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## Obstacles students face in EFL classrooms: The context of university students

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### Abstract

Foreign languages teaching at the university level faces both longstanding and emerging challenges, as students are increasingly motivated to complete their syllabus quickly to gain financial or career advantages <sup>[1]</sup>. Many university undergraduates who study English as a second language struggle to communicate and use the language in their post-graduate work. In order to improve language acquisition, this study intends to determine the primary challenges faced by EFL students in the classroom, investigate their origins in connection to university characteristics, and suggest workable remedies. In order to comprehend the needs and difficulties faced by students in EFL classrooms, this study article looks at the problems from the viewpoints of the students. The study found that students' fear of making a mistake, their lack of confidence, their limited vocabulary, and the size of the class are prevalent obstacles in EFL classrooms. Finally, the constraints of the study and the consequences of these findings for educators and learners have been discussed.

**Keywords:** Obstacles, EFL learners, university students, language skills

### Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is difficult to learn and practice. As a result, students have challenges that may affect their ability to learn, particularly when it comes to communication skills, which are crucial for interaction. Language learners must be dedicated, adept at handling challenges, and focused on the goals <sup>[2]</sup>. English language acquisition is difficult. Thus, it is important to understand the factors that obstruct and hamper the learning process <sup>[3]</sup>. As the interlocutors of the target language throughout language acquisition, learners must play a crucial role in developing communication skills. Students' difficulties are viewed as essential components of their cognitive growth. Speaking is seen by learners as a crucial ability to master since they believe that proficiency in the target language is a key indicator of language knowledge. Speaking fluency is the main goal for many English language learners across the world <sup>[4]</sup>. In order to improve the effectiveness of English language instruction, Bangladeshi educational institutions implemented a "communicative approach" to language teaching. The communicative method seeks to teach all four language skills so that the student can communicate effectively using all four abilities reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Despite using the method for forty years, the state has not discovered that typical EFL students have attained a level of English language proficiency that is sufficient <sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

### 1.1 Significance of the study

This study is significant as it sheds light on the common obstacles that university students encounter in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, including fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, shyness, and the challenges of large class sizes. Understanding these barriers is crucial for improving the overall quality of EFL instruction at the tertiary level. The findings of this research will benefit multiple stakeholders. For educators, it offers insights into the psychological and structural difficulties students face, allowing them to adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. Curriculum developers and academic institutions can use this information to create more effective and supportive learning environments. Policy-makers may also use the results to reform language education policies and ensure more inclusive and student-centered approaches.

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Moreover, the study contributes to the broader field of applied linguistics and language education by highlighting the contextual challenges specific to university settings, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries. It lays the groundwork for future research and interventions aimed at enhancing students' language proficiency and classroom engagement.

### 1.2 The objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the key obstacles that university students face in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The specific objectives are:

- To explore the psychological barriers (e.g., fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and shyness) that hinder students' participation and performance in EFL classrooms.
- To examine the linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, poor grammar skills, and lack of fluency faced by university students.
- To investigate the impact of classroom-related factors, including large class size, lack of individual attention, and limited speaking opportunities on students' EFL learning experience.
- To assess students' perceptions and attitudes toward EFL learning and the factors that influence their motivation and confidence.
- To provide recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to reduce these obstacles and enhance the effectiveness of EFL instruction at the university level.

### 1.3 Research Questions

- What kinds of difficulties do students have in EFL classes?
- What are the main reasons behind the difficulties?
- Have you found any difficulty to pronounce English words correctly?
- Do you speak English fluently during class discussions?
- Are you feeling nervousness when asked to speak English in class?
- Do you think English is important for your academic and professional goals?
- Is cultural differences make any obstacles to participate in English-speaking tasks?
- How classroom activities help you to improve your speaking skills?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

An interview is utilized to gather data for this study, which uses a qualitative design. A semi-structured interview was chosen in order to get additional information that might emerge from any follow-up questions <sup>[7]</sup>. Finding out what obstacles students face in EFL classes is the goal of the study. In order to accomplish this goal, a semi-structured interview was used as a means of comprehending and analyzing the opinions of the participants. Semi-structured interviews, a popular qualitative data collection method in applied linguistics, are the instrument utilized to collect the data <sup>[8]</sup>. The researcher created eight questions for the interview.

### 2.2 Participants

The researcher conducted interviews with students from both public and private universities in Bangladesh who were enrolled in various departments. Based on the participants' interests, the researcher selected them at random to participate in the study. The consent form was read and signed by participants before to the interview in accordance with study ethics. Responses, information, and participant names are anonymous and kept private.

### 2.3 Techniques of Collecting Data

The researcher first conducted interviews with the individuals, recording their responses as they went. Following the transcription of every recording, particular themes appeared from the sample subjects. Subsequently, the researcher classified the concepts into categories. In order to verify the paper's substance, a specialist researcher lastly examined the study questions and concepts.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The data evaluation method was carried out by a methodical and oral procedure to interpret the responses collected from university students across various departments. The responses were gathered through a structured questionnaire consisting of both quantitative and qualitative questions. Finally, the results were interpreted in relation to the research objectives. The analysis provided a clearer understanding of the major EFL challenges faced by students at the university level. These insights were used to develop recommendations for improving teaching practices and classroom environments. Thus, based on responses, the researcher emphasized the findings of the different challenges university students encounter in EFL classes.

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1 Difficulties in English Language Learning

EFL students have numerous challenges as a result of inadequate opportunities for utilizing English in the classroom, poor monitoring of language development, and a lack of classroom settings for English practice that never occurs outside of the classroom <sup>[9]</sup>. Language competency, spoken practice, conversational skills, educational speaking seminars, emphatic effect, limited opportunities to talk and converse in English, and error recognition and correction were identified as deficiencies that contribute to many of the difficulties that students encounter <sup>[10]</sup>. There are some common errors like.

#### 3.1.1 Writing an essay

When composing an essay, students should understand how to connect sentences to create paragraphs and how to organize paragraphs to create a cohesive text on a particular subject. Some pupils struggle to write logical essays or use proper language <sup>[11]</sup>.

#### 3.1.2 Spelling

It is the sole issue that English university students face. "A complex correspondence between sounds and letters" is the most challenging element for EFL students. As they may not be able to handle the full English language system, they may use incorrect letters.

### 3.1.3 Vowels

With regard to the significant differences in the vowel systems of Bangla and English, EFL students may encounter challenges with vowels. Additionally, a lot of words have morphemes that involve different sounds and spelling patterns that kids are not familiar with.

### 3.1.4 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is regarded as a key component of language acquisition proficiency and provides a foundation for students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening styles. For those learning English as a second or foreign language, boosting one's vocabulary is crucial. Knowledge of particular habits serves as the foundation for acquiring vocabulary <sup>[12]</sup>.

## 3.2 The Four Skills

### 3.2.1 Listening

Speaking is learned by children as a secondary behavior to listening during their initial language acquisition. Using all six skills hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, assessing, and responding to messages is also important. The ability to comprehend a native speaker's spoken language has been defined here <sup>[13]</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Speaking

Although it is a complex skill that is specific to humans, it can be described as a fundamental ability in language construction. Speaking is also the act of conveying messages through spoken words. Alternatively, "the active use of language to express meanings so that others can make sense of them" <sup>[14]</sup>. A student who can speak English fluently will have better chances for future employment or study opportunities since mastering the language is equivalent to mastering all other language abilities. However, speaking English should be acquired not just in the classroom but also outside of it and in real-life situations <sup>[15]</sup>.

### 3.2.3 Reading

Since it is the instrument of choice for developing one's knowledge, it is the most crucial talent for students. As the majority of knowledge sources are written in English, it is crucial for students studying English as a second language. One of the best ways to start improving your reading skills is to consider how you read texts.

### 3.2.4 Writing

The process of transcribing letters and characters onto various surfaces, like paper or wood, with the intention of capturing ideas and thoughts is called writing. The same type of message encoding is used so that people can express themselves in written form <sup>[16]</sup>. The oral technique is prioritized over the written one while teaching writing to EFL students because linguists, from De Saussure to Chomsky, emphasize spoken language and view it as the primary position.

## 3.3 Some other factors that affect EFL students learning

### 3.3.1 Linguistic Challenges

#### 3.3.1.1 Limited Vocabulary and Grammar Knowledge

Students may struggle to understand and produce English due to a lack of vocabulary and an incomplete understanding of grammatical rules. Another issue that

students have when attempting to communicate in class is a lack of vocabulary <sup>[17]</sup>. Results indicate that when kids' vocabulary is limited, they do not participate in oral activities with their teachers and peers. Additionally, it requires more time and effort to learn new phrases and use them with their classmates.

### 3.3.1.2 Difficulties with Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a crucial component of effective oral communication in any language. In EFL classrooms, many university students struggle with pronunciation due to several factors, including differences between their native language and English in terms of sounds, stress patterns, and intonation. These difficulties can lead to misunderstandings, reduced confidence, and reluctance to speak in class.

### 3.3.1.3 Fluency Issues

Many students face challenges in speaking fluently, often due to hesitation, self-consciousness, or a lack of practice. Fluency refers to the ability to speak a language smoothly, naturally, and without unnecessary pauses or hesitation. In EFL classrooms, many university students experience fluency issues that significantly impact their speaking performance and overall communication.

## 3.3.2 Psychological Challenges

### 3.3.2.1 Lack of Confidence

Dread of committing errors, being judged, or feeling inadequate can significantly impact a student's willingness to take part and speak in class. Lack of confidence is a significant barrier to effective communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, particularly among university students. It often stems from fear of making mistakes, negative past learning experiences, or low self-perception of language ability. When students doubt their own skills, they become hesitant to speak, participate in class discussions, or take linguistic risks.

### 3.3.2.2 Anxiety and Nervousness

Oral presentations and other interactive activities can trigger anxiety and nervousness, leading to hesitation and avoidance. Anxiety and nervousness are common emotional obstacles that negatively affect university students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. These feelings often arise from fear of making mistakes, being judged by peers, or not understanding or responding appropriately during class activities. Common causes include: Speaking in front of others, especially in large or unfamiliar groups, pressure to perform accurately and fluently under time constraints, fear of negative evaluation from teachers or classmates, lack of preparation or practice, leading to mental blocks during speaking tasks.

### 3.3.2.3 Shyness and Introversion

Some students may be naturally shy or introverted, making it difficult for them to actively participate in class discussions. Another significant issue that students face in EFL classes is shyness. Moreover, it is comparable to the results <sup>[18]</sup>. According to their findings, when learners lack a solid foundation in the English language, speaking is the most difficult ability to acquire.

### 3.3.2.4 Lack of Motivation

Decreased motivation and effort may result from an absence

of interest in learning English or from the belief that it has little bearing on their daily lives. One major issue that has a detrimental impact on language learning results in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is a lack of motivation. Motivation is a key factor in determining university students' degree of effort, perseverance, and participation in their English language studies. Students who lack motivation may not participate fully in class activities, shy away from speaking assignments, and neglect to practice the language outside of the classroom.

### **3.3.2.5 The concern with making errors**

In EFL classes, students often fear making mistakes and being judged, creating anxiety and low self-esteem. Although many want to participate in oral activities, this fear prevents them, fostering a tense and discouraging atmosphere. Furthermore, this result is consistent with research demonstrating that students' fear of their peers' unfavorable evaluations in the classroom is one of the most frequent causes <sup>[19]</sup>. Additionally, the results demonstrate that students do not view mistakes as a normal part of learning any language. Rather, they think that making mistakes will damage their "image" and make them look incompetent.

## **3.3.3 Environmental Challenges**

### **3.3.3.1 Class Size and Crowdedness**

Teachers may find it challenging to give each student individual attention and feedback in large class sizes, and crowded classrooms may be uncomfortable and distracting. In general, students feel that a high-class size presents additional difficulties since it lowers their likelihood of participating. Large class numbers reduce the number of times students may participate in activities and make their practices less effective, according to the study's findings <sup>[20]</sup>. They also obstruct interaction between educators and students.

### **3.3.3.2 Lack of exposure to english**

Insufficient chances for students to utilize English outside of the classroom might impede their development and make confidence building more difficult. The environment has an impact on language acquisition as well. Although all of these factors are significant and have an impact on language learning, the location, furnishings, lighting, and air conditioning are not relevant in this context. However, the focus here is on the restricted setting, which implies that students can't practice the language outside of the classroom because it isn't necessary; instead, they only care about using the language correctly in the classroom to please their teacher. Learning proper English is regarded as difficult when they walk out in any situation and are unable to hear others speaking in everyday English.

### **3.3.3.3 Cultural Differences**

Cultural differences can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of classroom activities or communication styles. Cultural differences can significantly affect the learning process in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, especially for university students. Language and culture are deeply interconnected, and unfamiliarity with the cultural norms embedded in the English language can create confusion, misunderstandings, and communication barriers for learners.

### **3.3.3.4 Classroom Activities**

The types of activities used in the classroom can either facilitate or hinder language learning, with some students finding certain activities more engaging and beneficial than others. Classroom activities play a vital role in developing English language skills among university students in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. However, when these activities are poorly designed, limited in variety, or fail to engage learners, they can become a significant obstacle to effective language acquisition. Common issues related to classroom activities include: overuse of teacher-centered approaches, lack of interactive or communicative tasks, activities not tailored to students' proficiency levels, cultural irrelevance or lack of context.

### **3.3.3.5 Teacher-related factors**

This is the primary factor influencing language learning, and the challenge in determining whether an English teacher is qualified to teach is exacerbated by the fact that many communities are English language learners and that anything the teacher says, produces, pronounces, writes, etc., will be taken as true even if it isn't. As a result of each teacher giving them a different explanation, students begin to confuse things together. The primary cause of this issue is teachers' inaccurate translations from their original tongues. For instance, the word "cup" is difficult for many teachers to pronounce since it is sometimes spoken as [kap], occasionally as [kop], or occasionally with a vowel /ʌ/ that is absent from the sound systems of many African languages <sup>[21]</sup>.

## **3.4 Inadequate learning materials**

The learning resources are another element that may influence language acquisition. Books are essential for teaching and learning, yet they are useless on their own. This includes any resources that aid in the learning process. The issue arises when students recognize a sound symbol in their books, even if audio gadgets are also crucial tools. It's true that after four years of studying English without having the opportunity to interact with native speakers, English language learners become teachers. Even with a book in hand, learners may still struggle to pronounce some words correctly. For instance, how can students acquire the correct pronunciation of the word "ewe" until they hear it? They will continue to look for resources to listen to and learn from native speakers, so they will watch movies, but regrettably, they will pronounce them incorrectly since they employ slang and dialects that are inappropriate for many types of communication <sup>[21]</sup>.

## **3.5 Students don't take their study seriously**

EFL students neglect learning English and only establish apart time for it. Usually, they only study it when the teacher is teaching it in class, and they never give it much thought after class. They also don't spend time practicing their pronunciation, writing essays, or improving their writing skills, and they never consider making extra effort to study and pick up new vocabulary. Their language acquisition is impacted by all of that. Even though students have access to all the resources they need to learn a language, including qualified teachers, appropriate resources, and the opportunity to hear native speakers, EFL students may still face certain difficulties. For instance, they may become overly reliant on their teachers and overhear



native speakers in the classroom <sup>[21]</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study highlights the various challenges that university students encounter in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Key obstacles such as difficulties with pronunciation, lack of fluency, low confidence, anxiety, limited motivation, cultural differences, and ineffective classroom activities significantly hinder students' ability to develop effective English-speaking skills. The findings suggest that both psychological and instructional factors play critical roles in shaping students' language learning experiences. Many students feel anxious or unmotivated due to fear of making mistakes, lack of speaking opportunities, and teaching methods that do not cater to diverse learning needs. These issues contribute to reduced participation, slower language development, and overall dissatisfaction with EFL learning. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach. Educators must create a supportive, inclusive, and interactive classroom environment, implement learner-centered teaching strategies, and promote regular speaking practice. Additionally, institutions should invest in teacher training and curriculum reform to better meet the linguistic and emotional needs of EFL learners. By understanding and addressing the specific obstacles faced by university students, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of English language education and empower students to become confident and competent English users.

#### 5. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

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