

SOME OF THE CHALLENGES THAT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FACE

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Abstract

Acquiring a language is considered one of the primary goals for students; but often, they face various challenges. In this literature review, the researcher addresses several of these challenges, with the most prominent ones being Pronunciation difficulties, dialects in the target language, Grammar rules, Syntactic rules, Oral Communication, and Comprehension, and finally, Vocabulary development among learners.

This literature review aims to highlight these challenges to draw the attention of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and those in environments where English is not the native language.

Keywords: Acquiring a language, challenges, pronunciation difficulties, grammar rules, oral communication, vocabulary development

Introduction

The acquisition of English language is often a primary goal in many educational institutions, but there are typically several challenges that students face in achieving this objective. For instance, the dialect spoken by native English speakers can be a difficulty for students, especially in an environment where English is not their first language. Additionally, among these challenges are language rules and grammatical structures, which can pose difficulties for language learners, particularly in terms of writing correctly. The challenge of oral communication is also prominent, as learners may struggle to control the pace and trajectory of their spoken language.

Furthermore, the last point discussed in this paper is vocabulary development among language learners. This includes both the quantity and quality of vocabulary that learners need to acquire, and the considerable amount of time it takes to build a solid foundation that enables them to master the target language.

1- Pronunciation

What Is Pronunciation?

According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012) and Yates and Zielinski (2009), pronunciation is the way of producing the sounds that are used to make meaning when speakers speak. It involves consonants and vowels of a language (segments), features of speech beyond the level of the individual segments, like stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, phrasing (suprasegmental features), and how the voice is described (voice quality). All of the above parts work together when speakers talk so that problems in one part can influence on the other and this can make a person's pronunciation easy or difficult to comprehend.

Pronunciation is the production of a sound system which does not interfere with communication either from the speakers' or the listeners' viewpoint (Paulston & Burder, 1976). Pronunciation is the way of uttering a word in an accepted manner (Otlowski, 1998).

A- In a study titled "Improved DNN-English Acoustic Model Specially For Phonotactic Language Recognition Usage in 2019," the author mentioned one of the main challenges facing English language learners, which is that native English speakers use the language in a way different from how it is written, lacking the formal aspect. Therefore, it becomes difficult for listeners who are not native speakers to understand or learn it in an easy or fast manner, and this usage is referred to as "colloquialism" or "slang."

B- In a separate study titled "The Role of Phonetic Training in L2 Speech Learning" for Cristina Aliaga-García conducted 2007, the researcher highlighted several factors that significantly impact the acquisition and learning of a second language. These factors include age, gender, the surrounding environment, and cultural background, as well as the reliance on the extent of perception and knowledge of the first language. The researcher also discussed the strong correlation between mastering the accent and familiarity with it and the process of learning the second language.

The author also pointed out the extended period that language learners often require, spanning several years, to master pronunciation and accent in the second language. The researcher considered this to be one of the major challenges faced by learners of the target language.

C- In a book published for J. Harmer 2001 titled "The Practice of English Language Teaching," the author highlighted that many teachers do not prioritize teaching accents or proper pronunciation when instructing a second language. They believe that mere comprehension and communication in English are sufficient, and that focusing on teaching correct pronunciation is a waste of time. The author pointed out that teachers often mistakenly believe that communication between students and teachers in the target language is the most important aspect, but this is a significant misconception. Effective communication is a different concept from teaching a language and mastering its correct pronunciation, which is a distinct and separate skill.

The author also noted that communication between teachers and students is something teachers are accustomed to, and they have the ability to understand what is required. Additionally, students from similar backgrounds who speak the same language and make the same errors often find it easy to understand each other. It was also mentioned that speaking and practicing the language within the classroom setting does not provide a genuine environment for using the language with its native speakers.

The researcher emphasized that mastering proper English pronunciation significantly contributes to improving the speaking skills of second language or target language learners.

2- Grammar

Definition of English Grammar

James E. Purpura stated in his book *Assesing Grammar*: "Grammar is defined as a systematic way accounting for predicting an ideal speaker's or hearer's knowledge of the language. This is done by a set of rules or principles that can be used to generate all well-formed or grammatical utterances in the language."

Penny Ur said that: “Grammar is sometimes defined as the way words are put together to make correct sentences”.

A- In 2016, a study titled "Grammatical difficulties encountered by second language learners of English" was conducted. The author highlighted that many educators tend to prioritize the four language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and grammar in English language instruction. However, they frequently encounter significant challenges when it comes to teaching grammar, leading to discomfort in the classroom. These challenges have prompted an exploration of the difficulties associated with teaching grammar to second language learners. One of the challenges faced by learners is pluralization in English, where many students make errors in using plural forms and neglect to add the plural marker at the end of words. The author also observed the improper use of pronouns for everyone, underscoring the importance of correctly employing plural nouns, as this is a common mistake made by many students. The author also highlighted several other examples of common errors made by students. The author further discussed various challenges that learners encounter in English grammar, including the difficulty of using verbs. They pointed out that using verbs in nominal sentences or, conversely, omitting verbs in a sentence is a common issue. Continuing the discussion, the author mentioned that learners also grapple with English verb tenses. Many students frequently make mistakes, such as using the wrong tenses within the same sentence, mixing present and past tenses, or incorrectly using question words in tense construction. In conclusion, the author emphasized that mastering the rules of the English language requires a significant amount of effort and time.

B- In 2010, a study titled "An Analysis on the Grammatical Errors in the Student's' Writing" was conducted, focusing on the grammatical errors made by students, which can be challenging obstacles in learning a second language. The study categorizes these errors into five sections: Sentence Structure, English verb tenses, Pronouns, Prepositions, and Spelling mistakes in writing.

In terms of sentence structure, the researcher noted that these errors often occur due to the influence of the native language on the target language. Additionally, the author highlighted that errors can also result from a literal word-for-word translation from the second language to the first language.

Regarding errors related to English verb tenses, the author attributed them to the literal translation of words into the target language, often done word by word. Furthermore, the study noted that another cause of errors in English verb tenses is the application of the rules of the first language to English.

The use of pronouns was mentioned as another source of errors, with the author pointing out that these errors frequently arise from a lack of agreement between pronouns and the subject or object they refer to.

In the context of prepositions in the English language, the author explained that they are typically short words with specific meanings that enhance sentence clarity and specificity. However, students often neglect to use these prepositions correctly.

The study also emphasized that spelling mistakes are common among many students, which the researcher attributed to students' incorrect use or placement of punctuation marks.

These are the key points highlighted by the author regarding the difficulties caused by English language rules when learning English as a second language.

3- Listening oral communication

Definition of Listening oral communication

According to Anderson and Lynch (1988), arguing what is successful listening, understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means.

Underwood (1989) defined listening as “the activity of paying attention and trying to get meaning from something we hear”.

Chamot, and Kupper (1989) defined "listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement".

A-In the research paper published in 2011 with the title " A Study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' English Listening Comprehension and the Strategies for Improvement" the researcher mentioned that one of the main reasons for the difficulty in acquiring English language is the inability to control the speed and sound level of the speaker, which can vary in levels and speeds. It is also related to certain psychological and social factors to which the speaker belongs. The author noted that students face significant challenges in reproducing what they hear in the classroom for better understanding and comprehension of the audio material. The control over this aspect is typically in the hands of the teacher, who decides when and where to replay the audio for students and the expected level of understanding in the classroom. The researcher also highlighted the difficulty in comprehending spoken language for students due to their limited vocabulary in the target language. This limitation hinders their understanding in the classroom and presents a significant challenge in language acquisition. Additionally, the researcher pointed out that the lack of understanding of the target language by listeners when transitioning from one point to another, repeating a specific point, enumerating, or giving examples in different aspects, directly affects the difficulty of acquiring the second language. Among the challenges faced by English language learners is the inability to understand the general context of the text. Differences in cultures and the absence of deep understanding of a specific point make it difficult for students to comprehend the second language. Superficial understanding of a specific point or gestures by the speaker also makes acquiring the English language extremely difficult. The researcher mentioned that one of the challenges faced by English language learners is the need for continuous focus and effort in understanding audio material. This demands a high level of concentration, connecting ideas, analyzing the content, and sustaining this effort for an extended period, which is considered a significant challenge for language learners. Regarding the failure to understand a specific word or sentence in the audio, it can lead to a feeling of failure among students and discomfort in the classroom, which, in turn, affects their focus during the lesson. This is also considered one of the difficulties faced by English language learners.

B-Yagang, Fan mentioned in their study titled "Listening: Problems and Solutions" that there are four main sources of difficulty in acquiring the target language through oral comprehension, which are the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener, and the location where the listening takes place

The researcher noted that the message conveyed through oral communication is typically fast-paced and can take various forms, such as gestures or diverse topics from everyday life. This can be very challenging for

students, and it would be easier if the information were presented in a written form. The rapid change in conversation context during a discussion can also cause a lot of confusion for students.

Examples of the challenges in comprehending spoken language include news reports where it's difficult to predict what the speaker will say next or request for repetitions. Additionally, students often struggle when the speech contains sounds that are typically pronounced quickly, like vowel sounds or other similar elements that are difficult to distinguish and aren't usually a problem in written texts.

Conversations that involve colloquial or informal language can also be challenging for students, as they are more accustomed to formal or official vocabulary, leading to confusion. In informal conversations, many language users tend to omit elements of sentences, which can further complicate understanding for learners of the target language.

1- Speaker

The researcher mentioned that often, when a speaker delivers a lecture or discusses a specific topic, they may use many words that are considered obstacles to students' listening comprehension. For instance, they may use key terms, less frequently repeated words, explanations, or words with little apparent meaning. This can create significant challenges for students in grasping the main subject of the lecture. Even students with a high level of language proficiency may find such word choices time-consuming.

Students tend to get accustomed to a particular language or accent from their teachers, making it difficult for them to understand a new speaker.

2- Listeners

The researcher emphasized that English language learners often lack a complete understanding of the intricacies of the English language, which makes it challenging for them to predict missing words or what comes after a specific word. This lack of knowledge contributes to their difficulty in acquiring the language correctly.

Additionally, students' lack of familiarity with the customs, traditions, and social knowledge of the target language is a major factor in the difficulty of comprehending the language. Language learners typically spend most of their time dealing with written and visual materials, which can lead to a deficit in their listening skills. It's essential for students to dedicate time to develop their listening skills to improve their overall language proficiency.

As previously mentioned, prolonged focus on listening passages can result in students losing the necessary knowledge from the passage, which can be another challenge they face in language acquisition.

3- Physical Setting

The researcher pointed out that the presence of noise or background sounds accompanying audio materials can be a hindrance to students' comprehension of the auditory content. These sounds can distract the listener's attention and make it challenging to focus on the material. Audio materials typically lack body language and the ability to see the speaker's facial expressions, which can also be obstacles to understanding the auditory content effectively.

Additionally, the presence of accompanying sounds in audio materials or poor recording quality can be a

significant barrier to student comprehension. Inadequate audio quality can make it difficult for students to understand the auditory materials.

4- Vocabulary

Definition of Vocabulary

According to Richards and Renandya (2002) "vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis of how learners speak, listen, read and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, listening to the native speaker, and using language in different context, reading or watching television".

Brown (2001) views vocabulary items as a boring list of words that must be defined and memorized by the students, lexical forms are seen in their central role in contextualized, meaningful language.

A-The researcher in the research paper titled " A Study on students' difficulties in learning vocabulary " in 2014 discussed the challenges of learning vocabulary in English as a second language and emphasized the significant role vocabulary plays in mastering the target language. The author highlighted that acquiring vocabulary greatly contributes to the development of language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in English. The researcher also mentioned the strong correlation between vocabulary and effective communication among people.

In this context, here is a summary of some elements that make acquiring new vocabulary in the target language challenging:

1- **Pronunciation:** The author mentioned that pronunciation is one of the difficulties that hinder second language acquisition for learners. The various accents of spoken English pose a big challenge for English learners. Many learners complain about the acute differences they perceive and sense between the American and British accents. As a matter of fact, one finds a variety of accents within the same country. These are another factor that hinders the smooth comprehension of learners of the spoken English.

2- **Spelling:** The lack of alignment in spelling can lead to errors, both in pronunciation and spelling, which can make words difficult. While most English spelling follows some rules, there are also significant exceptions. Words that contain silent letters can pose a particular problem.

3- **Length and Complexity:** Learning long words doesn't seem to be more difficult than learning short words. However, as a general rule, high-frequency words in English tend to be shorter, making them more likely to be encountered by learners. This is a factor that favors "learnability."

4- **Grammar:** Another problem is the grammatical rules associated with the word, especially if they differ from their equivalents in the learner's native language. This often leads to difficulty in language acquisition.

5- **Meaning:** When words have overlapping meanings, and it's challenging for the learner to determine the correct meaning of the word, it becomes one of the challenges faced by students trying to acquire a second language. This leads to difficulties in using the word correctly.

6- **Similarity to the Native Language:** When some English words are similar to certain words in the learner's native language, it can often have a negative impact, as it may lead to confusion in usage for language learners.

Also, the researcher mentioned several factors that play a significant role in the difficulties of acquiring vocabulary in English, including "multi-word elements, irregularities in words, and proper word usage."

B- In this 2001 study titled "Learning Vocabulary in another Language ", which specializes in vocabulary and its teaching methodologies, the author addressed an important topic regarding the quantity of words a language learner needs to master and the differences in acquiring these words between a native speaker and a second language speaker. The author mentioned that the vast quantity of words that a speaker of a language needs to learn grows automatically within a native speaker through family and community exposure. In contrast, language learners need to learn a significant number of words to master the language.

The author also added that there are several divisions to be considered to understand why building vocabulary is challenging for language learners. There is a group of frequently repeated words that are crucial as they cover a significant portion of spoken or written language in various fields. Another type is specialized vocabulary, as the English language is rich in vocabulary, and specific words are used in different contexts. The type of words used in children's stories, for instance, differs significantly from those used in academic or journalistic contexts.

In the realm of language learning, some words are used in a simple and limited manner, and these words are usually fewer in number in the language. The author pointed out that these complexities in the English language are influential factors affecting vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

Success in acquiring English as a second language is indeed distinctive, but initially, both teachers and students must confront the challenges that come their way. Familiarizing oneself with new teaching methods and engaging in substantial practice outside the classroom are excellent ways to overcome the difficulty of the dialect spoken by native speakers.

Understanding the rules of the English language through simplified methods, along with thorough practice and training in proper writing, is crucial for success in mastering the target language's grammar.

When it comes to oral communication between students and their teachers, it's not always sufficient for students to understand how to deal with the language and the context of conversation. Therefore, encouraging students to engage in language practice with native speakers is an excellent approach to acquiring a second language.

Moreover, students should be aware of the adequate quantity of vocabulary required to master the language, how to use it effectively, and that this process cannot happen quickly; it requires a substantial amount of time.

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