

Main Difficulties Faced by EFL Students in Language Learning

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Abstract

Many undergraduate learners at English departments who study English as a foreign language are unable to speak and use language correctly in their post -graduate careers. This problem can be attributed to certain difficulties, which they faced throughout their education years that hinder their endeavors to learn. Therefore, this study aims to discover the main difficulties faced by EFL students in language learning and test the difficulty variable according to gender and college variables then find suitable solutions for enhancing learning. A questionnaire with 15 items and 5 scales were used to help in discovering the difficulties. The questionnaire was distributed to the selected sample of study which consists of 90 (male and female) students selected randomly from the 3rd and 4th year class levels at English departments from colleges of Languages and Education (Ibn-Rushd) at the University of Baghdad. The results of the study showed that EFL students face difficulties in language learning such as the role of society in discouraging English language learning, the learners' shyness, which prevents them from speaking English in fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation, and the influence of class size and crowdedness. After analyzing the results, some recommendations and suggestions were presented to solve the problem and eliminate difficulties.

Keywords: difficulties, EFL students, Language learning

الصعوبات الرئيسية التي يواجهها الطلبة الدارسون للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في تعلم اللغة

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قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة بغداد

الملخص

لا يتمكن الكثير من طلبة الدراسات الاولية الذين يدرسون اللغة الانكليزية لغة أجنبية في أقسام اللغة الانكليزية من التحدث واستخدام اللغة بكفاءة عندما يتخرجون ويعملون في اختصاصهم. تعزى هذه المشكلة الى صعوبات حقيقية يواجهها الطلبة خلال مسيرتهم الدراسية والتي تمنع نجاح تعلمهم ولذلك هدفت الدراسة الحالية الى إكتشاف الصعوبات الرئيسية التي يواجهها الطلبة الدارسون للغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية ومعرفة عامل الصعوبات بالنسبة لمتغيري الجنس والكلية ومن ثم إيجاد الحلول المناسبة لتحسين التعلم. تم استخدام أداة مكونة من 15 فقرة وسلم ذي خمسة معايير من أجل الكشف عن الصعوبات وتم توزيعها على عينة البحث والتي تكونت من 90 طالب وطالبة تم اختيارهم عشوائيا من المرحلتين الثالثة والرابعة في أقسام اللغة الانكليزية في كليتي التربية (ابن رشد) واللغات بجامعة بغداد. أظهرت النتائج وجود صعوبات ومشاكل في تعلم اللغة يواجهها الطلبة من كلا الجنسين في الكليتين المذكورتين ومنها: دور المجتمع في كبح تعلم اللغة الانكليزية، عامل الخجل الذي يحول دون تحدث الطلبة باللغة الانكليزية والخوف من أقران الاخطاء، ضعف التحفيز لدى الطلبة لأستخدام اللغة، وأيضا تأثير عامل حجم الصف و

إزدحام الطلبة داخل قاعة الدرس. وبعد تحليل النتائج تم تقديم بعض التوصيات والمقترحات من أجل حل المشاكل وتقليل الصعوبات.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الصعوبات ، الطلبة الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية ، تعلم اللغة

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem of the study and its significance

Although English is a universal language, it's the world's second language, the formal language in 70 countries, and English-speaking countries are accountable for about 40% of world's total GNP (Gross national product). English can be used everywhere with educated people around the world, but EFL learners are facing difficulties and obstacles in learning it and this must be considered and acknowledged by specialists and educators by paying attention to all challenges and reviewing everything related to EFL teaching and learning (Arshad, et al., 2012; Gan, 2013; Anderson's, 1995, p. 484). EFL learners are those who are learning and studying the English as a foreign language. Therefore, any learner who studies a foreign language means that he got weak opportunities to practice the real conversation of it, the people or the culture of it (Chasten, 1988, p. 136). In Richards, et al. (1992, p. 142) EFL was defined as any language being studied that is not the same mother language in the same country.

EFL Learners do their best in order to improve their ability in English language so they read, write, listen, speak, learn vocabulary and try their best to comprehend written and spoken discourse rather than utterances. The latter refer usually to spoken output perse. They have all essential capabilities to achieve what they want, but many of them are still unable to succeed or pass! Apparently, they have challenges which prevent their success and these challenges need to be investigated and studied. From my experience in teaching I think that it's difficult to discover these challenges and identify them accurately without the help of the students. In order to ensure suitable teaching-learning situations for our students and support their real learning, we need first to find out these difficulties and second find solutions with the help of the students themselves who stand at the core of the learning process and the problem, therefore they ought to be part of its solution consequently.

Although our students study English for 12 years but they do not master it. It occurs because students didn't study the language in a proper way. The majority of the students are getting the language as a written text and reading about it but they are not engaged or motivated to take part in real situations. There is no support by up to date devices or technologies to be used for enhancing the language learning process at English departments from colleges of Languages and Education (Ibn-Rushd).

1.2 The value of the study

The value of the present study falls into two stages: the first to identify and define main difficulties and challenges that our EFL students face and suffer from so this study is significant for EFL learners to show their worries, troubles, factors that affect their success which of course affect their future and personalities. It's just like giving them freedom to speak up without fear or hesitation. The second stage is represented by showing these difficulties and challenges to English teachers so they can benefit from them in doing some modifications in their teaching routines or even in their way of dealing with their students. They will take these challenges on a golden plate without even doing efforts or wasting their time therefore this study is significant for teachers to

know the weak points in their teaching or behavior and take part in both: solving them and engaging in curriculum design.

1.3 Aims

This study aims to find out:

- 1- What are the difficulties that EFL college students face in language learning?
- 2- Are there statistically significant gender differences regarding difficulties in language learning?
- 3- Are there statistically significant differences regarding difficulties between students in the College of Languages and those in the college of Education (Ibn Rushd) for Humanities at the University of Baghdad?

1.4 Hypotheses

This study will test the following two null hypotheses:

- 1- There are no statistically significant differences at (0.05) level of significance between the mean scores of students' difficulties at college of Languages and those at College of Education (Ibn Rushd) for Humanities in language learning.
- 2- There are no statistically significant differences at (0.05) level of significance between the mean scores of female and male students' difficulties in language learning at both colleges.

1.5 Limits of the study

The present study is limited to 3rd and 4th years' students at English departments in both College of Languages and College of Education (Ibn Rushd) for Humanities at Baghdad University.

2. Theoretical Background

Language learning refers to the process of learning and gaining new foreign language (Horman, 1979, p. 125). Crystal said: it is a process of underlying a new language whether a foreign language or a mother tongue (2003, 257).

2.1 Difficulties in English Language Learning

Gan (2012, p. 34) referred that unsuitable opportunities for using the English inside the class, weakness in follow up with language progress, and unavailability of classroom situation to practice English speaking and never outside the class, altogether construct many difficulties for EFL students. In Gan (2013, p. 61) he mentioned that many challenges that students face were attributed to deficiency in: language proficiency, spoken practice, abilities to converse, seminars in educational speaking, emphatic effect, weak opportunities to speak and converse in English, and error recognition and correction. There are some common errors like:

- 1- **Writing an essay:** In writing an essay the student should know how to join sentences together to form a paragraph and how paragraphs are arranged to constitute a whole text about a certain topic. Some students fail to make correct sentences or coherent essay (Nataq, 2014, p. 48).

- 2- **Spelling:** it is one of many problems that encountered English college students. The most difficult aspect for Iraqi EFL learners is “A complex correspondence between sounds and letters”. Students might not cope with the entire regime of the English language and therefore may utilize incorrect letter such as:
- Trying to choose between either two or three consonants (C, Z, and S) recognise=> recognize.
 - Trying to make decision in using either /e/ or /i/: - Devided => divided.
 - Trying to delete some vowels especially (e) when it disappears in the middle of some words or from the spoken form such as: Intresting=>interesting.
 - Trying to substitute sounds one with the other such as: Cuikly => quickly Amd => and (Sabeeha & Wi'am, 2006, p.47).
- 3- **Vowels:** vowels can cause challenges that could be faced by Iraqi EFL students due to the big difference in the vowel system between Arabic and English languages. In addition, students are unfamiliar with some morphemes of many words involving other sounds and spelling changes in patterns (Ibid: p. 48).
- 4- **Vocabulary:** vocabulary is considered as a major element of proficiency in language learning and it supplies a framework for students' way of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Vocabulary learning is very important for people who learn English both as a foreign and second language. Learning of vocabulary is based on the information of specific habits (Eman, 2004, p.10).

2.2 The Four Skills

2.2.1 Listening

Children in their first language acquisition learn how to speak as posterior behavior to listening. Also, it is about engaging six skills together including: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating and responding to messages. It refers to the ability to understand the spoken language of the native speaker (Abbas & Narjes, 2016, p.180).

2.2.2 Speaking

It can be defined as a basic skill in constructing a language and it is a complicated skill but unique for humans. Also speaking can be defined as the process of using verbal utterances in delivering messages. Or “the active use of language to express meanings so that other people can make sense of them” (Al Hosni, 2014, p. 22). Mastering the speaking skill is as if mastering all other language skills therefore any student who can speak English fluently will get more opportunities for future work, or more study chances but it should be mastered not only inside the classroom, but also outside it and in real situations (Belhabib, 2015, p. 13).

2.2.3 Writing

“Writing is an act of typing letters and characters on different materials such as paper, wood and the purpose is to recording thoughts and idea. It is including encoding of message of same kind that people are able to translate their thoughts into written language” (Byren, 1988, p. 490).

In teaching writing to EFL learners, the emphasis is on the oral approach rather than the written one because the linguists from De Saussure to Chomsky, they focus on spoken language and regard it as the first position (www.openlearn.open.com:18).

2.2.4 Reading

It is the most important skill for students because it is the chosen instrument to widen their knowledge. It is essential for learners who study English as a foreign language because most sources of knowledge are published in English. A good way of getting started on developing your reading skill is to think about how you read text therefore there many techniques that you can use (www.openlearn.open.com:1).

2.3 Some other Factors that Affect Language Learning

2.3.1 Unqualified teachers

This factor is the first in affecting language learning and what makes the solution difficult for this problem is the difficulty in deciding whether the English teacher is well qualified or not for teaching which due to the reality that many communities are English language learners and whatever the teacher says, produce, pronounce, write, etc. will be considered as correct even if it's not. Therefore, learners start confusing things together because each teacher is telling them something different from the other one. The major reason behind this problem is due to the incorrect translation made by teachers from their native languages. As an example, for this: the word "cup" is pronounce by some teachers as [kap] and sometimes by [kop] or sometimes pronounced with a sound vowel /ʌ/ that does not exist in the sound systems of many African languages therefore there is a problem in pronouncing the word by many teachers (Jacob, 2018: 1).

2.3.2 Limited Learning Environments

Another factor that affects the language learning is the environment. In this point the matter is not concerned with the school location, and it is not about the furniture or the lighting and air-condition although they are all important and affect the language learning. But the idea here is about the limited environment which means that learners cannot practice the language outside the classroom as there is no necessity for that, but learners only take care and pay attention to use the language correctly inside the classroom to satisfy their teacher. When they go out no matter at all and they lack hearing people speaking in ordinary English language therefore it is considered a challenge to learn correct English (Ibid).

2.3.3 Inadequate learning materials

Another factor that can affect language learning is the learning materials. It includes any tools that support the learning process, for example, although books are necessary in teaching and learning they can do nothing by themselves. Tools like audio devices are also important but the problem is when learners note a sound symbol in their book how they will be sure of its pronunciation? It's true that learners of English language graduate as teachers after four years of studying English without getting the benefit of listening to native speakers. Even when Learners possess their book in order to read but still unable to pronounce certain words correctly for example how can learners know the pronunciation of the word 'ewe' unless by hearing the correct pronunciation. They will keep searching for sources to listen and learn from native speakers

therefore they will learn from movies but unfortunately with incorrect pronunciation because they contain dialects and slangs that are not suitable for many forms of communication (Jacob, 2018: 2).

2.3.4 Students Don't Take Their Study Seriously

Students tend to be unserious in studying English language and they think they can use the language outside the classroom with incorrect grammar and pronunciation as the same as in answering questions in the exam. As well as outside classrooms or in streets communication does not need any sentences with perfect or correct grammar to be intelligible in speaking, so they don't care about the systematic use of it which leads to failure in learning the language. Another point is that EFL learners neglect studying English and specify time for it and in most cases they study it only when the teacher teaching it inside the class and after finishing the class they won't pay attention for it and even they do not spend time for learning how to pronounce words, or practice time for essay writing and how to improve their writing skill or even they never think to do extra efforts to study and learn new vocabularies. All of that affect their language learning. Although the learners are provided with all necessary factors for learning language either with well-qualified teachers, suitable tools, and possibility of listening to native speakers, still some challenges may affect EFL learners for example: the over listening of native speakers inside the class and learners' dependency on the teacher ((Jacob, 2018).

2.4 Discussion of Some Related Previous Studies

The following are some studies which investigated problematic issues and difficulties faced by EFL learners in learning. Difficulties and problems that influenced English language learning had been investigated by many researchers. Mann (1985, p. 37) stated that searching factors that influence language learning began as early as the 17th century while Ballatine (1993) mentioned that these factors always refer to demography. In previous studies, these factors were divided into internal (refers to the language itself) and external factors (Nariswariatmojo, 2011). Farooq et al. (2011, p.14) stated that school, peer, family and student can be considered as external factors. They assert that the general situation of the house can be affective on learner's performance in education and in specific well-educated parents can provide their children with the necessary learning situation inside their houses to improve their education. Tariq et al. (2013, p. 13) studied the case of Pakistani students who live in rural areas and their parents in general were against learning. The family factor was confirmed in this study to affect language learning for those learners. The conclusion showed that parents' culture, interest, and family are essential factors in English learning.

In Rathod's (2012) study has shown that the issue of community social/ economical class has its effect on the language learning. He assured that learners who come from rich families are more successful in learning the English language when compared to those who come from poor socio-economic environment. Another study by Arshad et al. (2012, p. 6) reported that suitable resources of learning will be presented by parents who come from socio-economic rank. In Primlyn's study (2013), the researcher showed that many challenges in language learning can be attributed to the integration between the social and cultural characteristics in language learning, as each language is a combination of both. An internal issue was raised by Allard, et al. (2011, p. 677), where they mentioned the interference problem between the cultural and native language.

A study by Alkhaldeh (2010) investigated teachers' perceptions about different sorts of challenges faced by Jordanian students. The results showed many problems, such as weak follow up by parents, learners' negative attitudes towards English learning, class big size, and weakness in teacher training.

3. Methodology

3.1 The population and sample of the study

The population includes the college of Languages / English department (3rd and 4th) years and the college of Education (Ibn Rushd) / English department (3rd and 4th) years in the University of Baghdad. The sample includes 90 students (males & females) who were randomly selected from the population.

3.2 Instrument

An open questionnaire with the following question: (what makes English language learning difficult for you?) was distributed randomly to students from 3rd and 4th year at English departments in both colleges. Their answers were collected, analysed and rephrased in a form of questionnaire with 15 items and 5 scale options as: always, usually, often, sometimes, and never. This questionnaire was distributed to the randomly selected sample of 90 males and females' students at 3rd and 4th years in the English departments at both colleges.

The students were asked to identify the difficulties they face in language learning by selecting items from the questionnaire, and their responses were collected and analyzed to find out the results of the study.

3.2.1 Face Validity

The researcher showed the questionnaire to experts from the same field of study to gather their opinions and views about the validity of the items and they agreed on its suitability and considered it valid.

3.2.2 Reliability

In order to achieve reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher used test-retest. It was applied to (20) students, then after (14) days the same instrument was applied to the same (20) students. The results showed that there is reliability coefficient between the first responses and the second. By this, the researcher ensured the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and applied it to the selected sample of 90 students.

3.3 Data collected from questionnaires

After applying the questionnaire to the selected sample of 90 students, data were collected to show the main difficulties that EFL students face in language learning with their weighted average and centric weight as shown in table (1). The table shows that items got a weighted average between (2.488 – 3.744) and centric weight between (49.76-74.88). The item was considered difficult when its weighted average ranged from (3 – and more) and with centric weight (60 – or more) according to the specified criterion for substitutes weights as (3) which resulted from adding all substitutes' weights divided on their number. The resulted weights showed that only items with (2 – 3 – 4 – 15) numbers are not difficult on students in language learning because their weighted averages were less than (3) criterion and their centric weights less than (60) while other items considered essential difficulties faced by EFL students in language learning because their weighted averages were more than (3) criterion and their centric weights more than (60). Then items were rearranged according to their weighted average and centric weight in order to show the most difficult to the less difficult ones as shown in Table no. (2) .

Table (1) The weighted average and centric weight of the difficulties that EFL college students face in language learning

Items	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Never	Weighted average	Centric weight
1-Grammatical errors a serious problem for you?	26	28	11	13	12	3.477	69.54
2-English speaking skill is difficult for you?	6	18	10	36	20	2.488	49.76
3-interference (Arabic) make me confused?	9	25	9	30	17	2.766	55.32
4-writing is a major problem for you?	7	17	19	27	20	2.6	52
5-pronunciation of words in English is difficult?	18	19	18	26	9	3.122	62.44
6-Can you speak English with your fellows?	16	32	14	21	7	3.322	66.44
7- Do you think that you study English as subject not as language?	18	23	13	19	17	3.066	61.32
8- Your society discourage you for English language learning?	38	19	10	18	5	3.744	74.88
9- Lack of Interest and Ruthless Attitude towards College Teachers?	7	37	16	20	10	3.122	62.44

10- Role of Motivation	22	24	15	23	6	3.5	70
11- The learners' shyness prevents them from speaking English and afraid of mistakes?	29	25	15	17	4	3.744	74.88
12- The learner unable to use English in all aspect of life like conversation in real life?	13	38	14	20	5	3.377	67.54
13- The teacher follows traditional teaching technique?	24	21	10	22	13	3.422	68.44
14- The influence of class size and crowded class?	18	33	18	18	3	3.5	70
15- Reading and understanding English text is difficult to me?	19	19	12	15	25	2.911	58.22

Table (2) Rearrange the items of difficulties that EFL College student face from the most difficult items to the less difficult

Items	Weighted average	Centric weight
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8-Your society discourage you for English language learning?	3.744	74.88
11-The learners shyness prevent them from speaking English and afraid of mistakes?	3.744	74.88
10-Role of Motivation	3.5	70
14-The influence of class size and crowded class?	3.5	70
1-Grammatical errors a serious problem for you?	3.477	69.54
13-The teacher follows traditional teaching technique?	3.422	68.44
12-The learner unable to use English in all aspect of life like conversation in real life?	3.377	67.54
6-Can you speak English with your fellows?	3.322	66.44
5-Pronunciation of words in English is difficult?	3.122	62.44
9-Lack of Interest and Ruthless Attitude towards College Teachers?	3.122	62.44
7-Do you think that you study English as subject not as language?	3.066	61.32
15-Reading and understanding English text is difficult for me?	2.911	58.22

3-Interference (Arabic) make me confused?	2.766	55.32
4-Writing is a major problem for you?	2.6	52
2-English speaking skill is difficult for you?	2.488	49.76

4. Results

Results Analysis

4.1 Result Related to the First Aim

In order to achieve the first aim to discover the difficulties that EFL college students face in language learning, the researcher calculated the weighted averages and centric weights for all items in the questionnaire based on students' responses and discovered that items' numbers: (8 – 11 – 10 – 14 – 1 – 13 – 12 – 6 – 5 – 9 – and 7) are considered difficulties in EFL language learning and their difficulty levels were arranged from the most difficult items to the less difficult ones as shown above in table no. (2).

4.2 Result Related to the Second Aim and Verification of the First Null Hypothesis

In order to achieve the second aim to discover the statistically significant differences in difficulties in language learning between males and females, if any. The researcher used the T-test for two independent samples to find out if there are significant differences in difficulties in language learning between males and females. The mean value for females was (56.818) with standard deviation (60.388) while the mean value for males was (48.434) with standard deviation (4.621) and the calculated T-value was (0.939) at (88) degree of freedom which is lower than the tabulated T-value (1.99) which indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in difficulties between males and females in language learning, as shown in Table (3).

Table (3) Sample of Differences in Difficulties between Males and Females

Sex	N.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Calculated T-value	tabulated T-value	Degree of Freedom	Significance at 0.05
Females	44	56.8182	60.38877	0.939	1.99	88	Not significant
Males	46	48.4348	4.62194				

4.3 Results Related to the Third Aim and Verification of the Second Null Hypothesis

1- In order to achieve the third aim to discover the statistically significant differences in difficulties between students in the college of Education (Ibn Rushd) and those in the college of Languages at Baghdad University, if any, the researcher used the T-test for two independent samples to find out if there are significant differences in difficulties in language learning between students in the college of Languages and those in the college of Education (Ibn Rushd). The mean value for the college of Education (Ibn-Rushd) was (49.638) with standard deviation (5.727) while the mean value for the college of Languages was (46.581) with standard deviation (2.584) and the calculated T-value was (3.212) which is bigger than the tabulated T-value (1.99) at (88) degree of freedom which indicate that there are statistically significant differences in difficulties between students in the college of Education (Ibn-Rushd) and those in the college of Languages at Baghdad University and these difficulties were more in favor of the highest mean value for the college of Education (Ibn-Rushd), as shown in Table (4).

Table (4) Sample of Differences in Difficulties between Students at the college of Education (Ibn-Rushed) and the college of Languages.

Colleges	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Calculated T-value	tabulated T-value	Degree of Freedom	Significance at 0.05
Ibn Rushd	47	49.6383	5.72723	3.212	1.99	88	significant
Languages	43	46.5814	2.58413				

4.4 Conclusion

The major aim of this study is to investigate the difficulties that EFL college students face in language learning. The results of the different domains show that female students have the highest means (56.8182), while male students have the lowest mean (48.4348) and college of Education (Ibn-Rushd) has the highest means (49.6383) when compared to the means of the college of Languages (46.5814) which is the lowest. It's found from the investigation in fifteen items that item (8) has the highest rank. This may be due to the negative effect of society on learners. On the other hand, the lowest rank is item (2). This may be due to the low ability of few learners in the four skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

4.5 Recommendation & Suggestions

Considering the previous conclusions, the researcher recommends that:

- 1- Awareness campaign in coordination between the Ministry of Education and Higher Education should take place in order to raise community / society awareness as to the importance of learning English language as a focal means of communication these days.
- 2- Adopting a student-oriented approach to activate the role of students inside classrooms and motivate them to participate and speak through activities, games, discussions, songs and using the up to date technologies in facilitating learning English language.
- 3- Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) should invest categorically in their infrastructures relevant to learning English language such as: classes, labs, libraries, etc. so real learning can take place with relaxed conditions including seating, lighting, class size, air-conditioning, smart boards, new technologies including: cameras, speakers, and data-show.

On the basis of the previous recommendations, the researcher suggests the following:

- 1- A study, investigating the possibility of using real-life situations techniques for teaching EFL learners, should be conducted so that students can engage and learn more fruitfully.
- 2- An investigating study needs to be conducted to discover all obstacles that prevent both the Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Education to create new teaching – learning atmosphere and find solutions.

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