

The Importance of Studying English in Higher Education for SEN: Pathways to Social Mobility and Personal Development

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ABSTRACT

The study purpose was to examine the importance of studying English in higher education for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), focusing on its role in promoting social mobility and personal development. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving ten SEN students enrolled in English courses at a private university in East Nusa Tenggara. The findings reveal that English proficiency serves as a crucial gateway to economic opportunities, enabling students with SEN to obtain academic qualifications, enhance employability, and prepare for transitions into an increasingly global and digital labor market. English study also contributes to long-term professional resilience by granting access to international networks, remote work opportunities, and global discourses on disability rights. Beyond economic benefits, English learning fosters intellectual growth, self-confidence, autonomy, and the exploration of personal interests. It provides a platform for self-expression, social inclusion, and leadership development supported by inclusive teaching practices. Overall, the study concludes that English learning in higher education plays a transformative role in empowering students with SEN to overcome structural barriers, assert their academic identity, and participate fully as active and equal members of society.

Keywords: English learning, Higher education, Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Social mobility, Personal development

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INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, English has become a dominant global language of communication, education, employment, economics and culture. The spread of English has been described as both a tool of globalization and a gateway to participate in international networks of knowledge, mobility, and opportunity (Crystal, 2012; Graddol, 2006). This raises the urgency of learning English for all non-native English speakers in various circles to meet global needs in various fields. Within higher education, the ability to study and master English is often seen as a gateway to broader opportunities although most of the students learn it because it is integrated into the curriculum (Harmer, 2001). Studying English in higher education is no longer perceived as optional; rather, it is increasingly viewed as a vital competency for students wishing to access academic resources, participate in global conversations, and compete in an interconnected labor market. In Indonesian higher education, students are given one up to two semesters of taking English course with some credits (Arini, 2019; Tefa & Ati, 2023). While the benefits of mastering English apply broadly to many students, they carry a particular significance for Students with special educational needs (SEN), who often face additional social and structural barriers in education and employment (Shakespeare, 2014; Tefa & Ati, 2023).

Students with SEN remain one of the most marginalized groups in higher education worldwide. Students with SEN are those who function differently from regular students in terms of their physical, mental, and psychological capacities, which can impede their ability to study (Lowe, 2016; Adi et al., 2017). Dyslexia (a condition that makes reading and spelling difficult), Dyscalculia

(difficulty understanding numbers), ADHD (attention and hyperactivity disorder, characterized by difficulty controlling behaviour), autism spectrum disorder, visual impairment, hearing impairment, and dyspraxia (movement and coordination disorders caused by abnormalities in the nervous system's development) are some of the categories of special needs (Peer & Reid, 2012). They frequently encounter inaccessible learning environments, stigma, and limited institutional support that hinder their ability to thrive academically (Tefa & Ati, 2023). These barriers often continue into the workforce, where disabled graduates experience disproportionately high levels of unemployment or underemployment compared to their non-disabled peers (OECD, 2019). In this context, English proficiency becomes not only a skill for communication but also a form of symbolic capital that can help reduce exclusion, signal competence, and enhance opportunities for meaningful participation in academic and professional life (Rahman & Singh, 2019; Vu & Do, 2021).

In an effort to advance socially and develop abilities, more students with SEN are enrolling in higher education each year. The importance of studying English in higher education for them can be considered from two complementary perspectives: social mobility and personal development. Social mobility refers to the process by which individuals are able to move upward in the social hierarchy, often measured through employment, income, and occupational prestige (Kupfer, 2015). For students with SEN, who often face entrenched socio-economic disadvantages, English study provides a crucial pathway to more secure employment, global labor market access, and long-term economic stability. Personal development, by contrast, refers to the ways in which individuals build self-confidence, discover interests, develop autonomy, and cultivate life skills (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). For students with SEN, English learning promotes self-expression, nurtures critical voice, and facilitates inclusion in diverse academic and social communities.

Recent research has demonstrated that studying English at university enables students with SEN to access a wider range of resources, including academic literature, assistive technologies, online learning platforms, and international exchange opportunities (Friska, 2023; Carrillo-Sierra et al., 2025). These resources not only foster intellectual development but also allow students with SEN to challenge stereotypes and advocate for inclusion both locally and globally. Moreover, Friska (2023) states that English proficiency equips them with the means to engage in global disability rights dialogues, strengthening their roles as advocates and leaders in higher education and beyond.

The aim of this study is therefore to critically examine the importance of studying English in higher education for students with SEN. It argues that English learning enhances both social mobility and personal development, enabling students with SEN to overcome systemic barriers and pursue more equitable futures. This study begins with an exploration of the link between English studies, social mobility, and personal development for students with SEN. It then critically examines two major supportive arguments. The first is that studying English in higher education acts as a route to economic benefits by opening access to global labor markets and inclusive employment opportunities. The second is that English promotes self-fulfillment for students with SEN by building confidence, communication, social capital, and critical voice. The study concludes by summarizing how English learning in higher education equips students with SEN with tools to participate fully in society and move toward greater equality.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to deeply understand and describe the meaning, experiences, and perceptions of students with SEN regarding the importance of learning English in higher education. The term "qualitative descriptive method" describes a social science research approach that does not collect or generate quantitative data (Bryman, 2021). This method focuses on describing phenomena naturally without manipulating variables, emphasizing the use of language, meaning, and social context of the participants (Bryman, 2021). Similarly, As'ari et al. (2023) characterizes quantitative descriptive research as a non-experimental method that falls under the quantitative paradigm, which prioritizes language above numerical facts. This approach allows researchers to explore the realities experienced by students with SEN in the process of learning English and its implications for their social mobility and personal development.

The research was conducted at a private university in East Nusa Tenggara that has students with SEN enrolled in English courses as part of the university curriculum. The research was conducted over three months, including observation, interviews, and documentation stages. The main subjects of the research are 10 students with SEN who have taken English courses. Participant selection was done using the purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting informants based on specific considerations and criteria, in this case, students with SEN who have direct experience in English language learning activities.

To obtain valid and comprehensive data, this study uses three data collection techniques, namely: observation, interview and documentation. The observation was conducted in two English classes attended by students with SEN. The purpose of the observation activity was to gain a real picture of the learning process, the interaction between lecturers and students, and the use of teaching media and strategies employed. Interviews were conducted semi-structurally with participants. Data was also gathered through interviews because observation has a flaw in that respondents are likely to act as expected by the observer because they are aware that they are being watched, which could lead to the omission of crucial information (Bryman, 2012). The interview questions focused on: views on the importance of English language learning; the influence of English language learning on self-confidence, academic ability, and work readiness; and the barriers and support experienced by students with SEN. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at agreed-upon locations and times, and were recorded with the participants' permission. Documentation is used to supplement and validate observation and interview data. The documents collected include: semester learning plans, lecture materials and students' assignments, and records of learning evaluation results.

Data analysis in this study followed the model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. At the data reduction stage, the researcher selected, grouped, and simplified the collected data. At the data display stage, the reduced data was presented in the form of descriptive narratives and direct quotes from participants to authentically illustrate their views and experiences. At the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interprets the meaning of the analyzed data, draws conclusions based on the patterns of findings, and verifies the results by triangulating data sources.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Studying English as a Route to Economic Benefits

Across the world, English proficiency is strongly associated with access to better economic opportunities. For students with SEN, who often experience higher unemployment and underemployment rates, this association becomes particularly significant (OECD, 2019). In this section, three dimensions of economic benefit are examined: (1) obtaining qualifications and recognition, (2) facilitating smoother labor market transition, and (3) long-term investment in inclusive and sustainable employment.

1.1. English qualifications as gateways to employment

In higher education, academic English qualifications serve as a signal of competence, perseverance, and global readiness. Employers increasingly expect candidates to demonstrate English proficiency as a condition for recruitment, particularly in multinational corporations and sectors such as business, education, health, and technology (Graddol, 2006). For students with SEN, English proficiency demonstrates not only academic competence but also the ability to communicate effectively in diverse and international settings.

The findings of this study, obtained through interview, indicate that students with SEN are aware that English is an academic and professional tool.

One participant said:

"If I could speak English well, I would feel more independent and confident in the workplace".

This quote shows that English is not just a linguistic skill, but also a tool for building a positive identity and social independence.

In line with this, another participant stated:

"When I speak in English, people focus more on what I'm saying, not on my limitations, which can make it easier for me in the workplace later".

This view suggests that English language proficiency provides space for students with SEN to be valued based on their abilities, rather than their physical or sensory limitations.

Furthermore, studies show that English certification enhances employability for graduates with disability by signaling productivity and adaptability (Ameri et al., 2017; Schur et al., 2014). Employers are more willing to hire individuals who can engage in cross-cultural communication and access international resources. For example, research in Southeast Asia found that disabled graduates with English proficiency were more likely to secure positions in NGOs, education, and IT sectors compared to peers without English skills (Nilan, Parker, Bennett, & Robinson, 2011). Thus, studying English in higher education allows students with SEN to enter formal labor markets rather than being confined to precarious or informal work.

The findings of this study, obtained through interviews, also indicate that students with SEN have a high awareness of the strategic value of English in the modern world of work. They see English language proficiency as an important factor that can open up job and economic opportunities. Students also associate English mastery with the ability to compete globally and be economically independent. They understand that English language proficiency gives them access to higher-paying jobs, opportunities for further study, and international collaborative projects.

One participant said:

"English can be an asset for getting a better job. I can even collaborate with foreign institutions or pursue further studies".

This statement confirms the view that learning English at universities is not merely a curriculum requirement, but a strategy to improve vertical mobility and expand economic opportunities. With these skills, students with SEN are able to break through local boundaries and compete in the global labor market, which demands cross-cultural communication skills and technological literacy.

Another participant added:

"Despite my limitations, I want to show that my English skills can be an asset for working in an international company".

This quote illustrates that English serves as a tool for self-empowerment, helping them overcome stigma and build a positive professional image.

Additionally, most participants view English proficiency and holding certificates like TOEFL or IELTS as important gateways to obtaining good jobs. They associate English language proficiency with self-confidence and future career opportunities.

One participant stated:

"In my opinion, having an English certificate like TOEFL can boost confidence when applying for a job".

This view suggests that English proficiency provides a sense of competitiveness for students with SEN, as they feel they can compete with non-disabled students in the workforce.

Although they recognize the importance of English, some participants expressed barriers to accessing disability-friendly English language training and exams.

One interview participant explained:

"I know English is important, but the test format is sometimes not friendly to visually impaired students like me". Another participant stated: *"It's difficult to find English courses that understand my learning needs as a student with SEN".*

Both statements indicate that the English teaching and testing system is still not fully adaptable to the diverse needs of learners, particularly students with SEN.

1.2. Transition from education to the labor market

The transition from higher education to employment is often fraught with challenges, particularly for students with SEN who may encounter discrimination, inaccessible workplaces, or limited accommodations (Tefa & Ati, 2023; Shakespeare, 2014). English learning can smooth this transition by equipping students with transferable skills valued by employers: critical thinking, problem-solving, intercultural communication, and adaptability (Shakespeare, 2014).

Higher education institutions often integrate English learning with career-related activities such as internships, exchange programs, and project-based courses (Borisova & Letkina, 2019). These experiences allow students with SEN to demonstrate their competence in real-world contexts. For example, internships requiring English communication skills provide students with SEN the chance to interact with diverse colleagues, build professional networks, and prove their employability beyond stereotypes. Moreover, workplace English courses and inclusive teaching practices help students develop self-efficacy and readiness to adapt to employment contexts (Kavlu, 2020).

The results of interviews with the participants indicate that the transition process from higher education to the world of work still presents complex challenges. Most participants expressed that after completing their studies, they faced various obstacles, ranging from social stereotypes and workplace hostility toward people with disabilities to a lack of support from educational institutions in preparing them to enter the professional world. However, they also stated that learning English makes a significant contribution to helping with this transition process. English is considered not just a linguistic skill, but also a means of self-development that fosters self-confidence, critical thinking skills, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication, which are highly valued in the global workplace.

Students with SEN believe that learning English trains them to think critically, solve problems, and interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. English is seen as a symbol of professional readiness and a tool for self-empowerment, helping students with SEN demonstrate their potential in the wider work environment.

One participant stated:

“Learning English has made me accustomed to thinking critically and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds”. Another participant added, “With English skills, I can confidently attend job interviews or internships in international environments”.

These statements show that mastering English not only expands communication skills but also cultivates transferable skills relevant in the workplace.

The participants also believe that English-based projects provide a valuable opportunity to hone their skills in a real-world context.

One participant explained:

“In class, sometimes I get speaking assignments that require me to communicate with people from abroad. It was difficult at first, but it helped me prove my abilities”.

This quote indicates that practical experience allows students with SEN to demonstrate their actual abilities, not only academically but also in collaboration.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by another participant:

“Campus projects involving English make me more prepared for work because I learn to collaborate and solve problems”.

This finding confirms Jamwal & Gupta’s (2025) view that contextual English language learning experiences can build self-efficacy and work readiness for students with SEN.

1.3. Long-term investment and global competitiveness

English proficiency also represents a long-term investment in sustainable employment. As economies shift toward knowledge industries, digital platforms, and global collaboration, English becomes the medium through which innovations, technologies, and professional communities are accessed (McMahon, 2009). Students with SEN who master English gain an advantage in participating in global dialogues on disability rights, inclusive design, and social justice.

For instance, the rise of remote work and digital platforms has created new opportunities for disabled graduates fluent in English to work across borders without facing physical accessibility barriers (Murray, 2009). This demonstrates how English proficiency supports not only employability but also flexible and inclusive work arrangements. By positioning themselves in international markets, students with SEN secure more resilient career paths that transcend local limitations. Thus, studying English in higher education equips students with SEN with economic capital that enhances their upward mobility, employability, and long-term inclusion in globalized labor markets.

Students with SEN who participated in this study view learning English not just as an academic skill needed during their studies, but as a long-term investment for their future in an increasingly globalized world of work.

One participant stated:

“English is a long-term asset, especially in the digital age we live in now. Although I don't know where I'll be working yet, I'm confident that my English skills will be useful in the future”.

This statement demonstrates an awareness that mastering English provides sustainable economic and social value, especially as job markets shift toward knowledge-based and digital technology sectors. Consistent with McMahon (2009), students understand that English proficiency opens access to innovation, the global professional community, and cross-country collaboration opportunities that can enhance their competitiveness.

Another participant added:

“If you know English, you can attend international seminars, write articles, or communicate with people from abroad. That opens up many job opportunities”.

This shows that students with SEN view English as a key asset for improving their social and professional mobility in the long run.

Another theme that emerged in the interview was students' views on the emergence of new job opportunities through digital platforms and remote work. Some students realize that the online work world has provided an inclusive space for students with SEN to participate without physical barriers.

One participant explained:

“There are a lot of online jobs now. So, if we know English, we can work with people from abroad from home. No need to worry about workplace access”.

This quote confirms that English proficiency enables students with SEN to access the global job market without geographical limitations. With the increasing trend of remote work, they can work in an environment that is flexible and adaptable to their needs.

Another participant stated:

“I see that people with disabilities can freelance or work remotely because they have English language skills. So, the opportunity is actually there, as long as we're ready”.

This view supports Murray's (2009) argument that English proficiency can support flexibility and inclusivity in the modern workplace, as it allows people with disabilities to work across borders without facing physical or transportation barriers.

Beside career goals, some participants also believe that English proficiency gives them the opportunity to participate in the global discourse on disability rights and social justice.

A participant stated:

“If we know English, we can participate in discussions in international forums about disabilities. So, we can voice our experiences and needs”.

This statement indicates that mastering English opens up opportunities for students with SEN to actively participate in global dialog and advocate for issues of equality and social inclusion. In other words, English serves as an advocacy tool that strengthens their position not only as recipients of policy but also as agents of change at the global level.

Another participant added:

“I want to one day write or speak at international conferences about inclusive education. English is the key”.

The quote affirms that English proficiency provides opportunities for students with disabilities to access international academic and professional networks, while also fostering a sense of self-confidence as part of an inclusive global community.

2. Studying English as a Path to Self-Fulfillment

Beyond economic advantages, English learning plays a vital role in the personal development of students with SEN. It provides them with opportunities to stand out academically, explore their personal interests, and build social capital. In this section, two dimensions of self-fulfillment are discussed: (1) intellectual growth and confidence and (2) autonomy and personal interest exploration.

2.1. Intellectual growth and confidence

English study fosters critical thinking, creativity, and self-expression. For students with SEN, who may often be underestimated, success in English learning validates their intellectual abilities and boosts confidence. Higher education provides inclusive learning environments where English instructors serve not only as teachers but also as mentors and advocates (Dressman, 2008).

Through exposure to literature, research, and academic discourse in English, students with SEN can engage with global ideas and situate their experiences within broader social and cultural frameworks. For example, accessing disability studies literature in English enables them to critically reflect on societal attitudes and challenge discriminatory practices (Shakespeare, 2014). This intellectual empowerment contributes to their academic identity and personal confidence.

Through inclusive learning and faculty support, they gained space to hone their critical thinking skills, express their ideas, and challenge the stereotypes that had previously limited them (Tefa & Ati, 2023). Additionally, engagement with global academic literature and discourse allows them to build empowered academic identities with an international perspective (Lowe, 2016). Overall, learning English in higher education can be seen as a medium for intellectual and personal transformation for students with special needs. This process not only enhances their thinking and communication skills but also affirms their position as part of an equal and globally competitive academic community.

The interview results indicate that participants view learning English as an experience that broadens their thinking and deepens their understanding of the world. They feel that learning English is not just about mastering grammar and vocabulary, but also about developing critical thinking skills, creativity, and the ability to express oneself more freely.

One participant said:

"Through English, I learned to think more critically and openly. I became more confident in expressing my opinions and ideas".

This statement indicates that English proficiency contributes to intellectual growth, encouraging students to think reflectively and analytically. They not only understand the text, but also learn to interpret meaning, question assumptions, and connect ideas across cultures. This view aligns with Dressman (2008), who emphasizes that studying English in higher education plays a crucial role in shaping students' critical thinking abilities and intellectual independence, including those with special educational needs.

Many participants say that their success in learning English proves their intellectual abilities, especially in light of society's often dismissive view of the potential of people with disabilities.

A participant stated:

"People sometimes think we can't, but when I successfully give a presentation or write in English, I feel proud. That's proof that I'm capable".

This statement indicates that academic success in English serves as self-validation and proof of intellectual ability, which strengthens the self-confidence of students with SEN. Challenging learning processes and tangible achievements help them build a positive self-image, both in academic and social environments.

Another participant added:

"English makes me more confident that I am no less capable than other students. I can understand difficult texts, discuss, and write in English".

This reinforces the idea that mastering English is a symbol of intellectual achievement as well as a tool for psychological empowerment, fostering belief in one's abilities despite physical or sensory limitations.

Most participants also highlighted the importance of an inclusive learning environment and the role of English language lecturers who function not only as teachers but also as mentors and advocates providing moral support.

One participant said:

"My English lecturer not only taught, but also understood my situation. She motivated me and believed I could".

This quote reflects that positive interpersonal relationships between lecturers and students play a significant role in building the self-confidence and learning motivation of students with special needs. A supportive environment makes them feel valued and encourages them to take intellectual risks, such as speaking in front of the class, writing academic essays, or participating in international activities. This aligns with Tefa & Ati (2023) dan Dressman (2008), who emphasize that teaching English in higher education can be an inclusive platform for fostering intellectual autonomy and a sense of belonging among students with SEN.

Participants also revealed that their ability to read literature and research in English opened up new perspectives on social, cultural, and humanitarian issues, including topics related to disability. Through academic readings in English, they were able to understand how global society views and fights for the rights of people with disabilities.

One participant explained:

"I learned that disability issues are discussed openly abroad. From that, I learned that being disabled doesn't mean being weak, but having rights and a voice".

This quote suggests that access to international literature allows students to reflect on their personal experiences within a global context, as well as foster critical awareness of discrimination and social inequality.

Another participant added:

"After reading English articles about inclusive education, I feel inspired to fight for our rights on campus".

This aligns with Shakespeare's (2014) view, which emphasizes that access to global discourse on disability allows students to challenge discriminatory views and build a strong academic identity.

From the interview results, it is evident that the experience of learning English helps students with SEN build stronger self-confidence and academic identity. They feel more valued when they can actively participate in discussions, write papers, or use English in a professional context. Thus, mastering English serves a dual purpose: as a tool for intellectual development and a psychological mechanism to strengthen self-confidence and learning independence.

2.2. Autonomy and personal interest exploration

Higher education offers students with SEN greater autonomy to pursue their interests, often through English-based platforms such as student clubs, online communities, and international exchange programs. Participation in English-speaking environments allows them to discover new passions, connect with peers from diverse backgrounds, and challenge social stereotypes (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013).

Students with SEN benefit from these experiences by learning how to manage academic pressures alongside personal commitments. Moreover, assistive technologies (such as screen readers or captioning tools) in English classrooms support independence and encourage exploration of interests in writing, speaking, or digital media (Barq & Rehan, 2025).

The interview results indicate that for students with SEN, learning English in higher education is an important space for developing independence and learning autonomy. They felt that the campus environment provided greater opportunities to determine their course of study, manage their time, and explore their personal interests compared to their previous school years.

One participant stated:

"On campus, I have more freedom to choose activities I enjoy, including joining the English club. I can learn according to my interests and abilities".

This statement indicates that students with SEN view college as a place to get to know themselves and develop personal responsibility. Through English-based activities, such as debate clubs, writing activities, or cross-cultural communication classes, they can express themselves while also broadening their horizons. This finding aligns with Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013), who stated that experiences of autonomy in college help students develop self-confidence and social awareness, especially when they interact in diverse environments.

Furthermore, most participants expressed that English language activities, both inside and outside the classroom, provided them with opportunities to discover and explore their personal interests.

One participant explained:

"Through English language activities, I realized I enjoy writing and sharing ideas. I used to lack confidence, but now I dare to write online".

This quote shows that using English opens up space for self-expression and encourages students to discover potential they were previously unaware of. Some other students also felt that activities like presentations, creative projects, or participation in international forums gave them a new enthusiasm for learning and growing.

Another participant added:

"I joined an online community that uses English. From there, I learned a lot and made friends with people from other countries".

This reinforces the view that an English-speaking environment provides access to the global community and allows students with special needs to connect their personal interests with cross-cultural experiences that enrich the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

As the demand for English proficiency continues to rise globally, its importance for students with SEN in higher education cannot be overstated. English study fosters both social mobility and personal development. From the perspective of social mobility, English qualifications increase employability, smooth transitions into the labor market, and provide long-term economic resilience. From the perspective of personal development, English empowers SEN to build confidence, explore personal interests, and acquire social capital for leadership and advocacy. Ultimately, English in higher education equips students with SEN with the tools for independence, dignity, and equality.

Ultimately, studying English in higher education equips students with SEN with critical tools for achieving independence, dignity, and equality. It enables them not only to overcome systemic barriers but also to shape their futures as active global citizens. By integrating inclusive pedagogies, assistive technologies, and supportive environments, higher education institutions can ensure that English learning becomes a transformative pathway for both mobility and fulfillment.

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