

# English Language Teachers' Perceived Difficulty of English Skills Faced by ESL Learners

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**Abstract** – Many ESL (English as a Second Language) learners are aware of the importance of having good English language proficiency. Yet, many have not had much success learning the language. Why do learners fail to master the language? What skills do they find difficult to master? The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties that hinder ESL learners from mastering the main language skills which are speaking, writing, reading and listening skills. The respondents for this study are 27 English subject teachers from five different secondary schools. The English teachers were selected as respondents as the teachers knew best how their students were performing and what problems they faced with English language learning. The questionnaire which is the main research instrument in the study was used to collect data on the views of the English teachers on the skills that their ESL learners lacked and the challenges they faced with language learning. The findings revealed that the learners' biggest difficulty with the Speaking skill, the Reading skill and also the Listening skill, was with vocabulary and expressions. With the Writing skill, the learners have most difficulties with using grammatically correct sentences in addition to problems with vocabulary. Thus, this indicates that vocabulary is the biggest difficulty for ESL learners, and grammar too is a challenge when they write in English. Thus, new English language teaching and learning methods should be implemented to help solve ESL learners' problems with English language learning. **Copyright © 2015 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.**

**Keywords:** ESL, Language learning, Language skills, Vocabulary

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysians these days have already begun to realize the importance of having good English language proficiency. Not having good English Language ability is a hindrance from getting better academic achievements at the higher learning level and also at the workplace since it obstructs one from getting promotions and recognitions at the workplace.

As a student at the higher level of learning, one's lack of proficiency in English will hinder him from advancing well academically. In higher learning institutions, proficiency in English is vital in achieving academic success as most lectures, tutorials and notes are provided in English language. Drennan and Rohde [1] who studied the effects of English language proficiency on academic achievement among accounting students in University of Queensland, Australia reported that students with limited use of English faced problems in advanced subjects. This shows that one's English language proficiency affects one's academic performance.

Secondly, possessing good English language skills is an asset in securing one's dream job. Most employers especially in the private sectors seek employees who are proficient in English. In a 2005 report in Malaysia Today entitled "Malaysia has 60,000 Graduates Unemployed", the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department found that around 60,000 Malaysian graduates are unemployed due to the lack of important skills which include communication skills and English Language skills [2]. The report also revealed that 70% of graduates of public universities, 26% graduates of private higher learning institutions and 34% of those who graduated from foreign universities are still jobless [3]. This indicates that the lack of English language proficiency among Malaysians can create a problem for them in finding a job and this would further increase the unemployment rate in the country.

Good English Language skills are also required at the workplace, especially if one works in the private sector. The inability to use English at the workplace will be an obstacle for one's promotion and career advancement. English is also most widely used in communicating around the world, and this further adds to the reasons why Malaysian learners should be proficient in English.

Many Malaysians have thus already embraced the fact that having good English Language skills is crucial. Yet, many have not had much success learning the language. Why do learners fail to master the language? What skills do they find difficult to master? These are some of the pertinent questions that needed answers in order to move forward in producing successful English Language learners in the future.

The purpose of this study then is to investigate the difficulties and challenges that hinder local ESL (English as a Second Language) learners from mastering the main language skills which are speaking, writing, reading and listening skills. The findings of this study can be helpful in assisting the Ministry of Education in Malaysia in identifying the problems associated with English Language learning in Malaysia, and would subsequently help find possible solutions towards improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning the English subject at the school level.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

Gaudart [4] states that the Malaysian society is constantly regaled with opinions about the falling standards of English but falling where and in what way, is seldom mentioned. It is always important to search for the root of the problems if we want to solve it.

According to Hiew [5], students spend between 11 to 13 years learning English at school, but many are still not able to master the language upon completing secondary school. Hiew [5] is of the view that this is caused by several factors which include the learners' learning methods, motivation, perceptions, teachers' teaching methods and the syllabus. Lewey [6] on the other hand, attributes this failure to the Malaysian education system which is examination-oriented. This exam-oriented system pressures learners to only aim to score high in their exam, ignoring other aspects of the importance of learning. Besides, teachers and students now focus more on the topics that will be tested, rather than on learning the language as a whole.

English Language, being a second language for many Malaysians, and even a foreign language to some others, poses a challenge to many ESL learners when learning the various skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Peng [7] found that of the various skills, speaking is the skill that Chinese students found most difficult to learn and reading was least difficult. In

teaching the writing skill which many learners also find challenging, Barkaoui [8] advises teachers to help students see themselves as successful writers and to give them a lot of positive experiences by praising them when they produce good writing and to make them feel that they can become good writers.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

The respondents for this study are 27 local English subject teachers who are currently teaching in secondary schools. These 27 teachers are from five different secondary schools. The English teachers were selected as respondents as it was felt that the teachers knew best how their students were performing and what problems they faced with respect to English language learning. In fact, it was felt that the teachers would be able to reflect better than the learners themselves on why the learners were not progressing and what obstacles hindered them from making progress in English Language learning.

The questionnaire is used as the research instrument in the study. Key [9] stated that the questionnaire is most frequently a very concise, preplanned set of questions designed to yield specific information to meet a particular need for research information about a pertinent topic. The main purpose of using questionnaire as the main research instrument is to collect data on the views of the 27 local English subject teachers on the skills that ESL learners lacked. The items in the questionnaire are related to the difficulties faced by the teachers' ESL learners based on these teachers' own observations, experiences and perspectives.

The data that were collected via the questionnaire were analyzed based on the frequency and means of the items. The questionnaire comprises Likert-scale options as responses for each of the items. These Likert-scale items are 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'; each given a value of 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively. The software used for data calculation is the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software.

## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Language Skills Problems Faced by ESL Learners**

This section presents the findings of the study which are the opinions or perceptions of English subject teachers regarding their students' difficulties in the four main skills of English language. The skills are speaking, writing, reading and listening skills.

#### **3.1.1 Problems with Speaking in English**

Table 1 shows the frequencies that were obtained from the questionnaires given to the English subject teachers. The results from the calculation of the means for each item in the questionnaire are used to determine the main contributing factor for learners' difficulties and problems in speaking skills.

**Table 1:** Problems with speaking skills

Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
a) Students lack confidence in speaking using English	0	3	13	11	3.29
b) Students have difficulty in using varied vocabulary and expressions	1	1	12	13	3.37
c) Students have difficulty in making suggestions and supporting their ideas.	1	3	13	10	3.18

(\*SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

Table 1 shows the frequencies as well as the means for each item related to the Speaking skill. From the table, the statement with the highest mean is the second statement ‘Students have difficulty in using varied vocabulary and expressions’. This is true because in order to speak in any language, one must know how to express oneself and that is when vocabulary knowledge is important. Fulcher [10] stated that “anyone who wishes to speak a second language must learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and master its sounds”. Gan [11] who conducted a research on speaking problems reported that vocabulary problem was the main factor that led to students’ lack of ability in expressing themselves clearly and properly. The lack of knowledge on appropriate words and expressions to use always poses as a problem to ESL learners as learners have a limited repertoire of vocabulary to use.

### 3.1.2 Problems with Writing in English

Table 2 shows the difficulties that learners have in relation to writing skills. The findings reveal that the teachers agreed that all the sub-skills of writing stated in the three items above caused learners to have problems in writing skills. The means of all three items are above 3.0, indicating almost high agreement with all the items. Items ‘b’ and ‘c’ have the highest mean which is 3.29, which shows that learners have most difficulties with using grammatically correct sentences and vocabulary. Correct grammar is essential in writing tasks compared to speaking activities, as written documents serve as evidence of one’s language ability and thus learners feel more pressured to produce good pieces of writing that are grammatically correct. When using English for speaking, learners are able to convey their messages across more easily as facial expressions and other physical gestures help in communicating their ideas across, and these aids compensate for their lack of grammatical knowledge.

As with the speaking skill, limited vocabulary knowledge is again a challenge for learners when carrying out writing tasks in English. As suggested by Barkaoui [8], teachers should give learners more motivation and help them see themselves as successful writers.

**Table 2: Problems with writing skills**

Item	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
a) Students have difficulty in choosing the correct word for their written task.	0	1	19	7	3.22
b) Students have difficulty in writing grammatically correct sentences	0	0	19	8	3.29
c) Students have limited vocabulary knowledge	0	2	15	10	3.29

(\*SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

### 3.1.3 Problems with Reading in English

Table 3 shows that all the 27 teachers partially agreed with the statements provided. The highest mean is for the second item which is ‘Students could not understand the meaning of the words written’. This problem is related to learners’ knowledge of vocabulary. When learners fail to understand the meaning of certain words, they may fail to understand the message written in the text and to a more serious extent, may not be able to successfully get the gist of the whole text.

The third item which relates to reading problems caused by the lack of grammatical knowledge, scored a mean rating of 2.59. Grammatically correct sentences play an important role in delivering the meaning of the sentences. However, as indicated by the three means in the table, the lack of vocabulary is the factor that the teachers felt was the biggest challenge that learners have with respect to the reading skill, compared to the inability to identify the main ideas of the text or the lack of grammatical knowledge.

### 3.1.4 Problems with Listening in English

Table 4 shows that all respondents agreed with the statements regarding the problems faced by their learners in terms of listening skills. The statement with the highest mean (3.07) is the second statement which is ‘Students have problems because they do not understand the meaning of words’. This means that learners face the biggest challenge with vocabulary. Just like the problems that are faced by learners with speaking, writing, and reading skills, vocabulary is the main factor that causes the learners to also have difficulty in listening skills.

According to Coady and Huckin [12], vocabulary is central to language and is of critical importance to language learners. Samuel [13] emphasizes that knowledge of the vocabulary used by the speaker is an important factor for good listening comprehension. In order to become an effective listener, one needs to possess a wide range of vocabulary so that one can understand exactly what the speaker is saying.

**Table 3: Problems with reading skills**

Item	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
a) Students fail to identify the main ideas of the text given.	0	10	15	2	2.70
b) Students could not understand the meaning of the words written	1	7	14	5	2.85
c) Students fail to understand the texts because of grammar.	1	12	11	3	2.59

(\*SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

**Table 4: Problems with listening skills**

Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
a) Students have problems because of the intonation of the speaker.	0	6	19	2	2.85
b) Students have problems because they do not understand the meaning of the words	1	2	18	6	3.07
c) Students have problems in identifying the relevant points.	0	5	17	5	3.00

(\*SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

The study concluded with a number of salient points. One important observation that was made is that, with the Speaking skill, learners have the biggest difficulty with vocabulary and expressions. With the Writing skill, the learners have most difficulties with using grammatically correct sentences and their vocabulary knowledge. With the reading skill, the biggest problem appears to be related to learners' knowledge of vocabulary. And with Listening, again, the learners face the biggest challenge with vocabulary. Thus, this indicates that vocabulary is the biggest difficulty for ESL learners, and grammar poses a challenge only when they write in English.

One problem of ESL learners that should be given extra attention is their limited vocabulary of the English language. This is because the English teachers think that their students have problems related to vocabulary for each of the main language skills which are speaking skills, writing skills, reading skills and listening skills. Additionally, learners also should be given sufficient exposure and opportunity to use the language outside of their classroom. It is better for them to use it more regularly in order to improve their English language mastery.

Teachers should experiment with different methods and techniques of English Language teaching in order to find out which one best suits the learning and teaching process of Malaysian learners.

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