

Investigating English Language Difficulties Faced by EFL University Students among Fourth-Year BA English Major

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the current difficulty levels encountered by EFL university students among fourth-year BA English majors in fundamental areas of English language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A quantitative research design was employed, and the study utilized a purposive sampling method to select participants among fourth-year BA English majors from the Faculty of Liberal Arts. A self-made questionnaire was administered to assess students' perceived challenges, scoring average difficulty ratings of 3.32 for general English skills, with specific averages of 3.16 for writing, 3.20 for listening, 3.22 for speaking, and 3.18 for reading. The results indicated that students experience concerning difficulties, particularly in writing and speaking, where a significant number reported anxiety and a lack of confidence in their communicative abilities. Additionally, challenges in listening comprehension, especially concerning diverse accents, were highlighted, emphasizing the need for targeted pedagogical interventions in these areas. Furthermore, grammar and vocabulary were identified as critical domains requiring additional instructional emphasis. To address these challenges, the study proposes several essential steps within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) framework. It aims to expand further enhancement of the curriculum through the integration of practical courses that emphasize real-world communication, such as business communication and public speaking. In addition, it suggests increasing interactive classroom activities to mitigate anxiety and uplift student confidence, while recommending the incorporation of new opportunities to facilitate the application of language skills in authentic and even more realistic contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The language is the primary source of information relay – be it verbal or non-verbal. A language is needed for communication to be effective. Among all the languages used in the world, English has become the bridge that connects other languages thus making it the lingua franca of the world. In addition, due to its worldwide demand, non-English speaking countries are upholding the needs of English use. As evidenced by how the Vietnamese government perceives English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is viewed as a key facilitator of global integration as a result of globalization [1]. Thailand is no different, even though it still faces challenges in language training as well as addressing its limitations in proficiency, Franco and Roach [2] stressed that Thai businesses assess English as vital for success. Thailand has been investing in initiatives to encourage English learning and to educate its community of EFL learners on how important English is. Furthermore, since English is one of the important skills to have in terms of economic advancement and most ELF countries invest in making their countries progress using English proficiency as a tool, the resources are put into teaching in formal education regardless of the result, Thai university students view English as means for economic growth but still preserve their identity and native language [3]. As a Thai student studying English as a Foreign Language, the struggles primarily consist of less exposure to the language since most of the students rarely use English outside of the classroom and the lack of confidence that is attributed to anxiety in language acquisition. Three primary factors led to the change in Thailand's English language curriculum. First is the social environment of education, teaching methodologies, and language instruction context. The second concerns power dynamics and inequality associated with English's dominance as a foreign language and as the medium of education in the Thai setting. The third factor covers critical sociolinguistics in terms of socio-political concerns about language education in the Thai setting, as well as critical applied linguistics in connection to language instruction. [4]. In a recent survey conducted by English First (EF) [5], the world's largest ranking of countries by English skills, Thailand is ranked

101st globally and eighth among ASEAN nations in the English Proficiency Index 2023, which also translates to “very low”. This shows that Thailand requires significant improvements in English proficiency to meet the evolving demands of the global landscape. However, while the English Proficiency Index 2023 presented a low result, Lai and Gyamfi [6] highlighted opposing viewpoints. Their study showed an above-moderate level of grit or determination in learning English. The result suggested the consistency of interest presented by the English university students in English language learning. The findings concluded that despite having a low proficiency, students are eager to learn and improve.

While various studies are anchored on the challenges and difficulties of EFL students, they mostly focus on beginner-level students, and limited research on the level higher than beginner to elementary-level EFL students. Similarly, several research are conducted using elementary to secondary-level students, and research on the tertiary level has yet to be explored further. For these reasons, the study investigating English language difficulties faced by EFL university students among fourth-year BA English majors has been developed.

The purpose of the study is to identify the difficulties fourth-year BA English major students face in Learning English and to gain insights into how they perceive their English proficiency through self-assessment of their whole learning process. This research has the potential to significantly improve the curriculum of the English department by identifying the specific challenges the students have while learning and by addressing them based on their weaknesses. Moreover, it can also enhance the learning outcome and help improve the teaching approaches and learning resources, and by understanding students’ motivation and challenges, the information can be valuable for improving the overall English learning experience for students.

Research Questions:

1. What is the most common challenge faced by EFL English major students in developing their English language skills in terms of:

- 1.1 general knowledge
- 1.2 reading
- 1.3 writing
- 1.4 listening
- 1.5 speaking

2. In which of the four macro skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) do students report the most difficulty?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL students in Thailand need to establish a solid foundation in English language proficiency. These foundations are the basis for better personal and educational progress as well as great career options in the future. Reaching the desired level of proficiency may pose a challenge as difficulties gradually become evident but it is achievable. It is a well-known fact that English is widely used in educational settings worldwide. Learning English has become mandatory as most texts used in higher education are written in this language. Since English is the primary language used in all fields of education and the only language used for information stored in books and journals in both printed and electronic form, it is widely used by students, teachers, and researchers worldwide [7]. The importance of learning English is apparent and beneficial in communication. All the macro skills have roles, and they are as important as the other. In language classrooms, they provide learners with guided support, opportunities for development, and real-world scenarios in which to use the language for information exchange, demonstration of skills, and confidence [8].

Difficulties Faced by University EFL Learners

Based on the study of Tayyab, Hassan, and Akmal [9], the primary issues that Pakistani graduate-level learners face are speaking skills, proficiency, and learning achievements. Given that, at present, English has become essential in Pakistan, these issues need action as teaching methods and approaches for improving speaking skills

were recommended. Furthermore, cultural barriers, self-consciousness, and disinterest, along with the classroom size and poor learning environment, hinder the learning process. These factors made the undergraduate students at the University of Baghdad [10]. Conversely, Indonesia's non-English department university students' challenges were specified to English skills such as grammar, with a 48% difficulty level, pronunciation, at 27%, vocabulary, at 12%, and other aspects at 10% [11]. University-level EFL students in Yemen's reading difficulties lie in deducing information and concluding based on context clues and organizing tasks despite using metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies in reading. Intensive reading was suggested for the students to overcome these difficulties and improve their academic proficiency [12]. In Indonesia, a group of second-year undergraduate students' challenges in listening skills focused on the unfamiliarity of accents, fast-paced conversations, and uncommon vocabulary, which emphasized the necessity of more vocabulary input in speeches [13]. While in Libya, the major difficulties of the English major students in writing, especially academics, were the appropriate vocabulary choice, the struggle in formulating thesis statements, the organization of ideas, and coherence. The factors that influenced these difficulties were the lack of resources, low English proficiency, and insufficient chances in writing practice [14].

According to Dimaano and Huong, Vietnamese first-year university students have difficulties with English comprehension, writing, speaking, and pronunciation. The study found that the student's performance in English language proficiency was average with notable inconsistencies among each skill and thus recommended more language practice with specific skill interventions [15]. Similarly, a study of the analysis of the needs of Korean EFL university learners by Lee and Villacorta has shown that learners consider writing and speaking to be the most difficult to master, as compared to reading and listening. The study indicates that most Korean's primary goal is to get high scores on aptitude tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL and on it, they found intensive grammar classes to be ineffective and consider immediate correction methods to be more suitable instead [16]. Building on the work of Lee and Villacorta, Tanmongkol et al. [17] noted that Thai students' difficulties in English are because of lack of experience and vocabulary, exposure, and fear and speaking as their weakest skill, as well as grammar and accuracy. The same case for Thai EFL learners' reading difficulties. Frequent reliance on context clues for comprehension and skipping unfamiliar words suggest the need for vocabulary skills improvement especially when used in reading. Additionally, Thai university students experience anxiety and shyness concerning oral presentation which affects their overall performance. The psychological pressure hinders them from being effective speakers [18, 19].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section covers the following aspects: research design, sampling strategy, the researchers' role, participants, data sources, data collection process, instrumentation, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

This study employed a descriptive research design to investigate English language difficulties faced by EFL university students among fourth-year BA English majors. This design is appropriate for describing and putting collected data in detail providing essential points in enhancing the EFL students' learning experiences.

Participants

The data collection took place at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, English Department, Nakhon University, Thailand. The study involved 31 fourth-year BA English major EFL students from the English Department. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique used to select individuals with specific knowledge or experience [20].

Instruments of the Study

The researchers employed a self-made questionnaire to collect data on students' difficulties in the English language. The questionnaire comprised 6 sections: general knowledge (8 items), reading writing (5 items), listening (5 items), speaking (5 items), and open-ended questions (5 items) to provide more reliable results.

Procedure

The questionnaire was validated by three experts in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT).

A pilot study was conducted as the next step following the validation process. Upon the completion of the revisions, the questionnaire was distributed to participants using Google Forms. The Likert scale was used to measure the respondent's responses (Likert, 1932) which is a widely recognized instrument for assessing attitudes and opinions in survey research. Respondents selected from five options to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement: 5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, and 1 - never. Upon collection of the responses, the data were meticulously recorded and subjected to analysis using appropriate statistical methodologies. This analysis included the computation of frequency distributions, means, and mean percentages. The data were systematically organized and tabulated to facilitate interpretation, with all computations executed using Microsoft Excel and Jamovi Applications.

To achieve the study's research questions, a quantitative design was employed. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Accordingly, the tabulation of the data from the questionnaire was used in this study. Finally, the open-ended probing questions included in the questionnaire were collected and synthesized to gain a more in-depth understanding of their difficulties.

Sub-problem no. 1

1. To identify the most common challenge faced by EFL English major students in developing their English language skills in terms of general knowledge, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, the data was collected from the questionnaire and Microsoft Excel Functions were used to analyze the data.

Sub-problem no. 2

2. To find out which of the four macro skills students report the most difficulty, the data was collected from the questionnaire and Microsoft Excel Functions were used to analyze the data.

Ethical Considerations

Following ethical standards in research is very important. It helps ensure that the study focuses on its main goals, like gaining knowledge, finding the truth, and reducing errors. It also promotes values such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness. This study followed the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (2020). These principles include respecting participants' choices, doing good and avoiding harm, ensuring fairness, obtaining informed consent, protecting confidentiality and data, maintaining integrity, and avoiding conflicts of interest. These guidelines helped make sure the research was ethical.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the outcome of the quantitative analysis of the research questions. The results are presented based on the emergent themes, sub-themes, core ideas, and categorization.

Table 1 shows that 25.8 % of the respondents were male and 74.2 were female.

Table 1: Gender and Age of the EFL Students

Frequencies of Gender			
Gender	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
male	8	25.8 %	25.8 %
female	23	74.2 %	100.0 %

The assessment of English skills showed several key challenges. A lack of vocabulary (3.45) and difficulty with grammar rules (3.45) make it hard to understand and express ideas. Pronunciation issues (3.23) affect speaking confidence, and anxiety about making mistakes (3.48) adds to the problem. Limited practice opportunities (2.94)

make it difficult to follow lectures and conversations (3.10) and to understand written English (3.45). There are also challenges in expressing thoughts clearly in writing (3.45). In general difficulty, the students found anxiety or fear of making mistakes when speaking English, the most challenging. It was followed by a lack of vocabulary, difficulty with grammar, comprehending written English, and expressing themselves clearly in writing. In addition, pronunciation and following lectures and conversations in English come after. Lastly, the limited opportunity to practice English was not part of the primary concern of the students as it had the lowest score.

General Difficulty	WM
Lack of vocabulary	3.45
Difficulty understanding grammar rules	3.45
Pronunciation issues	3.23
Limited opportunities to practice English	2.94
Anxiety or fear of making mistakes when speaking English.	3.48
Difficulty following lectures or conversations in English.	3.10
Problems understanding written English	3.45
Difficulty expressing yourself clearly in writing.	3.45
Total	3.33

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

The assessment of reading skills emphasized a neutral stance on the category. Understanding the main ideas garnering 3.19 suggests that the issue is present but not to the point of worry. Identifying supporting details was at 3.10. Comprehending the vocabulary used was at 3.39, which was close to a notable challenge to the student's reading proficiency. The students had fewer worries about following the overall structure of the test, with 2.97, while reading speed/pace was deemed tolerable. For the reading category, the main problem the students had was the comprehension of vocabulary, as it had the highest score, whereas the overall structure of the text was the least of the students' concerns with the lowest score. This means that the challenge of completely understanding the language was restricted by the difficulty in the comprehension of how vocabulary was used.

Reading	WM
Understanding the main ideas	3.19
Identifying supporting details	3.10
Comprehending the vocabulary used	3.39
Following the overall structure of the text	2.97
Reading speed/pace	3.16
Total	3.16

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

The assessment of writing skills revealed a moderate challenge the students had. Organizing of ideas logically

was at 2.23, which was at a manageable state. Using grammatically correct sentences was the lowest score at 3.03. Choosing the appropriate vocabulary indicated the most challenging part of writing skills, as it received the highest score of 3.35. Using different sentence structures was at 3.10 while identifying errors when editing posed some difficulties to the students as it was the second highest score of 3.29. The overall score of 3.20 indicated that the writing skills were mildly challenging but not alarming.

Writing	WM
Organize your ideas logically	3.23
Use grammatically correct sentences	3.03
Choose appropriate vocabulary	3.35
Use different sentence structures	3.10
Identify errors when editing	3.29
Total	3.20

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

The assessment of listening skills highlighted several key challenges. Understanding native speakers' accents scored 3.13, Following the pace of conversation was within the average level at 3.23, but still presents challenges. Identifying key information scored 3.06. Distinguishing between similar-sounding words scored 3.26, indicating a need for improvement in this area. However, focusing on the speaker for extended periods scored the highest at 3.42, which posed a problem for the students. This suggests that the final category might challenge them in their progress as reflected in the score.

Listening	WM
Understanding native speakers' accents	3.13
Following the pace of conversation	3.23
Identifying key information	3.06
Distinguishing between similar-sounding words	3.26
Focusing on the speaker for extended periods	3.42
Total	3.22

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

The assessment of speaking skills revealed several areas for improvement. Fluency and the ability to express oneself smoothly scored 3.13. Using appropriate grammar was rated at 3.03, which was slightly normal. However, a high score of 3.48 in using appropriate vocabulary indicated a significant concern. Pronunciation and clarity were the lowest at 2.97. Confidence and overcoming speaking anxiety scored 3.29, suggesting some challenges but still manageable. Finally, participating actively in discussions and presentations scored 3.26, which was faintly above normal.

Speaking	WM
Fluency and expressing yourself smoothly	3.13
Using appropriate grammar	3.03
Using appropriate grammar	3.48
Pronunciation and clarity	2.97
Confidence and overcoming speaking anxiety	3.29
Participating actively in discussions and presentations.	3.26
Total	3.18

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

The general proficiency score is 3.32, suggesting a relatively strong foundation. However, the reading (3.16) and writing (3.20) scores fall into the average range, indicating that students feel unconcern about their performance in these areas. This indicates that the challenges may not be significant. In contrast, the listening (3.22) and speaking (3.18) scores are slightly higher, suggesting a possibility of obstacles in the future. Overall, while students demonstrate solid proficiency, there are clear opportunities implying room to enhance their general proficiency.

General	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
3.32	3.16	3.20	3.22	3.18

legends:

5 - always, 4 often, 3 -sometimes, 2 – rarely, 1 - never

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a discussion of the themes from the analyzed data. The study aimed to identify the difficulties fourth-year BA English major students face in learning English and to gain insights into how they perceive their English proficiency through self-assessment of their whole learning process.

The overall assessment scores indicate moderate proficiency across different language skills. The general score is 3.32, suggesting a solid foundation. In reading, the score is 3.16, reflecting some challenges in comprehension. Writing has a score of 3.20, indicating areas for improvement in organization and grammar. Listening is rated at 3.22, showing a need to enhance comprehension of accents and key information. Finally, the speaking score was 3.18, highlighting difficulties in fluency and pronunciation. Focusing on the areas with lower scores can lead to significant improvements in English proficiency. [21, 22]. In discussing the role of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Mantra and Widiastuti (2019) argue that EAP, as a branch of English for Specific Purposes, they highlight that EAP does not adhere to a fixed methodology, allowing for various strategies to enhance students' English proficiency [23] it implies various teaching techniques are therefore needed to improve the overall English skills of the EFL students.

The assessment of English language skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners highlights several areas for improvement. With a general score of 3.32, learners have a solid foundation, but specific challenges remain. In reading, a score of 3.16 indicates difficulties in comprehension, particularly in

understanding the main ideas and following the overall structure of texts. Implementing strategies such as summarizing paragraphs and practicing with a variety of reading materials can help EFL learners enhance their comprehension and become more confident in navigating written content. In the study of Lin (2014) technology may be a very useful way to enhance their reading skills as it indicated that the mobile group not only excelled in online activities and reading achievement but also expressed a more positive attitude toward the online extensive reading program compared to the PC group [24].

Writing skills scored 3.20, implying areas that need attention, especially in organizing ideas logically and using grammatically correct sentences. While vocabulary usage shows some strength at 3.35, learners may struggle with varying sentence structures and effectively identifying errors during editing (3.29). Providing structured writing exercises, along with opportunities for peer feedback, can empower EFL learners to express their thoughts more clearly and improve their writing overall. By reading and responding to students' journal entries, teachers can assess individual competencies and gain insights into their learners' needs, thoughts, and feelings. It will allow educators to support their teaching approaches to better align with student preferences and provide targeted support throughout the writing process [25, 26].

Listening skills, rated at 3.22, highlight the need for better comprehension of native accents and key information in conversations. This is very important for effective communication in both academic and everyday contexts. According to Kim, she mentioned that students in intermediate and advanced proficiency groups showed significant improvement in their listening skills after engaging with video resources. The enhancements in listening ability among these groups were notably greater than those observed in the low-proficiency group [27].

Speaking skills scored 3.18, reflecting ongoing challenges in fluency and pronunciation, often triggered by anxiety in speaking situations. Creating a supportive environment for practice, such as conversation clubs or language exchanges, can significantly boost learners' confidence and speaking abilities. In the study of Alharbi, he addressed the challenges faced by Saudi students in developing their English communication skills, emphasizing the lack of authentic language learning opportunities outside the classroom. It implies that addressing the lack of authentic language learning opportunities outside the classroom is essential for enhancing students' English communication skills and overcoming barriers to their speaking proficiency.

In the responses to the open-ended questions, many students said they want more focus on speaking skills because they feel nervous and lack confidence when talking in English. They also mentioned that listening skills should be improved, as understanding different accents can be difficult as a support system to Tanmongkol et al. statement on Thai students' difficulties in English language learning [11]. Grammar and vocabulary were emphasized as important areas where they need more practice, thus real-time interventions should be given for smooth pacing of learning process [10,11]. Students expressed a desire for practical courses, like business communication and public speaking, that relate to real-life situations and jobs. They suggested adding activities and internships to help them gain experience. When asked about using English outside the classroom, many reported feelings anxious about making mistakes and having trouble understanding native speakers. They worry about speaking in front of groups and often feel they cannot express their ideas clearly. In terms of their English proficiency and career readiness, students shared mixed feelings. While some feel their skills have improved since high school, most believe they still need to learn more to be fully prepared for work. They stressed the importance of continuous practice and further study to build their confidence and improve their language abilities for future job opportunities therefore integrating the CLT Approach may be considered in honing their confidence in communication skills [28].

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results, it is therefore recommended to enhance speaking and writing skills through interactive activities and practical exercises, while also incorporating more targeted listening and reading practice to support comprehension and fluency.

Based on student feedback, it is recommended that the English subjects focus more on speaking and listening skills to help build confidence. Adding relevant English courses, such as business communication and public speaking, will make learning authentic, and more relevant to real-life scenarios. It would also be helpful to

include activities and internships for hands-on experience. To reduce anxiety about using English outside the classroom, providing more informal speaking practice in a friendly setting could be beneficial. Finally, offering continuous support and resources for extra study will help students improve their skills and prepare better for future job opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study focused on the current challenges faced by EFL learners in developing their English language skills. The findings indicated that while learners demonstrate a basic understanding of English, significant difficulties persist, primarily due to anxiety and limited practice opportunities outside the classroom. Furthermore, it emphasized the need for careful study and tailored interventions that focus on the specific needs of learners, enhancing their engagement and confidence in using English. Despite certain limitations, such as the narrow demographic scope, the insights gained from this study provide valuable implications for improving EFL instruction and making it a more effective language learning environment.

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