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Academic Adjustment of First-Semester English Department Students When Transitioning to Study in University: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

The transition from high school to university level can pose several challenges for first-semester students. Contextual and individual factors play an important role in the academic and social adjustment of first-semester students in learning English. This study sheds light on difficulties of academic adjustment that first-semester students encounter when they study English at university. The main aim is to investigate why first-semester students encounter challenges regarding the level of difficulty and autonomy required in their study. Adopting a descriptive research design, data were collected using a questionnaire of 13 items completed by 23 students studying English in the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Misurata University. The target sample was randomly chosen, and the data analysis was performed using the SPSS programme. The findings revealed that students found difficulty in adjusting to a new environment, academic demands, and autonomous learning.

Key words: Autonomous learning; Academic adjustment; Challenges; First-semester students; Learning English; Transition; University

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التكيف الأكاديمي لطلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول لقسم اللغة الانجليزية عند انتقالهم للدراسة بالجامعة: التحديات والاستراتيجيات

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الانتقال من التعليم في المرحلة الثانوية إلى التعليم الجامعي قد يسبب عدة صعوبات لطلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول. فهناك عوامل فردية وعلمية تلعب دورا مهمّاً في هذا التكيف الاجتماعي والعلمي عند تعلم اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعة. حيث تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الصعوبات في التكيف الأكاديمي لطلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول عند التحاقهم بالجامعة ودراسة اللغة الانجليزية. الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة هو تقصي أسباب الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب الفصل الأول في تحسين مستواهم العلمي واستقلاليتهم المطلوبة في الدراسة الجامعية. هذه الدراسة تتبنى المنهج الوصفي متمثلا في استبيان يحتوي على 13 بند ويتم تعبئته بواسطة 23 طالب وطالبة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية، جامعة مصراتة. حيث تم اختيار العينة عشوائياً وتم تحليلها بواسطة برنامج SPSS. استنتجت الدراسة أن الطلبة يجدون صعوبة في التكيف في بيئة جديدة ومتطلبات أكاديمية جديدة واستقلالية في التعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقلالية، الانتقال للجامعة، التحديات، التكيف الأكاديمي، تعلم اللغة الانجليزية، طلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول

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Introduction

Learners of English generally face problems when navigating from high school to university. They may encounter teaching and learning practices at university that largely differ from those they have experienced in their secondary schools. At university, learners of language are assumed to gain greater responsibilities for their own learning. In Libya, learners in high schools often lack autonomy, critical thinking, and active participation which cause some problems for learners when joining a college.

Several studies have been conducted on challenges that first semester students face when they transition to university (Hughes, 2017; Thompson et al., 2021). Hughes (2017) conducted research on understanding the different challenges facing students transitioning from high school to university, particularly with a focus on ethnicity. He claimed that students often feel welcomed and they develop a sense of belonging when they join university.

Meanwhile, Thompson et al. (2021) investigated the problems using a triangulation method. They conducted a survey to collect numerical data as well as quantitative research on two groups from different backgrounds. As a result, they concluded that students encounter challenges when they join university due to unpreparedness for independent study. First-semester students often face problems as they need to have prior preparation both in academic learning and adapting to living independently.

Thompson et al. (2021) introduced a new term related to these challenges: Struggles Around Independent Learning and Living (SAILL). The transition from a controlled environment in schools to the autonomy and personal responsibility in university is considered to be crucial in terms of future success in academic and social life (Murtagh, 2012).

Jeyagowri and Ilankumaran (2018) investigated the role of students regarding the transition from school to college. They explained many challenges that first-semester students face during their first stage in university. The following are the problems:

First, the external changes related to the environment and location. In this period, new university students often feel challenged when joining college. According to Jeyagowri & Ilankumaran (2018), students feel isolated as well as anxious, and this causes some problems in terms of their success and learning process. Hence, new students need to have new relationships and support to overcome this challenge.

According to Jeyagowri and Ilankumaran (2018), another challenge that students may encounter is the economic and financial changes wherein some international universities cost too much to be able to accept students. That is, students need to pay before they register at those universities. This leads students to worry about debt in the future.

The third aspect is social change. University environment forces learners to engage in interaction which they have not experienced in secondary schools. When entering university, language learners may encounter challenges related to classroom interactions and participation that they have not practiced before. Based on Aljoundi (2025), Libyan

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learners find difficulties in both learning and teaching English at the university entrance level. In her study, Aljoundi claims that there are four categories regarding the difficulties that learners of language encounter; namely are: linguistic challenges, cultural challenges, institutional challenges and structural challenges.

On the other hand, students in university have to interact with other students whom they do not know to overcome shyness and fear. According to Jeyagowri and Ilankumaran (2018), introverted students in college have to engage in institutional and classroom activities to cultivate self-efficacy.

Clough et al. (2024) claimed that new university students encounter considerable challenges. For some students, this massive transition can occur smoothly; for others, transitioning to university brings many challenges such as adjusting to a new environment and studies. They conducted a study on the difficulty of transition, with multifaceted factors: academic, personal, literacy, assessment, accommodation, finance, mental health, and social transition.

According to Brooker and Lawrence (2017) there are three prevalent challenges for first semester students characterized by: managing time, workload, and others' expectations. In their study, they also suggest that students' perceptions of their difficulties are associated with how they appraise and engage with those obstacles they face.

In the same vein, studies conducted in the Libyan context have demonstrated that students encounter challenges when they enter higher education, particularly those learning English as a foreign language. Aljoundi (2025), for example, identified the challenges Libyan university learners face in developing English communicative competence for academic purposes. In her study, she concluded that students experienced challenges related to the university learning environment and the demands of the higher education system.

Despite previous Libyan studies have highlighted the challenges learners of English language encounter in English speaking and communication, less attention has been paid to how learners adapt in learning strategies in university. This study investigates the challenges students in first semester in English department face when they enter higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Student Transition Model

This theory explains a life span perspective, asserting that individuals face challenges when their life changes. According to Mulaudzi (2023), the essence of Transition Theory lies in a general perspective to understand the multifaceted nature of learners' transition. It offers a framework for investigating the two areas: external changes and internal psychological processes, support systems, and coping strategies.

Academic Transition

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First-semester students often find it difficult when they join lectures, seminars, tutorials, and workshops. (Clough et al. (2024). The higher education system expects students to be active, self-governed learners; in contrast, first-semester students often expect that the system in university requires students to write notes and memorize them later.

Statement of the Problem

The transition from high school to university is considered a fundamental stage in students' academic lives, characterized by important changes in many aspects. According to Gadour (2006), Libyan students who move from high schools to university encounter several learning challenges in English learning; this also includes engaging with both teaching and learning at college, which is largely different from the way they have practiced in school. These challenges can hinder their ability to adapt and continue learning English successfully. That is, this may lead to disappointment among learners and may not help them in advance. Thus, this paper investigates the challenges that students may encounter and helps them to recognize the strategies that can be used to overcome these challenges.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer these questions:

1. Do first-semester students encounter challenges when joining English department classes in college?

2. What strategies do college students need to successfully manage their learning when attending university classes?

3. Do first-semester students in the English Department of the Faculty of Education have autonomy in their learning?

Objectives of the Study

This paper attempts to provide a clear understanding of the challenges that first-semester students in the English Department of the Faculty of Education face when transitioning to college. Its purpose is to recognize what strategies they can use to overcome these difficulties. Moreover, it aims to determine whether students possess the autonomy needed in university.

Significance of the Study

Research is needed for several reasons. It is significant to bridge the gap between studying English in high school and in college and the challenges students face when transitioning to university. This leads us to identify and comprehensively analyze the academic challenges encountered by first-semester university students during their transition to higher education. The study provides a benefit for several stakeholders:

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- **University Instructors:** The study may support instructors' awareness of the difficulties experienced by first-semester students, helping them to adopt more supportive teaching practices.
- **Students:** The findings may identify the most common academic, social, emotional, and institutional problems. The study may provide support for prospective and first-semester students to better prepare for higher education life and develop effective skills to overcome their problems when transitioning to universities.
- **University stakeholders and Policy Makers:** The findings may help university instructors in designing orientation programs that universities often adopt when accepting new students in their departments, and academic advising services.
- **Curriculum Designers:** The study may shed light on areas where the curriculum or teaching approaches can be adopted to better bridge the gap between secondary and higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, the main aim is to investigate the challenges that first-semester students in the English department, Faculty of Education, encounter when they join university. To achieve this aim, data were collected through quantitative research using a questionnaire of 13 items to meet the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms, and the data were analyzed using the SPSS programme. This approach was chosen to provide a high level of accurate and objective data. (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). The questionnaire was used to collect data from first-semester students registered in the academic year during which the research study was conducted.

Participants and Setting

The primary focus in this study was to address the difficulties first-semester students face when adjusting to university. In this study, the data were collected from 23 students studying English in the Faculty of Education, Misurata University during the academic year 2023-2024. The participants were randomly chosen. They studied in different high schools in Misurata, both in scientific and art streams. The students were between 19 and 21 years old. 21 of them were females, and only two were males. Their levels in high school were between good and excellent.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire is a research instrument which consists of a set of questions or items designed to collect information from a sample chosen to answer the questions of the study or related to a specific topic or research objectives.

In this study, the questionnaire was used to answer the research questions. It consists of 13 items with a five-point Likert scale which required participants to respond (strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5). This questionnaire was distributed to students of the English Department via Google forms in a WhatsApp group of the English department (Rani, 2017).

Data Analysis

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This study used a descriptive approach to examine the research tool used. The main objective of the research is to explore what challenges first-semester students face when they join the English Department in the Faculty of Education. Survey responses were analyzed for this purpose.

The items of the questionnaire were divided to meet the objectives of the research. The following division showed the items giving answers to the questions of the study as follows:

1. Do first-semester students find challenges when transitioning to college? (1, 2, 4, 8, 10, 11 and 13)
2. What strategies do college students need to successfully manage their learning when attending their first classes in college? (3, 5, 9 and 12)
3. Have first-semester students in the Faculty of Education-English Department had autonomy in their learning? (6 and 7)

In the following tables, each section explains a group of the items answering one of the questions.

Results and Discussion

First-semester students generally find challenges when they transition to university from high school. Table (1) shows if first semester students find challenges when they enter English department classes in college.

Table (1) First-semester students' transition challenges

Item	strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Dev.
Statement 1	9 (39.1%)	7 30.4%)	5 (21.7%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (4.3%)	2.04	.231	1.107
Statement 2	5 (21.7%)	5 (21.7%)	7 (30.4%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	2.04	.194	.928
Statement 4	10 (69.9%)	4 (17.4%)	8 (34.8%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	2.00	.209	1.000
Statement 8	6 (26.1%)	4 (17.4%)	8 (34.8%)	5 (21.7%)	0 (0%)	2.52	.234	1.123
Statement 10	6 (26.1%)	5 (21.7%)	7 (30.4%)	4 (17.4%)	1 (4.3%)	2.48	.234	1.123
Statement 11	6 (26.1%)	5 (21.7)	5 (32.7%)	4 (17.4%)	3 (13%)	2.70	.291	1.396
Statement 13	5 (21.7%)	9 30.4%)	3 (13%)	5 (21.7%)	1 (4.3%)	-3.00	1.528	2.646

This table showed whether first-semester students encounter challenges when transitioning to college to study English. As the responses indicated, most of the students were demotivated to learn in a university environment.

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The majority of the first-semester students, 16 (69.5%), agreed and strongly agreed that the institutional environment is totally different from high school to the university. On the other hand, only 2 (8.6%) of the respondents claimed that the environment in university was appropriate and not different at all. Moreover, 2 (8.6%) students stated that they did not face challenges when they transitioned to studying in university.

In addition,10 ((43.5%) of students did not feel that they received guidance when transitioning to college. They felt disappointed and worried about their learning. Eight (34.8%) students claimed they feel neutral. Only 5 (21.7%) of students strongly agreed and partly agreed on the difficulty to engage into English tasks. However, a great number of students (47.8%) stated that they found the tasks in university challenging. Furthermore, 10 (43.4%) students found that because of low level of proficiency in English, they found difficulty with vocabulary and grammar. Thus, learners do not find studying English easy to comprehend.

Table (2): What strategies do college students need to successfully manage their learning when attending classes in college?

Item	Strongly agree	agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Dev.
Statement 3	8 (34.8%)	6 (26.1%)	7 (30.4%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	**2.05**	.203	.950
Statement 5	10 (43.5%)	4 (17.4%)	8 (34.8%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	**2.05**	.213	.999
Statement 9	6 (26.1%)	11 (47.8%)	3 (13%)	2 (8.3%)	1 (4.3%)	**2.17**	.224	1.072
Statement 12	5 (21.7%)	5 (21.7%)	7 (30.4%)	6 (26.1%)	0 (0%)	**2.61**	.233	1.118

Table (2) showed what strategies used by students of first semester in Faculty of Education in English Department to facilitate their learning in college to overcome the challenges they faced. That is, first-semester students typically found obstacles in their learning when joining university. As shown in Table 2, statement 3 showed that the majority of the students (60.9%) insisted that it was significant for them to have good preparation academically and personally before they joined university. However, only 1% of students asserted that preparation before going to college is not vital and fundamental.

Likewise, first-semester students who transition to college stated that they lacked the autonomy in their learning that they needed in college. Generally, the level of autonomy in learning differs among students between high school and university. In the table, a great number of respondents (60.9%) announced that they needed autonomy and high responsibility in their learning. In contrast, only 1 (4.3%) of first-semester students disagreed.

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One of the other strategies that first-semester students in the English department normally use to overcome the obstacles they face when they join university is asking instructors how to study and what the basic elements they have to focus on. 73.9% (17) of students asserted that they always ask their instructors to know how to study in the college learning system. Alternatively, a small number of respondents said that they do not ask instructors during classes.

Table (3): Have first-semester students in the Faculty of Education, English Department gained autonomy in their learning?

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree	**Mean**	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Dev.
Statement 6	12 (52.2%)	5 (21.7%)	4 (17.4%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (4.3%)	1.91	.243	1.164
Statement 7	8 (34.8%)	7 (30.7%)	5 (21.7%)	3 (13%)	0 (0%)	2.09	.227	1.065

This table represents whether first-semester students have gained autonomy in their learning or not. Majority of students (73%) indicated that they felt responsible for their learning in the college more than in their learning in high school. In contrast, only 2 of students claimed that they do not feel responsible, and learning in university is very similar to learning in their high schools. Furthermore, students in university have to get independence in their learning. Fifteen (65%) students who participated in this study claimed that learning in university forced them to be independent, and they said that everything in their learning should be done by themselves. However, only 3 (13%) of learners stated the opposite.

Generally, first-semester students in the English Department in the Faculty of Education indicated that they face some challenges in their learning when they navigated from high school to university. Moreover, they need to require some training and preparation to overcome these challenges. The study takes into account the test value of the responses 3. The mean of all responses for the 23 participants, which gives the height and the lowness, is 27.6; the standard deviation of all responses, which shows how far the individual responses to a question vary or deviate from the mean, is .950. This shows that reliability is high and the results indicated high frequency.

Overall, the results provide insights into how first-semester students struggle with their language proficiency and their lack of autonomy in learning. They feel that they are not well prepared to join university. They say they need guidance in their learning unlike in high school learning.

Conclusion

The first semester in university is a vital period for students to adapt to a new atmosphere in general. McInnis (2001) stated that students in the first semester of university often experience not only academic development but also social and moral development. This study

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concluded that students of first semester in university faced multiple challenges when they enter college. 69% of students insisted that they found high educational institutions are different from those in high schools. Moreover, (60.9%) pointed out that it was vital for them to prepare themselves academically and personally before they joined university. The results also indicated that (73%) of students felt responsible for their learning in college more than in their learning in high school. However, scholars and educators should invest in helping first-semester students to overcome these challenges they face. Students should be encouraged to use some strategies to be able to strive in university by facilitating conditions such as preparing themselves emotionally and psychologically before they study in college, as well as learning how to be independent while studying.

Recommendations

1. Introducing a Foundation or Bridging Course

English departments should help new students to improve English language proficiency and develop essential academic skills, including academic reading, writing, critical thinking, research skills, and time management. Students often enter universities without much knowledge about how to deal with university skills.

2. Implementing an Orientation Program

Higher Education has to provide an intensive orientation workshops and lectures before the beginning of the first semester. This should familiarize students with academic expectations, higher education regulations, learning skills, assessment practices, and depth support services.

3. Providing Real Academic Supervision

As quality requirements demand, every first-semester student should be supported by an academic advisor who regularly clarifies academic progress and helps students address academic and personal challenges during this important stage.

4. Strengthening English Language Skills Support

English Department has to establish language skills support or writing centers where students can receive individualized assistance with grammar, vocabulary, academic writing, presentation skills, and reading comprehension.

5. Developing Students' Independent Learning Skills

Students should learn how to assess self-regulated learning strategies, including time management, independent learning, information literacy, and effective study skills.

6. Supporting Psychological and Social Skills

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Higher education should strengthen mentoring services to facilitate first-semester students of English manage anxiety, fear, and the psychological challenges associated with university transition.

7. Bridging Communication Between Secondary Schools and Universities

Collaboration between secondary schools and higher education institutions is needed to better assist students for university-level academic expectations and reduce the gap between the two educational stages.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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Appendix (1)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The institutional environment in the university does not focus on motivating learners to achieve the required results.					
2. I face challenges when I join an English class because of my poor vocabulary and grammar.					
3. It was supposed to prepare me before I navigate to study in English department in university.					
4. The educational system is different between secondary school and university.					
5. Studying in university needs autonomy in learning which I lack.					
6. I feel more responsible for my learning in university more than when I was in high school.					
7. It seems to me that learning in university gives me independence and everything should be done by myself.					
8. I do not feel like I get that much guidance from instructors in lectures and seminars.					
9. I try to ask the instructors how I study the subject to be able to focus on basic information.					
10. I find difficulty to engage into English academic tasks.					
11. Transferring from controlled environment to autonomous environment causes me some problems in learning English in the English department.					
12. I lack the required training to perform my duties as an English language learner in the university.					

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13. I face challenges when I join an English class because of my poor vocabulary and grammar.

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