen as a key to economic opportunity, educational advancement, and global engagement. As globalization intensifies, English functions as a lingua franca across sectors such as tourism, trade, and higher education. Proficiency in English enables access to international academic resources, cross-cultural communication, and improved employment prospects—particularly in fields where communication skills are essential (TesolCourse, 2025).

Despite these advantages, English language education in Cambodia faces persistent challenges. At the secondary level, Em (2022) identifies several barriers, including underqualified teachers, limited resources, large class sizes, inadequate classroom interaction, and weak student motivation. Educators and school leaders have echoed these concerns, emphasizing the need for improved infrastructure, teaching materials, and continuous professional development.

At the tertiary level, both structural and motivational issues persist. Em et al. (2024) found that university students tend to display extrinsic motivation in English reading, with few gender differences. They suggest that incorporating peer explanations of reading comprehension could boost engagement. Similarly, Nhem (2024) reported generally positive student attitudes toward English at a private university in Phnom Penh, though levels of satisfaction varied. The study underscored English's role in preparing students for a competitive, globalized labor market.

The evolving status of English in Cambodia further complicates its educational role. Moore and Bounchan (2010) observe a shift in perception, with English increasingly viewed not just as a foreign language (EFL), but as an international (EIL) or even second language (ESL). This change reflects broader sociopolitical developments and highlights a dynamic linguistic landscape. Their findings show that both students and lecturers are reassessing preferred varieties of English, influenced by historical legacies and present-day realities.

Economic motivations are also a powerful driver of English learning. Hashim, Leong, and Pich (2014) found that university students often see English as essential for upward mobility, driven largely by labor market expectations. Their interviews and needs analysis revealed widespread enthusiasm for learning English, rooted in the desire to improve living standards. Similarly, Clayton (2006) argued that English is vital for national development, offering ordinary Cambodians a pathway toward greater economic security.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The exploratory approach was appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of the topic, particularly in contexts where existing knowledge is limited or fragmented. A qualitative methodology was chosen to capture rich, contextualized, and nuanced data that could not be quantified, enabling the researcher to explore participants' subjective meanings and the complexity of their experiences.

Data were collected through focus group discussions, which encouraged interactive and dynamic exchanges among participants. This method facilitated open sharing of views while allowing participants to build on each other's responses, thereby generating a broader and more diverse set of insights. Focus groups also provided a naturalistic setting for observing group interactions and uncovering shared experiences and collective perspectives.

All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and support a thorough analysis. Overall, the focus group method was instrumental in generating rich, exploratory data that deepened the understanding of the research questions.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population of this study comprised students enrolled in Year 1, Semester 1 of the 2024–2025 academic year. These students had recently completed high school and were in the early stage of their university education. At the time of data collection, they had not yet selected an academic major, as official selection was scheduled for Semester 2. This made them a suitable group for examining factors that influence students' intentions and considerations regarding future major selection, particularly their attitudes, motivations, and perceived influences during this decision-making phase.

A cluster sampling method was employed to select participants. The sample consisted of all students from a single intact class, totaling 55 students— 32 females and 23 males. This cluster was chosen for its accessibility and its representativeness of the broader first-year student body. Utilizing a naturally formed group allowed for the exploration of common themes and individual variations in students' reasoning and perspectives while maintaining contextual consistency. This approach facilitated a focused investigation into how students form academic preferences prior to officially committing to a specific major.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through focus group discussions, which allowed for the exploration of students' perspectives, thoughts, and intentions in a collaborative and interactive setting. The sample was divided into seven separate focus groups, each consisting of seven to eight students. This grouping enabled a manageable discussion size that encouraged active participation and the expression of diverse viewpoints. The use of multiple groups ensured a broader range of data, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

Each focus group session was conducted using a non-participatory observation approach. The discussions were facilitated by a moderator, while the researcher acted as a silent observer and did not intervene in the conversation. To ensure the accuracy of the data, all sessions were audio-recorded using a voice recording application. This allowed for detailed transcription and later analysis of the verbal content. The non-intrusive nature of the observation helped maintain the natural flow of the discussion and reduced the potential for observer bias or influence.

The discussions were guided using a semi-structured questionnaire designed to elicit thoughtful and relevant responses from participants. The core questions included: "What major are you choosing?", "If you don't choose English, why?", and "If you choose English, why?". These open-ended questions provided a consistent framework across all focus groups while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their personal motivations, concerns, and reasoning. This approach enabled the researcher to explore key themes related to students' major selection decisions while also capturing unexpected insights that emerged during the group interactions.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed Grounded Theory as the methodological approach to analyze qualitative data, aiming to construct a theory based on the lived experiences and perspectives of participants. Grounded Theory is especially appropriate for exploring complex processes and interactions where existing theories may be limited. The analysis followed the three traditional coding phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the data from focus group discussions were examined line by line, with initial codes assigned to meaningful segments, staying close to participants' own language. Axial coding then grouped these codes into broader categories by identifying relationships among conditions, actions, and consequences.

In the selective coding phase, a central or "core" category was identified to integrate all other categories, forming a coherent narrative that captured the study's central phenomenon. The final theoretical model was refined through iterative comparisons with the data to ensure internal consistency and accuracy. To strengthen the validity of the emerging theory, the findings were compared with existing literature to determine whether they extended, confirmed, or challenged current understanding. This process ensured that the developed theory was both grounded in empirical evidence and situated within the broader academic context.

4. Presentation of the Results

4.1 Academic Major Choice Influenced by Social and Personal Factors

The selection of academic majors among students is shaped by a complex interplay of parental influence, personal preferences, and career aspirations. Parental pressure emerged as a dominant factor, with many students citing it as decisive in their choices. One participant noted, "*My parents pressured me to choose Accounting over English because they believe English literature has weak job prospects*" (FGD1). This often led to compliance, as another shared, "*I just obeyed my parents' decision, even though I was interested in English*" (FGD1). Concerns about job stability frequently discouraged students from pursuing English studies.

Personal interests and perceived English ability also played significant roles. Some students stated, "*I prefer Accounting because I don't like English*" (FGD3), and others remarked, "*English is difficult and uncomfortable to speak*" (FGD1). Limited English proficiency was a common barrier: "*I have low English proficiency, so I chose Accounting*" (FGD3), and "*I lack the foundation in English, so it's hard for me to study it*" (FGD2). Such challenges lowered students' confidence and interest in English literature.

Career aspirations further influenced their choices. Many students felt that English literature did not align with their professional goals: "*English literature is not connected to my career goals*" (FGD1), and "*I chose Business Administration because I want to become an entrepreneur, and English is*

valuable but not relevant to my path" (FGD1). Others expressed, "*English does not align with my chosen major of Law*" (FGD3), and "*I dislike English because it's difficult and unrelated to my future job*" (FGD3).

In contrast, a few students pursued English out of genuine passion. One explained, "*I love English because it is a global language, and I enjoy sharing knowledge*" (FGD4), while another said, "*I want to strengthen my English skills to apply for scholarships abroad*" (FGD4). Others emphasized, "*English helps with job opportunities and communication with foreigners*" (FGD4). These examples show that strong personal interest can occasionally override external pressures.

In summary, students' academic major choices reflect a balance between parental expectations, individual interests, and perceived career alignment. As one student summarized, "*Although English is valuable, my parents want me to choose a major that guarantees a stable career, so I picked Accounting*" (FGD1). Understanding these influences is essential for supporting students in making informed educational and career decisions.

4.2 Perceived Difficulty and Self-Efficacy in English Learning

Students' academic choices are often influenced by their perception of English as a difficult subject and their low self-efficacy in the language. Many participants described feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable with English, leading to avoidance and lack of motivation. For instance, one stated, "*English is difficult and uncomfortable to speak*" (FGD1), while another noted, "*I feel overwhelmed by English and do not enjoy it*" (FGD3). These negative perceptions frequently stemmed from a weak foundation in English, as reflected in the statement: "*I did not have a strong foundation in English from high school, so it is hard for me to learn now*" (FGD2).

Low confidence in English abilities was a recurring theme. Students often described themselves as having "*weak proficiency*" (FGD1, FGD3, FGD5, FGD7), or as "*not good at English*" and "*lacking talent for it*" (FGD6). One student feared academic failure due to comprehension difficulties: "*I have difficulty understanding English content and spoken English, so I fear I will lag behind*" (FGD5). This lack of confidence led many to avoid English-intensive fields.

Consequently, students often selected majors perceived as less reliant on English. Many opted for Accounting or Business Administration because they felt more capable in these areas. One student shared, "*I chose Accounting because I do not like English and have limited English skills*" (FGD3). Others expressed a preference for majors like Law, IT, or Engineering, which they believed better suited their career paths and did not require strong English skills.

Nevertheless, a minority of students persisted with English due to intrinsic motivation. These individuals cited strong interest and recognized English's value as a global language. One said, "*I love English because it is a global language, and I enjoy sharing knowledge*" (FGD4), while another added, "*I want to strengthen my English skills to apply for scholarships abroad*" (FGD4). Their motivation illustrates how self-efficacy and positive attitudes can help students overcome linguistic challenges.

In conclusion, students' avoidance of English is closely linked to perceptions of difficulty and low self-confidence, often exacerbated by weak educational foundations and parental influence. However, for those with strong motivation and interest, English remains a desirable and purposeful academic choice.

4.3 Lack of Clear Career Goals and Information

A lack of clear career goals and insufficient access to reliable information significantly influenced students' academic major choices. Many participants expressed uncertainty about their future professions, which led to indecision and reliance on external opinions. As one student shared, "*I have not yet identified my desired profession*" (FGD2), while another admitted, "*I don't know what I want to do after graduation*" (FGD4). This ambiguity often resulted in selecting a major by default or based on perceived ease.

Several students chose their major not out of genuine interest but because they lacked other options or were unsure what the major entailed. For example, a participant said, "*I chose this major because I had no other options and didn't know the details of the program*" (FGD3). Another stated, "*I didn't understand what English Literature was about, so I hesitated to choose it*" (FGD1). The absence of structured guidance in choosing academic pathways was evident throughout the discussions.

The lack of access to accurate career-related information was another key factor. Many students were unaware of the potential job opportunities available for certain majors. One participant said, "*I don't know what jobs I could get with an English Literature degree*" (FGD2). Another remarked, "*There is no clear job path after majoring in English*" (FGD3). This lack of clarity discouraged students from pursuing fields that might otherwise align with their interests.

In the absence of clear career goals, students often turned to parental or peer advice. One student said, "*My parents and relatives recommended Accounting, so I followed their suggestion*" (FGD2). Another followed friends' decisions: "*My friend chose Business Administration, so I did the same*" (FGD3). This peer influence highlighted the need for career counseling and information services.

In summary, the lack of clearly defined career goals and limited access to relevant information led many students to make academic choices based on external influences or convenience rather than informed decisions. Providing students with better career guidance could empower them to make more purposeful and confident educational choices.

4.4 Influence of Family and Friends on Academic Decisions

Family members, particularly parents, had a substantial impact on students' academic decisions. Many participants reported choosing their major primarily to fulfill their parents' expectations, even if it conflicted with their personal interests. One student remarked, "*My parents asked me to choose Accounting because they think it offers better job security*" (FGD1). Another said, "*I didn't want to disappoint my parents, so I followed their decision*" (FGD2). Such instances underscore the strong cultural role of family in educational choices.

Parents often valued job stability and income potential over students' passions. As one participant noted, "*My parents believe English has no future, so they asked me to avoid it*" (FGD1). This led to internal conflict for some students, especially those interested in English or other less traditional fields. A student explained, "*I wanted to study English, but my parents said it wouldn't lead to a good job, so I chose Business*" (FGD3). In such cases, students prioritized familial approval over self-fulfillment.

In addition to parental influence, friends also shaped students' academic paths. Some students reported selecting the same major as their peers out of convenience or a desire to stay together. For instance, one participant shared, "*My friend chose this major, and I didn't want to be in a different class, so I followed them*" (FGD3). Peer influence was particularly strong among students who lacked personal direction or confidence in making independent choices.

Moreover, some students found it easier to follow the opinions of those around them than to explore their own interests. One admitted, "*I just followed what my cousin studied because I had no idea what to choose*" (FGD2). This tendency reflects a broader issue of limited guidance and low self-efficacy in educational planning.

In conclusion, both family and friends play influential roles in shaping students' academic decisions. While support from these groups can be beneficial, excessive reliance on their opinions may prevent students from pursuing fields aligned with their true interests and aspirations. Encouraging open dialogue between students and families, alongside enhanced academic advising, may help balance external influence with personal agency.

5. Implication of the Study

5.1 Navigating Academic Major Choice through a Dynamic Balance of External Influence, Self-Perception, and Strategic Adaptation

Students' decisions to choose or avoid English-related academic majors are shaped by an interplay of external pressures, internal preferences, perceived competencies, emotional responses, and pragmatic considerations. This process reflects an ongoing negotiation between their environment (especially parental influence), their self-assessed English ability, emotional attitudes toward English, and strategic choices to align with personal goals and perceived opportunities.
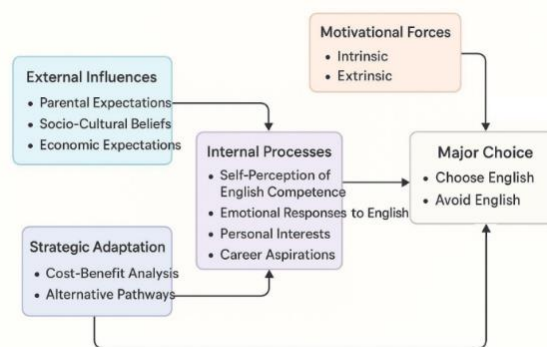

Figure 1: Dynamic Interplay of Influence, Perception, Strategy, and Motivation in Choosing English Majors

5.1.1 External Influence as a Primary Framework

Students' decisions to pursue English as a major are often shaped more by external influences than by personal interests. Parental expectations and socio-cultural beliefs—especially those regarding the economic value and academic difficulty of English—frequently guide students toward or away from this field. These external pressures can override genuine enthusiasm, leading students to prioritize perceived practicality or familial approval over personal aspirations. This trend is well-explained by several theoretical frameworks that explore how social and cultural forces shape individual choices.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) posits that career decisions result from the interaction between personal factors— such as interests and self-efficacy—and external influences like family and cultural expectations. For example, if parents perceive English as lacking job prospects, they may unintentionally undermine their child's confidence in pursuing it, regardless of intrinsic interest. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) emphasizes how subjective norms—expectations from significant others—influence behavioral intentions. Even when students have a positive attitude toward studying English and feel capable, they may avoid it if they perceive parental or societal disapproval.

Other frameworks provide complementary insights. Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (1981) explains how students narrow down career options early based on social acceptability, often eliminating English if deemed impractical or overly challenging. Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory (1986) argues that educational choices are shaped by access to family knowledge and values—families that devalue English limit their children's support and exposure to it. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) adds that both immediate influences like family (microsystem) and broader cultural beliefs (macrosystem) shape students' development and decisions. Together, these theories underscore how deeply external influences can constrain students' freedom to pursue personally meaningful academic pathways like English.

5.1.2 Self-Perception and Emotional Influences on Engagement

Students' self-perception of their English ability significantly influences their emotional responses and engagement with the subject. Those who view themselves as having low proficiency or who perceive English as particularly difficult often experience anxiety, frustration, or aversion. These negative emotions diminish motivation and encourage avoidance, creating a cycle that hinders language learning and academic performance.

This dynamic is well explained by Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), which asserts that students' beliefs about their capabilities shape their emotional responses, effort, and persistence. Low self-efficacy in English is often associated with anxiety and disengagement, while high self-efficacy promotes resilience and active participation. Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985) supports this by highlighting how students' explanations for success or failure—such as attributing difficulty to a lack of innate ability—can deepen negative emotions and reduce motivation. Likewise, Pekrun's Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (2006) suggests that students who perceive low control over learning but high value in English are more likely to experience anxiety, while those who perceive low control and low value may become bored or disengaged.

In addition, Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles, 1983) posits that motivation depends on students' expectations of success and the value they place on a task. When students doubt their abilities and see little value in English, engagement declines. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) further explains that high anxiety and low confidence create an "affective filter" that impedes language input and acquisition. Together, these theories demonstrate that students' self-perceptions and emotional experiences are critical to their motivation and success in learning English.

5.1.3 Alignment of Personal Interests and Career Goals as Motivating Moderators

Students' personal interests and career aspirations play a crucial role in moderating their motivation to study English. When their goals—such as careers in teaching, international communication, or scholarship—align with English proficiency, students tend to view English as meaningful and valuable, which sustains motivation even amidst challenges. Conversely, if their desired careers in fields like law, science, or local entrepreneurship seem unrelated to English, they may deprioritize the subject.

This relationship is clarified by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which holds that motivation is strongest when activities fulfill the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students who see English as supporting their goals experience intrinsic motivation. In contrast, misalignment between English and their aspirations may result in extrinsic motivation or even amotivation. Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles, 1983) also emphasizes that effort depends on perceived value and expected success; when English lacks perceived utility, motivation and effort diminish.

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) further support these findings. Career Construction Theory suggests that students are more engaged in subjects that contribute to their desired life narrative. If English does not fit into this narrative, disengagement may follow. Meanwhile, the Theory of Planned Behavior shows that students' intentions are influenced by attitudes, norms, and perceived control. When interest or relevance to future careers drives a positive attitude, students remain committed despite external pressures. Collectively, these theories affirm that alignment between English studies and students' goals enhances sustained motivation and engagement.

5.1.4 Strategic Adaptation of Academic Decisions to Perceived Constraints

Students who perceive English as too difficult or misaligned with their goals often make pragmatic academic choices. Many opt for majors perceived as easier or more relevant to their long-term ambitions, believing they can still acquire English informally if needed. This strategic decision-making enables them to avoid immediate challenges while preserving future options.

Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1993) explains this behavior as a cost-benefit analysis where students aim to maximize personal advantage. English majors may be avoided if perceived as high-effort with low short-term gain, especially when other fields offer clearer alignment with career or family expectations. Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles, 1983) similarly indicates that students pursue paths they both value and feel confident in. If English appears low in utility or if confidence is lacking, motivation declines.

Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1997) adds nuance by suggesting students make "satisficing" rather than optimal decisions due to constraints like limited information, time, or support. Under this model, non-English majors may be chosen because they appear more attainable. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) further emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence academic choices. When confidence in English is low or external pressures are high, students gravitate toward fields where they feel more competent and autonomous. These theories collectively illustrate how students adapt their academic paths in response to both internal dispositions and external pressures.

5.1.5 The Multifaceted Nature of Motivation for English

Students who choose to major in English are typically motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsically, they may find joy in the language, intellectual satisfaction, or personal fulfillment. Extrinsically, they recognize English as a valuable global skill for communication, career advancement, and international opportunities.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) holds that the strongest motivation arises when intrinsic interest is supported by meaningful external goals. The Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand, 2015) distinguishes between harmonious and obsessive passion, noting that harmonious passion—where students freely engage in English in line with their identity—leads to sustained effort and well-being.

Beliefs about success and the usefulness of English also shape motivation. Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) highlights that students are more committed when they both value the subject and believe they can succeed. For English majors, both attainment value (personal significance) and utility value (relevance to future goals) are typically high, reinforcing long-term effort.

Finally, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) shows that intention is influenced by attitudes, perceived norms, and control. Students with positive attitudes toward English, who believe others value it, and who feel capable of success are more likely to pursue and persist in the major. Collectively, these perspectives show that motivation for studying English is multifaceted and rooted in identity, value, confidence, and relevance.

5.2 Guidelines for Encouraging Student Engagement in English

The findings from this study suggest several important implications for educators, policymakers, and academic advisors seeking to promote enrollment in English majors and enhance student engagement. First, targeted interventions are necessary to address both external and internal factors influencing students' academic decisions. Since parental beliefs and societal perceptions significantly shape students' choices, awareness campaigns and parental engagement initiatives can help reshape misconceptions about the value and potential of English-related careers. Simultaneously, improving students' English proficiency and confidence through early support and positive reinforcement can increase their willingness to consider English as a viable academic path.

Second, the establishment of robust emotional and academic support systems is essential. Many students who struggle with self-perceived low ability in English experience anxiety, frustration, and avoidance. Schools and universities can mitigate these challenges by offering targeted skill-building programs, mentorship, and safe learning environments that reduce stress and build resilience. Encouraging a growth mindset and fostering a sense of competence can significantly enhance students' emotional engagement and persistence in learning English.

Third, career counseling must play a more proactive role in aligning students' aspirations with realistic and informed understandings of English-related opportunities. Advisors should help students explore diverse career pathways where English plays a central or complementary role, such as teaching, international relations, journalism, translation, and global business. By highlighting the practical applications and long-term advantages of English proficiency, career guidance can bridge motivational gaps and support better-informed decision-making.

Lastly, offering flexible learning paths can accommodate students who may be hesitant to major in English due to perceived difficulty or misalignment with their primary goals. Universities might consider dual-degree options, interdisciplinary programs, or elective-based curricula that allow students to develop English skills alongside other fields. Such pathways enable students to maintain and strengthen their English proficiency without bearing the full academic burden of majoring in the subject. These flexible structures acknowledge the diverse needs and constraints students face while still promoting meaningful engagement with the English language.

Proposed Survey Questionnaire for Future Quantitative Research

Factors Influencing Academic Major Choice and English Study

Instructions: Please answer the following questions honestly. Your responses will help improve academic guidance and English language support programs.

Section 1: Demographic Information
1. **Age:** _____ years
2. **Gender:**
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other
3. **Current Academic Major:**
   - English
   - Accounting
   - Business Management
   - Law
   - Science
   - Other (please specify): _____
4. **Year of Study:**
   - 1st year
   - 2nd year
   - 3rd year
   - 4th year or above

Section 2: Parental Influece and Support
5. To what extent do your parents support your choice of major?
   - Strongly support
   - Somewhat support
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat oppose
   - Strongly oppose
6. Have your parents encouraged or pressured you to choose a specific major?
   - Yes, encouraged

- Yes, pressured
- No

7. How do your parents view English as a subject or career path?
   - Very positive
   - Somewhat positive
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat negative
   - Very negative

Section 3: Personal Interest and Motivation

8. How interested are you in studying English?
   - Very interested
   - Somewhat interested
   - Neutral
   - Not very interested
   - Not interested at all

9. Why did you choose your current major? (Select all that apply)
   - Personal interest
   - Career opportunities
   - Parental influence
   - Academic strengths
   - Peer influence
   - Other (please specify): _____

10. How important is English for your future career goals?
    - Very important
    - Somewhat important
    - Neutral
    - Not very important
    - Not important at all

Section 4: English Language Proficiency and Perceived Difficulty

11. How do you rate your current English language proficiency?
    - Excellent
    - Good
    - Average
    - Below average
    - Poor

12. How difficult do you find English language courses?
    - Very difficult
    - Somewhat difficult
    - Neutral
    - Somewhat easy
    - Very easy

13. What aspects of English do you find most challenging? (Select all that apply)
    - Reading comprehension
    - Writing
    - Listening
    - Speaking
    - Grammar and vocabulary
    - English literature content

14. How confident are you in your ability to succeed in English-related courses?
    - Very confident
    - Somewhat confident
    - Neutral
    - Somewhat unconfident
    - Not confident at all

Section 5: Academic Support and Career Guidance

15. Have you received career counseling related to your academic major?
    - Yes
    - No

16. How helpful was the career counseling in guiding your major choice?
    - Very helpful
    - Somewhat helpful
    - Neutral
    - Not very helpful
    - Not helpful at all
17. Have you attended any workshops or training to improve your English skills?
    - Yes
    - No
18. How effective were these workshops/trainings?
    - Very effective
    - Somewhat effective
    - Neutral
    - Not very effective
    - Not effective at all

Section 6: Attitudes Toward English and Future Aspirations

19. How much do you enjoy learning English?
    - Enjoy a lot
    - Enjoy somewhat
    - Neutral
    - Dislike somewhat
    - Dislike a lot
20. Do you see English as useful beyond your studies (e.g., travel, communication, career)?
    - Yes, very useful
    - Somewhat useful
    - Neutral
    - Not very useful
    - Not useful at all
21. What are your future career goals? (Open-ended)

Section 7: Open Feedback

22. Please share any thoughts or suggestions on how your school or program could better support students in choosing and succeeding in English or other majors.

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