

## **CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) BY NON-NATIVE LEARNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the ways of overcoming Difficulties of learning English as a foreign language this study aims at identifying the difficulties based on teachers' experiences in learning English as a foreign language, and also shows general strategies that are useful to overcome the difficulties of leaning language. The result shows that for learning English as foreign language, learners need a proper time and a good management; however, the results reveal that teachers' role, learning methods and strategies are vital, also the use of authentic materials motivate learners to develop their linguistics and communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Overcome, English language, EFL learners, Language skills, Learning strategies

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

English, the most widely internationally used language in many world countries, is the language of Education, Business, Medicine, Banking, Tourism, Diplomacy, etc. English is also the language of computing that is why it is a global language. The number of users increases on daily basis. However, people face lots of challenges in the learning process and mastering this language. This paper examines the reasons behind the difficulties of learning the second language, identifies the most effective strategies which can be helpful for the learners in order speaking fluent English. Moreover, it presents ways of overcoming difficulties of learning English as a second or foreign language and shows several strategies for gaining successful and positive outputs in learning language. Nowadays, Learning English language is really important because English is an international language that is used in many sectors.

Kannan (2009), states that, the learner's attitude has a great effect on learning language because learners' positive attitude directly changes learning languages.

This research provides responses to many questions in learning language such as (1) why learners face difficulties in learning a second or foreign language? (2) What are possible difficulties in learning language? And (3) how to overcome the difficulties of leaning English as a second or foreign language?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recently, a lot of researches investigating difficulties concerning learning English as second languages put a number of solutions and strategies in order to help EFL learners to overcome the difficulties and improve their language such as:

One of the challenges that English learners face in learning process is cultural differences that often render the learners to feel disturbed; a group of learners master sufficient number of vocabularies, in good command of comprehension. They are, however, unable to understand various expressions and sentences due to cultural differences (Abdullah, 2015).

Each learner holds his/her own unique ability and capacity differentiating them from each other. This belongs to specific skills each learner enjoys in handling their smartness to improve language learning process.

Difficulties of learning a second or foreign language vary from one learner to another, a difference shaped by the ability each learner handles. (NAE education policy and practice department, 2007)

In addition, when learners try to learn English as a second language, they face lots of difficulties. English has four major skills that are very important to improve English language learning properly; however, it depends on ESL learners to fully master those skills in an effective way.

Personal orientations such as self-confidence and thinking positively help in facilitating the learning process when the orientations mentioned are at issue since they are strongly related to the outcomes of the learning language. Correspondingly, if the English learners hold confidence and fearlessly make mistakes, they undoubtedly learn from their mistakes (Yee and Zainoalabidin, 2014).

Adas and Bakir (2013) claim that online materials and using English web-sites are preferable methods being effective ways of learning English more appropriately, for these mediums facilitate students' direct communication with native English speakers.

Many scholars have conducted research with reference to second or foreign language learning; some have agreed that environment plays influentially in the process of learning language. It depends on teachers' plans of managing classrooms thereby creating open discussions to instill

confidence inside the students to speak language freely, and thus, improve their skills. (Bingol, 2014)

The role of the teacher is obviously important in learning a new language. The task of teaching is not only speaking inside classrooms, but also guiding students, and providing a friendly atmosphere for the learners, means that highly cooperative in facilitating the process of learning English language. (Kannan, 2009) Anxiety, moreover, is another factor that challenge English language learners, decreasing the power of the learner and causing loss of self-confidence. (Banks, 2008) Linking intelligence with second or foreign language learning, some researchers contend that intelligent learners are capable of learning a second or foreign language more successfully. (Brown, 2007)

### **3. ENCOURAGING REASONS FOR PEOPLE TO LEARN ENGLISH**

#### **Personal Advantage**

Use of English language is very useful to achieve personal goals such as getting a job, making a successful communication with people and also promoting one's position in the workplace. Therefore, English is advantageous for those people travelling to the English-speaking countries to help them easily understand the language and overcome language problems. (Marcos, 2001)

#### **Enriches and Enhance Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development related to mind; it means that those people who have ability to speak a second or foreign language are more creative and think creatively, and their minds are more active for problem solution, they continuously attempt to think deeply in order to solve issues more appropriately. (Bomford & Mizokawa, 1991)

#### **Social benefits**

People having ability to speak English are more socialized for they are involved in further communication with newly encountered individuals.

However, English language facilitates in building stronger economic and better socially structured communities through English language use with the new people these speakers meet. . In today's world, English language occupies an ineluctably significant position in the world of business, building trading bridges and opening trade markets at global levels. (Marcos, 2001). NEA Research (2007) states that one of the advantages of English language is;" to build a very strong feeling for the learners" knowing a second language, a means encourages the learners to work hard and believe in their abilities in performing their daily activities. Actually, a good

attitude like self-confidence, self-esteem and positive thinking altogether strongly influence the outcomes of learning language.

#### **4. DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

Learning a second or foreign language is a long and complex process, because learners are required to cover all the aspects of a new language such as the structure and culture of the target language. (Brown, 2007)

Many people around the world step in to learn English and they are simultaneously challenged by linguistic and cultural difficulties. .

All types of difficulties play their part in leaving effects on language learning thereby bringing in hindrances in front of these learners.

This study, therefore, shows the main difficulties that learners face when they start learning English. I mention those difficulties for each of them has their effect on learning. Certainly, there are many difficulties, such as;

##### **A. Negative Transfer**

Negative transfer means using the same structure of source language when rendered into the target language. Source language is the speaker's native language and (target language is the second language. All languages have their own structures, and learners attempt to adopt their native language structure with the second language.

English learners should be familiar with the second or foreign language structures when they start learning that language. This is because language structure has a great impact on learning. If learners use a wrong structure it will cause the occurrence of a negative transfer and ambiguity in the language. But some learners do not care about this issue therefore the result of learning will be negative. For example the structure of English language is different from Arabic language. (Rhalmi, 2014)

##### **B. Cultural Differences**

Culture is about senses of belonging and non-belonging to a specific community with a history, language, heritage and myths. Almost every society has their own culture differentiating it from other societies.

The role of culture in learning a new language cannot be ignored, because sometimes learners know everything about the vocabulary and other aspects of the second language; however, they

cannot properly understand what the sentences or expressions mean. Therefore, background information about the culture and community is highly important.

English learners must know about English (Does English culture refer to US, British, Canada, Australia or South Africa? It appears ambiguous for the reader.) Culture; because sometimes learners are challenged by specific vocabularies belong to specific communities. Understanding these vocabularies need cultural awareness and familiarity. Cultural difference, therefore, is another issue that learners face in learning language. (Rhalmi, 2014)

### **C. Accent**

Another difficulty that English learners may face in learning English is accent. Accent is the way of pronouncing words. English language has different accents such as American, British, and Australian, etc. Accent varieties may cause problem for learners because they probably confuse the learners' understanding and they find it hard. (Derwing and Munro, 2015)

### **D. Slang and Colloquialism**

Colloquialism and slang are those expressions used in informal language. English language consists of many slang and colloquialism expressions; it is another difficulty that English learners face in learning language because it is often challenging for the learners to cover all slang and colloquialism expressions. (Hayat, 2009)

### **F. Arbitrary language**

According to Yule (2014), English is an arbitrary language, meaning that there is no relationship between the form and the meaning, for example in the word "dog" there is a relationship between the meaning and the form. Also, Al-khasuwneh (2010) indicated that in English language the relationship between the word and the object does not occur, this arbitrariness is another problem based on English learners.

### **G. Attitude**

Attitude is completely related to the feelings. One of the main factors that strongly affect the result of learning language is personal.

Some English learners in the beginning of the process negatively react toward the language which may lead to lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, stress, anxiety and fear of making mistakes. These feelings cause a negative attitude and learners fail to learn the language properly. While learning a language, learners need to avoid being overthrown by such negative feelings since they bring in a distorted image about that language, and learners, meanwhile, are

encouraged to establish a cordial relationship – instead of such negative reactions – to get along and learn successfully. (Bingol, 2014)

## **H. Environment**

Environment refers to the class atmosphere, geographical space, culture and systems of thought in which learners learn the language. At the time of learning a language, the size of the classroom and its educational atmosphere need to be significantly considered. Safe environment and freedom of interaction provided for the learners are appropriate and preferable means of learning. (Bingol, 2014) Teachers take responsibility to create a safe environment in which learners experience the newly acquired language. Well-designed environment and classroom freedom of interaction lead to students' influential participation and their sense of anxiety. (Brown, 2007)

## **I. Grammar and Vocabulary**

English grammar consists of many rules of which every single rule is used in a specific time and situation. Therefore, learners must be aware, while having conversation, of their grammar correctly because incorrect use of grammar leads to misunderstanding. English language has a complicated system of grammatical rules. What concerns English grammar is it has many rules and exceptions? The complexity of grammar makes it difficult for the learners to use and produce correct grammatical tenses and sentences. As known, grammatically constructed sentences deliver wrong messages to the addressee.

Grammar changes the meaning of communication and learners are thus required to proper grammar rules. Given that, English grammar occasionally appears challenging even for the native speakers and it is therefore more challenging for the non-natives. Learners of English language sometimes face difficulty of using English grammar; they know the rules but find them complicated while applying correctly. .English has a large size of lexis and vocabulary; therefore, mastering too many vocabularies is difficult for the learners especially for those who are in their early stages of language learning. At the same time, in English a word has many meanings and the meaning changes according to the context, a phenomena making learning process even more challenging. As English has lots of words that have different usages in different contexts (Hayat, 2009), knowing all these meanings leads to boredom from the side of the learner.

## **J. Pronunciation**

Another challenge that learners may face is correct word pronunciations of target language. While it is difficult for second or foreign language learners to pronounce the sound like native speakers, it is still required from them to pronounce them correctly.

Furthermore, pronunciation is strongly related to the first language because maybe some sounds or phonetics does not exist in the first languages, making difficulty for the learners.

And also, the learners face difficulty in those sounds which are not pronounced in the same way in different words. (Hayat 2009).

## **5. LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Language learning strategies includes steps that learners can follow in order to overcome difficulties of learning language. Chamot (2005) states that, strategies act broadly as "procedures that facilitate a learning task". Many ESL students feel extremely overwhelmed for living in a country that they do not speak the target language; it can be very frustrating because they cannot understand the language.

Typically, strategies can be divided into three main categories:

### **Metacognitive Strategies**

Metacognitive strategies refer to methods that are used to help students find a way of learning, meaning the method of planning and thinking of learning. Metacognitive strategies directly impact the learning process, because those strategies guide the learner to think independently.

Metacognitive strategies include some resources, which can be applied in the classroom:

-Advance organizers: it means preparation, planning prior to each activity.

-Self-evaluation: it means daily assessment.

Self-management: fully understanding the condition and environment of the class. -

Self-monitoring: checking carefully for each situation to measure the performance development. (Brown, 2007)

### **Cognitive Strategies**

Cognitive strategies are most helpful tools in evaluating students with learning problems. Generally, this term relates to the mind; it is used as procedures to facilitate learning process.

Cognitive strategies are very useful, because it increases efficiency, and requires an important task. The teacher's role is so sensitive to use these strategies in order to fill the gaps between the learners and the challenges.

These strategies include some important tasks:

Repetition: it means practice and exercising by means of visual aids and oral activity. -

- Elaboration: learners should try to expand and elaborate target information by adding other background information.

- Transfer: learners need to simplify target information and transfer the target information in a simple way.

Imagery: it means using visuals, auditory, or images to create meaningful information in the target language. -

- Group working: this task has a great role to increase confidence; and helpful for those students that feel shy in learning language. (Brown, 2007)

### **Socio-Affective Strategies**

Socio-affective strategies refer to the relationship between learners and society; it is not an academic approach. This strategy fully deals with the attitudes and behaviors that are in some way related to the society itself. Here the society and community have a great impact on learning outcomes.

These strategies focus on the community dealing with learners and helping them to learn a language in a better way. Socio-affective strategies have something to do with social activity and interacting with others like working in pairs and other people around the learners. (Gaber, 2008)

## **6. WAYS TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE SKILLS**

English language consists of four main skills; reading, listening, (receptive) speaking and writing (productive). Learning each of them takes time and requires efforts. The following sections will elaborate how learners can improve each of these skills.

### **Listening skill**

Listening skill is important as other skills, learners will receive input through listening then they would be able to transform their input to output. (Deutschendorf, 2014)

Is arguing and propose some techniques to improve listening skill such as:

1. Listen to English songs.
2. Listen to short stories and short paragraphs.
3. Listen to English news on Radio and TV especially native English channels.
4. Listening to English poems are another way to improve your listening and speaking.

Nunun (1998) states that, "listening is the basic skill in language learning, because without listening learners never learn to communicate effectively".

### **Speaking skill**

Speaking skill is another important skill in English language, it means the way of producing sound, utterance, and sentences correctly and accurately. Speaking means the use of language orally for the purpose of communication and delivering the message. (Shenel, 2006)

Researchers argue and suggest some techniques to improve speaking skill such as:

1. Join English clubs and courses in order to speak freely and fluently. (Students can correct each other without feeling embarrassed).
2. The role of teacher is important; to motivate the learners to speak English.
3. A suitable environment should be provided because it makes positive results on learning language, because most of the learners feel shy and anxious while speaking.
4. Making presentation and debates in English. (Hetrakul, 1995)

### **Reading skill**

Reading is another skill in English language, which enriches the vocabulary tank and improves language comprehension.

The following steps are useful to improve reading skill:

1. While you start reading, you should focus on the new vocabularies.
2. Read about interesting topics or those topics that you are interested in.
3. Find something like short stories and children's book because it is a good way to improve your reading and vocabulary in early stages. (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2004)

## **Writing skill**

Writing is an important skill in language which impacts on the result of learning language; avoiding repetition and long sentences; it is good for the learners to choose and use clear words and expressions. (Johnson, 2009)

The following techniques help learners to improve their writing skill:

1. Follow spelling rules
2. Know the abbreviations in English language.
3. Punctuation mark is so important in English language because; it change the meaning.
4. To improve writing, it is good to write poems and short stories to overcome the difficulties of writing skills. (Adas and Bakir, 2013)

It means when learners know the writing steps, follow and apply them, they will do better and better in writing.

## **Some steps to deal with difficulties in English language**

### **a. Practice**

If learners want to be fluent in English language, they should practice well in all skills; because practicing make learners familiar with all aspects of language. Practicing has a great impact on the result of learning language.

Learners must know that it is normal to make mistakes because it is not the first language; even native speakers make mistakes that is why learners must have a good plan for practicing each day.(Cain,2011)

### **b. Reading**

Reading is a useful way to improve language and overcome difficulties. Learners should have a plan to read every day; because by reading learners can improve other English skills.

English learners should try to read for 10 minutes every day. Moreover, they should start with a suitable level; it is good to start from easy to hard. (Williamson, 2009)

### **c. Native speakers**

An excellent way to improve English language is to make connection with native speakers. While it is difficult to find native speakers, the learners can establish the connection through online courses and social media. (Cain, 2011)

#### **d. Positive attitude**

Positive attitude consists of all those feelings that encourage learners to continue the process. Some feelings such as self-confidence can motivate learners to reach a high level without any hesitation. In language learning process, learners need all positive feelings and think critically in order to achieve all goals. (Cain, 2011)

#### **e. Planning**

English learners must have an effective plan in life in order to manage the learning process. Learners must think about goals in life; because if learners have goals on their agenda they should try hard in order to obtain them that they have planned for. Learning language depends on the learners' plan. (Thompson, 1997)

### **7. METHODOLOGY**

The study was quantitative research; the questionnaires were developed for the teachers of secondary schools and university in Soran city. In order to reach results, I prepared questionnaires about "How to Overcome the Difficulties of Learning English as a Second Language".

#### **Participants**

The participants of the study are 25 English teachers (University and schools) which were selected randomly. (Among them 15 were males and 10 were females, their age ranged from 28 to 54)

#### **Procedure**

The respondents answered the questions according to their knowledge and experience. After obtaining their consent, the research questions given to them with request to complete; it by selecting appropriate response category which considered more appropriate regarding their expert about learning English language (this sentence sounds vague for me).

#### **Result and Discussion**

The collected data was analyzed by percentages (%) and the analysis is presented in the form of tables. Each table has been organized according to the related field, and also frequency and percentage were used to analyze it and describe the result.

According to the first item in the table 1, 16% of the participant strongly agreed, also 20% agreed, while 20% strongly disagreed and 44% disagreed on (all the EFL learners face the same challenges). Regarding the next item in the table, 28% of the participants strongly agreed meanwhile 60% agreed while only 12% disagreed on (a lot of the EFL learners face difficulties in pronunciation as a result and impact of first language). The other item which is (methods have a great impact on the results of learning outcomes), 20% of the respondents strongly agreed and 68% agreed, while only 4% strongly disagreed and 8% disagreed. Regarding the fourth item which states (cultural differences is another difficulty in language learning), 16% of respondents strongly agreed, also 72% agreed, while only 12% disagreed on this item. The next item which is (teachers can motivate and facilitates language learning process), 48% of the respondents strongly agreed and 52% agreed, while no one disagreed. For the last item 48% of the respondents strongly agreed, also 48% agreed, in contrast only 4% disagreed on that (environment has a great role in language learning process).

**Table 1: Common challenges that EFL learners face**

Variables		Frequency	Percentage %
All the EFL learners face the same Challenges	Strongly agree	4	16.0
	Agree	5	20.0
	Strongly disagree	5	20.0
	Disagree	11	44.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
A lot of the EFL learners face difficulties in Pronunciation	Strongly agree	7	28.0
	Agree	15	60.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	3	12.0

as a result and impact of first language	Total	25	100.0
Methods and strategies have a great impact on the results of learning outcomes	Strongly agree	5	20.0
	Agree	17	68.0
	Strongly disagree	1	4.0
	Disagree	2	8.0
	Total	25	100.0
Culture difference is another difficulty in learning language	Strongly agree	4	16.0
	Agree	18	72.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	3	12.0
	Total	25	100.0
Teachers can motivate and facilitate learning language process	Strongly agree	12	48.0
	Agree	13	52.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	0	00.0
	Total	25	100.0
Environment has a great effect on learning language process	Strongly agree	12	48.0
	Agree	12	48.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	1	4.0

	Total	25	100.0
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The first item in the table 2 which states (reading English articles encourage learners to learn effectively), 40% of the respondents strongly agreed and 56% of them agreed, while only 4% disagreed on that. Regarding the next item, 28% of the respondents strongly agreed and 72% agreed, while none of the respondents disagreed on (using authentic materials motivate learners to learn the language). The next item which is (social sites are an interesting and effective way to learn English), 24% of respondents strongly agreed, also 60% agreed, but 8% strongly disagreed and the other 8% of respondents disagreed. Regarding the last item of the table, 32% of the respondents strongly agreed and 68% agreed, while none of the respondents disagreed on that (positive attitude encourage learners to learn the language quickly).

**Table 2: Motivation methods to encourage EFL learners**

Variables		Frequency	Percentage %
Reading English articles encourage learners to learn Effectively	Strongly agree	10	40.0
	Agree	14	56.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	1	4.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Using authentic materials motivate learners to learn the Language	Strongly agree	7	28.0
	Agree	18	72.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	0	00.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
	Strongly agree	8	24.0

Social sites are an interesting and effective way to learn English	Agree	15	60.0
	Strongly disagree	2	8.0
	Disagree	2	8.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Positive attitude encourage learners to Learn the language quickly	Strongly agree	8	32.0
	Agree	17	68.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	0	00.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Regarding table 3 and its first item; (using dictionary is a good way to improve writing skill), 16% of the respondents strongly agreed, also 44% of the respondents agreed, while 16% strongly disagreed and 24% disagreed. The next item, 36% of the respondents strongly agreed, 52% agreed, while 12% of the respondents disagreed on (visual aids are the best way to enrich). The third item in the table which states; (listening to English songs is an interesting way to be fluent in English), 40% of the respondents strongly agreed, also 48% of the respondents agreed, while 8% strongly disagreed and only 4% disagreed. For the next item, 16% of the respondents strongly agreed and 52% agreed but 4% strongly disagreed and 28% disagreed on that (English poems help learners to improve pronunciation). Regarding the last item of the table which is (listening and watching English videos improve speaking skill), 68% of the respondents strongly agreed, also 32% agreed; in contrast, none of the respondents disagreed.

**Table 3: Materials to improve skills**

Variables		Frequency	Percentage %
Using dictionary is a good way to improve writing skill	Strongly agree	4	16.0
	Agree	11	44.0
	Strongly disagree	4	16.0
	Disagree	6	24.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Visual aids are the best way to enrich Vocabulary	Strongly agree	9	36.0
	Agree	13	52.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	3	12.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Listening to English song is an interesting way to be fluent in English	Strongly agree	10	40.0
	Agree	12	48.0
	Strongly disagree	2	8.0
	Disagree	1	4.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>
English poems help learners to improve	Strongly agree	4	16.0
	Agree	13	52.0
	Strongly disagree	1	4.0

Pronunciation	Disagree	7	28.0
	Total	25	100.0
Listening and watching English videos improve speaking skill	Strongly agree	17	68.0
	Agree	8	32.0
	Strongly disagree	0	00.0
	Disagree	0	00.0
	Total	25	100.0

## 8. CONCLUSION

Learning English as a second or foreign language is a complex process which many factors and areas are at play. The researcher has reached the conclusion that that all English language learners face a different challenge in learning language. However, the ability of the learners has an effective role; it depends on the smartness of the learners and the amount of their attempt in taking steps to overcome the difficulties.

In concluding the information based on the literature, it shows that learning English as a foreign language depends on methods, teacher's role, students' performance and environment. The latter plays an influential role since it obliges the teacher to provide a clear and comfortable environment in the classroom. Furthermore, English learners must have a good plan and use the best techniques to overcome the difficulties of learning English such as practicing, making contacts with English native speakers, have a good attitude, reading a lot and etc. As a result, the findings of the current paper show that there are different challenges and all EFL learners face difficulties while at the same time, findings propose some crucial and important material and way in order to overcome those difficulties.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the results most of the learners have difficulty in pronunciation, the researcher proposes that the teachers should pay more attention to this field and use authentic materials to make the EFL learners practice. Also, results show that the teaching methods have a vital role in learning process; therefore the researcher suggests that the teachers should use the proper

methods and strategies in order to enable the learners to use the language. Also, further research can be done to investigate the challenge of each skill separately, especially speaking skill.

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