

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



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Why is it important to have good English language proficiency?



1. To get better academic achievements especially at the higher learning level

- At HLIs, proficiency in English is vital in achieving academic success as most lectures, tutorials and notes are in English language
- Students with limited use of English faced problems in advanced subjects (Drennan and Rohde, 2002)
- Thus, English language proficiency affects academic performance

Why is it important to have good English language proficiency?



2. Easier to secure one's dream job:

- Employers especially in the private sectors seek employees who are proficient in English
- 60,000 Malaysian graduates are unemployed due to lack of important skills which include communication skills & English Language skills (Nurita et al, 2007)
- Thus, lack of English language proficiency can create a problem in getting a job

Why is it important to have good English language proficiency?



- Good English Language skills are required at the workplace, especially if one works in the private sector & international corporations
- Obstacle for promotion & career advancement if one is not proficient in English
- English: widely used around the world, the lingua franca in many countries

Current Scenario



- Many Malaysians have 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?

Purpose of Study



- To investigate the difficulties that hinder local ESL (English as a Second Language) learners from mastering the main language skills which are speaking, writing, reading and listening skills.
- Findings of this study would assist in:
 - Identifying the problems associated with English Language learning in Malaysia
 - Producing successful English Language learners
 - Finding possible solutions towards improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning English in schools

Literature Review



- Malaysians constantly regaled with opinions about falling standards of English but falling where and in what way, is seldom mentioned (Gaudart, 1987)
- Students spend 11- 13 years learning English at school, but many are still not able to master the language . Factors for this failure include learners' learning methods, motivation, perceptions, teachers' teaching methods & the syllabus (Hiew, 2012).
- In Malaysia, one factor for failure to master English: the exam-oriented Malaysian education system (Lewey , 1977) . Learners pressured to only aim to score high in exams, focussing on topics that will be tested, rather than on learning the language as a whole

English Language Skills that Learners find Challenging



- English Language: a second language for many Malaysians, & even a foreign language to some, especially those in the rural areas
- Many find Speaking and Writing skills more difficult than Listening and Reading, as these skills require them to produce utterances in English
- Speaking is the skill that Chinese students found most difficult to learn & Reading was least difficult (Peng, 2014).
- Writing skill is challenging, so Barkaoui (2007) advises teachers to help students see themselves as successful writers & to offer positive experiences eg praising them when they produce good writing & to make them feel that they can become good writers.

Research Methodology



- Respondents: 27 local English subject teachers teaching in 5 different secondary schools
- Justification: Teachers know best how their students are performing & what problems they face in English language learning
- Research instrument : questionnaire
- Items in questionnaire: on difficulties faced by the teachers' ESL learners based on these teachers' own observations & perspectives.
- Items: Likert-scale options as responses, 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree', 'Strongly Agree'
- Analysis of data: frequency & means, & using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software.

Findings: 1) Problems with Speaking in English



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

Findings: 1) Problems with Speaking in English



Item with highest mean: ‘Students have difficulty in using varied vocabulary and expressions’.

To speak in any language, one must know how to express oneself and that is when vocabulary knowledge is important.

Fulcher (2003): “anyone who wishes to speak a second language must learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and master its sounds”

Gan (2012): In his study, vocabulary problem was the main factor that led to students’ lack of ability in expressing themselves clearly and properly

Lack of knowledge on appropriate words and expressions to use: always a problem to ESL learners as they have limited repertoire of vocabulary to use.

Findings: 2) Problems with Writing in English



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

Findings: 2) Problems with Writing in English



- All 3 sub-skills of writing: have means above 3.0, indicating almost high agreement with all 3 items, thus all 3 sub-skills of Writing pose challenges to learners
- Items 'b' and 'c' : highest mean: 3.29
- Thus, learners have most difficulties with using grammar & vocabulary in writing
- Correct grammar: essential in writing tasks compared to speaking , as written documents serve as evidence of one's language ability & thus learners feel more pressured to produce good pieces of writing that are grammatically correct
- When using English for speaking, learners can convey messages across more easily as facial expressions & other physical gestures help in communicating their ideas across, and these compensate for their lack of grammatical knowledge.
- As with the speaking skill, limited vocabulary knowledge is again a challenge in writing in English
- Barkaoui (2007): Teachers should give learners more motivation and help them see themselves as successful writers.

Findings: 3) Problems with Reading in English



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

Findings: 3) Problems with Reading in English



- All 27 teachers partially agreed with all 3 statements
- Highest mean: for item 'Students could not understand the meaning of the words written'. Thus, vocabulary is the biggest problem when learners read in English
- When learners fail to understand the meaning of certain words, it may affect the comprehension of the whole text
- 2nd highest mean: item on main ideas
- 3rd highest mean: item on grammar
- Thus, getting the main ideas of the text is more crucial than deciphering the grammar in the text being read.

Findings: 4) Problems with Listening in English



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

Findings: 4) Problems with Listening in English



- Item with highest mean: 2nd item: 'Students have problems because they do not understand the meaning of words' (mean=3.07). Thus, learners face the biggest challenge with vocabulary
- Just like the problems faced by learners with speaking, writing, & reading skills, vocabulary is again the main factor that causes the learners to also have difficulty in listening skills.
- Coady and Huckin (1997): vocabulary is central to language and is of critical importance to language learners
- Samuel (1984): knowledge of vocabulary used by speaker is an important factor for good listening comprehension
- 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.

Summary & Conclusion



- Speaking skill: learners' biggest difficulty is with vocabulary
- Writing skill: learners' biggest challenge: grammar and vocabulary
- Reading skill: learners' biggest problem: vocabulary
- Listening skill: biggest challenge is vocabulary.
- Biggest difficulty for ESL learners: Vocabulary
- Grammar is a challenge only when they write in English

Implications



- Teachers should pay more attention to their learners' limited vocabulary of the English language
- Learners should be given sufficient exposure & opportunity to use English outside of their classroom
- Teachers should experiment with different methods & techniques of English Language teaching to find out which best suits the learning and teaching process of Malaysian learners