



Overcoming Obstacles: Insights into the English Language Proficiency of Diploma Students in a Malaysian Polytechnic

Marcus Gee-Whai Kho^{1,*}, Su-Hie Ting²

¹Department of General Studies, Politeknik Kuching Sarawak, 93050 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

²Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author; E-mail: marcus.k@poliku.edu.my

Article Info

Article history:

Received: 22/02/2024

Accepted: 25/04/2024

Published: 30/04/2024

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33102/alazkiya.a92>

ABSTRACT

Given English's status as the international language of communication, its mastery is necessary for global interaction. However, people often face communicative difficulties in countries where English is not the primary language. English educators must understand the obstacles their students face for effective teaching. Therefore, exploring students' perspectives on their difficulties in learning English as an additional language becomes a research priority. This qualitative study aimed to identify the strengths and challenges faced by English language learners in a polytechnic institution in Malaysia. Information was collected through open-ended questionnaires and interpreted using a thematic analysis approach. The results indicate that deficits in English proficiency, confidence and fluency are learners' main challenges. In contrast, determination, enthusiasm and optimism were highlighted as notable strengths. The study highlights the need for a solid foundation in language skills such as understanding instructions and messages, vocabulary acquisition and fluency. Implementing language teaching methods that address individual challenges such as comprehension deficits, grammar, and vocabulary is paramount. The findings have significant implications for English language teaching in Malaysian polytechnics. They show a need to improve English immersion, promote dynamic and engaging learning exercises, and create a supportive and motivating learning atmosphere.

Keywords: *English language learning, Malaysian polytechnic, strengths, challenges, qualitative study, language proficiency.*

INTRODUCTION

The English language has achieved widespread use and dominance in various fields because of its versatility and adaptability. Its importance is underlined by the fact that 67 countries have declared it their official language, while another 27 recognise it as a second official language (Ilyosovna, 2020). As an important means of intercultural communication, education and professional advancement, English is crucial for success in science, technology and medicine. Its importance in information and communication technology has made it an indispensable tool for participating in the global community and taking advantage of opportunities. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to prioritise the acquisition of English (Ilyosovna, 2020).

With the increasing dominance of English, it has become an indispensable language not only in the former British-ruled countries but also in the cultural and business sectors dominated by these nations. As a result, people worldwide are learning English as a second language, especially in countries where it has been included in the curriculum (Ilyosovna, 2020). English is widely used in education, so students need to be proficient in the language to access a wider range of reading materials and academic references, most of which are in English (Mamat, 2016). Consequently, English has become the global lingua franca, making proficiency in the language a prerequisite for communication and interaction.

Recognising the importance of English proficiency among students, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has developed a "roadmap" to improve English language education for a decade (Zuraidah & Mardziah, 2019). This roadmap aims to make students competent and productive users of English by providing English language instruction from preschool to university aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). English teaching, learning and assessment are linked to the CEFR, including teacher education and training. It also promotes students' engagement with English outside the classroom by providing additional English language activities and programmes, extending learning time, and informing stakeholders and community members (Zuraidah & Mardziah, 2019). To design effective English lessons and improve students' language skills, teachers need to understand the barriers their students face. Therefore, researchers need to obtain the students' perspectives on their challenges in learning English as a second or foreign language.

Researchers have identified oral communication as challenging for second and foreign learners, particularly academic listening comprehension (Rintaningrum, 2018; Utan, 2019). Learners have problems communicating in English due to limited vocabulary, poor grammar, and nervousness (Alharbi, 2022; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Hassan & Dweik, 2021; Ratnasari, 2020). The obstacle of anxiety posed by peer pressure and lack of self-confidence surfaced in Kara, Ayaz and Dündar's (2017) qualitative study. Utan (2019) found that reducing anxiety can improve listening comprehension. Other researchers have investigated strategies to address the

challenges faced by English learners in reading (Alharbi, 2022; Hassan & Dweik, 2021; Yaccob & Yunus, 2019), and writing (Rass, 2015; Ravichandran et al., 2017), spelling (Altamimi & Ab Rashid, 2019), grammar (Tshotsho, Cekiso, & Mumbembe, 2015), and pronunciation (Al-Zayed, 2017; Mohammed & Idris, 2020; Rajadurai, 2006; Shak, Lee, & Stephen, 2016), and vocabulary (Siddiqua, 2016). However, the challenges of speaking are different. In oral communication, language learners need to think on their feet and produce the language in seconds. First, they have a limited vocabulary and inadequate grammatical knowledge to produce meaningful utterances quickly and are inclined towards hesitations and pauses. The pressure they feel to speak fluently compounds their anxiety, but less is understood about the main obstacles in oral communication from the student's perspective.

This study examines Malaysian polytechnic students' views on their strengths and challenges in learning English. By identifying the specific challenges and strengths students face in learning English, this study can provide valuable insights to inform classroom practice and support students' English language development in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon that can negatively and complexly affect language learners. Students suffering from foreign language anxiety often experience fear, insecurity and avoidance behaviour when pressured to speak a non-native language. Misconceptions and perceptions about the language to be learned, such as cultural differences, limited language proficiency and perceptions of English as a demanding subject, can increase foreign language anxiety (Ibrahim & Ismail, 2010). Such anxiety can create an unsafe learning environment and negatively affect students' academic performance and outcomes (Ibrahim & Ismail, 2010). In addition, students may feel ashamed or avoid speaking up when teachers point out their mistakes in front of the whole class, which can exacerbate negative feelings towards language learning (Nor et al., 2019).

Several factors can influence language anxiety, including personality traits, previous language learning experiences, teaching methods and classroom atmosphere. The influential affective filter hypothesis (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) states that language learning is more effective when learners feel relaxed and motivated. According to this model, high anxiety levels can lead to a mental block that impedes language input processing and results in production.

Fortunately, effective strategies to reduce foreign language anxiety include cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation techniques and exposure therapy (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Teachers can also help minimise foreign language anxiety by creating a supportive classroom environment, providing positive feedback and using communicative and interactive teaching methods (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

In summary, foreign language anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can have a negative impact on language learners' experiences. To create a more inclusive and effective environment for foreign language learning, educators must understand the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety and implement effective strategies to reduce it. Teachers should also be aware of the impact of foreign language anxiety on their student's learning experiences and take proactive measures to minimise it in their classes.

Challenges in learning English

Challenges in listening for learners of English

This section provides the literature review on areas that might pose challenges in English learning, which means that these areas may cause anxiety to some learners but are strengths for other learners who are better language learners.

The studies by Utan (2019) and Rintaningrum (2018) addressed the difficulties of academic listening and learning English as a foreign language. Utan's (2019) qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with 10 undergraduate students in Indonesia to identify their listening difficulties and discover strategies to overcome them. The study found that fluency was a major hurdle, as well as understanding unfamiliar words and phrases. In addition, affective techniques such as managing emotions and reducing anxiety effectively improved listening comprehension. In contrast, Rintaningrum (2018) examined curriculum materials, textbooks and interviews with learners to analyse the barriers to effective listening comprehension in English. The study identified inadequate language skills, difficulties in understanding native speakers' accents and a lack of motivation as the main factors hindering effective listening comprehension. Based on studies on the complexity of academic listening comprehension and foreign language learning for English learners, the areas that can pose challenges (and yet be the strengths of a smaller number of learners) are fluency, unfamiliar vocabulary, and accent.

Challenges in speaking for learners of English

When speaking English, English language learners face various difficulties that can have a negative impact on their language acquisition. The case study by Ratnasari (2020) found that learners struggle with problems such as limited vocabulary, nervousness, an unsupportive environment and poor grammar skills. On the other hand, the systematic review of published studies by Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) found that ESL learners in Malaysia face both internal and external obstacles, including low confidence, inadequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge, difficulties with native speakers' accent or pronunciation, limited resources for learning English, and insufficient support and feedback from teachers. Similarly, the qualitative study by Kara, Ayaz and Dündar (2017) highlighted social, pedagogical and personal reasons

for Turkish EFL learners' difficulties. These factors include peer pressure, lack of self-confidence, deficiencies in teacher training and teaching materials EFL, fear of language learning, autonomy issues and the absence of English-speaking fathers.

The studies reviewed above identify accent and pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and unsupportive environment (e.g., little feedback) as areas that can pose challenges (but may be overcome by a few learners). The emotions accompanying language learning are nervousness and low confidence. These studies show the many challenges English language learners face in speaking English, including internal and external factors. With the insights from these studies, educators and teachers can develop effective strategies to help learners overcome these challenges and succeed in their language learning process.

Challenges in reading for learners of English

Studies on areas that can pose challenges in mastering the reading skills in English learning are grammar and vocabulary (but these can be handled well by a smaller number of learners with strengths in these areas). Yaccob and Yunus (2019), Hassan and Dweik (2021), and Alharbi (2022) have examined the hurdles and obstacles faced by learners of English as a second or foreign language. Yaccob and Yunus (2019) found that secondary school students in Malaysia struggle to understand language and instructional materials due to interference with their mother tongue and lack of motivation. Nevertheless, they adopt various strategies, such as collaborative and autonomous learning styles, to facilitate their language acquisition process. In contrast, Hassan and Dweik (2021) found that ninth-grade students in Jordan struggle with grammar, new vocabulary, homonyms and homographs in reading comprehension. Alharbi (2022) found that challenges in learning English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia include inadequate knowledge, vocabulary and interest in learning English and curriculum design issues that hinder reading comprehension. Suggested solutions include training teachers, using different teaching methods to suit students' learning styles, and motivating students through additional instruction. These studies show that English language learners use collaborative and autonomous learning styles to facilitate their language acquisition process, and varied teaching methods to suit students' learning styles can improve their language skills.

Challenges in writing for learners of English

In this section, research shows that the main challenge for English learners is writing sentences because of their inadequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but poor critical thinking and organisation skills also hamper them. Rass (2015) focused on Palestinian Arab students learning English as a foreign language and found that some could form topic and concluding sentences but had difficulty providing supporting details and developing a coherent paragraph using appropriate connectors/transition words. To improve their writing skills, Rass (2015) suggests

conducting contrastive analysis, analysing errors and exposing students to authentic English by reading and watching the news to enhance their learning experience.

According to Ravichandran et al. (2017), international students in the United States also have difficulty writing in English. The researchers conducted a qualitative study and found that these students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, organising and developing ideas, critical thinking, and avoiding plagiarism. To help these students improve their writing skills, the researchers recommend that subject teachers, friends and peer mentors play an important role in providing support.

Altamimi and Ab Rashid (2019) investigated the causes of spelling errors among Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language. They found that spelling errors are caused by several factors, including the educational system and curriculum, learners' attitudes towards learning, and interference between Arabic and English. In particular, the lack of emphasis on teaching spelling rules and techniques in the education system and curriculum in Saudi Arabia has a negative impact on students' written communication skills. Improving spelling instruction and addressing learners' attitudes towards learning could help Arab learners improve their written communication skills.

Taken together, the findings indicate that to help English learners overcome the challenges of writing coherent sentences and essays, instructors can conduct activities involving error analysis, authentic materials, and mentor support.

Challenges in pronunciation for learners of English

Researchers have conducted several studies to investigate the challenges that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) face in pronouncing English correctly and found that pronunciation problems affect learners with low proficiency but not those with good proficiency. These studies have identified common pronunciation difficulties and suggested practical solutions. According to Mohammed and Idris (2020), learners often struggle to recognise vowels and pronounce consonants correctly. Similarly, Al-Zayed (2017) found that the differences between Arabic and English sound make it difficult for Jordanian learners to pronounce English words correctly. In contrast, Rajadurai (2006) studied the speech patterns of highly skilled English speakers in Malaysia and found that they adjust their pronunciation to improve intelligibility. Shak, Lee and Stephen (2016) studied Malaysian students with low oral proficiency and found that they frequently mispronounced vowels, consonants, silent letters and the form '-ed'. Both studies recommended using instructional videos to overcome these difficulties and emphasised the importance of correct pronunciation for employability.

Challenges in Grammar for Learners of English

In the previous sections, the literature review has shown that inadequate knowledge of grammar caused problems for English learners in their listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and this section provides empirical findings on the particular aspects of

grammar posing challenges. Several studies show that learning English grammar can be challenging for non-native speakers. Tshotsho, Cekiso and Mumbembe (2015) found that French-speaking students from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) studying in South Africa struggled with tenses, concord, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns and punctuation. Similarly, Saengboon (2017) found that Thai university students have limited English grammar skills due to inadequate teaching methods, limited contact with native speakers and cultural differences in language acquisition.

Halim, Wahid and Halim (2021) investigated attitudes towards teaching and learning grammar in online classrooms and found that although virtual classes present challenges, they also offer benefits for language acquisition. On the other hand, Jabbar and Hussein (2023) identified the differences between Arabic and English grammar rules as one of the main difficulties Iraqi learners face in English as a foreign language. They also found that students have different attitudes towards the grammar of the two languages and use different techniques in dealing with them.

These studies show the importance of recognising the grammatical difficulties of non-native speakers of English and developing effective teaching methods and resources to support their language acquisition. This includes giving attention to teaching tenses, concord, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns and punctuation, which may differ across languages. In this way, learners can improve their grammar skills, which is essential for effective communication and success in academic and professional settings.

Challenges in vocabulary for learners of English

In the previous sections, the literature review identified unfamiliar and inadequate vocabulary as posing challenges for English learners in their spoken and written communication, and this section provides empirical findings on the particular aspects of vocabulary posing challenges. Siddiqua (2016) surveyed 100 secondary school students taking English as a foreign language as a compulsory subject in Bangladesh to determine learners' attitudes towards vocabulary acquisition and using their mother tongue when needed. The study found that learners showed positive attitudes towards acquiring new vocabulary in and out of context. In addition, using their mother tongue when needed helped them to improve their language skills. However, the biggest challenge for the teachers was adapting the teaching methods to the learners' needs. Both teachers and learners had difficulties optimising language experiences, teaching individual words explicitly, developing learning strategies for new words and creating awareness of newly learned words.

On the other hand, Farjami and Aidinlou's (2013) study aimed to provide effective vocabulary learning strategies for learners and useful teaching techniques and activities for teachers. The study found that learners often forget new vocabulary quickly and have difficulty retaining it in their long-term memory. Effective strategies used in the study included the keyword method, verbal repetition, sound-based

learning and pictorial representations. Grouping words and writing them down in a notebook were also effective strategies. These studies show the importance of individualised instruction for teaching individual words explicitly, developing learning strategies for new words and strategies to remember newly learned words; it can turn a challenging area into a strength for some English learners.

METHODOLOGY

The study collected qualitative data on Malaysian polytechnic students' views on their strengths and challenges in learning English. The qualitative research method is powerful for gaining insights into people's experiences, attitudes, behaviours and interactions (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013).

The data were from 62 polytechnic students, of which 82.3% were male, and 17.7% were female (Table 1). There was a spread of English proficiency based on the students' SPM English results. The grades were on a scale of 10 different levels ranging from A+ (Super Distinction) to G (Fail). A small percentage had good English proficiency: 10 (16.1%) received an A (High Distinction), and 3 (4.8%) received an A- (Distinction). More students had B grades: 16 (25.8%) received a B+ (Super Credit) grade, while 4 (6.5%) received a B (High Credit) grade. Seven (11.3%) participants received a grade of C+ (Upper Credit), and 9 (14.5%) received a grade of C (Credit). Eleven (17.7%) received a grade of D (Upper Pass), while only 1 (1.6%) received a grade of E (Pass). Finally, one participant (1.6%) received a grade of G (Fail).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Variables		Number	%
Gender	Male	51	82.3
	Female	11	17.7
SPM English language results	A+ (Super Distinction)	0	0
	A (High Distinction)	10	16.1
	A- (Distinction)	3	4.8
	B+ (Super Credit)	16	25.8
	B (High Credit)	4	6.5
	C+ (Upper Credit)	7	11.3
	C (Credit)	9	14.5
	D (Upper Pass)	11	17.7
	E (Pass)	1	1.6
	G (Fail)	1	1.6

The instrument was an open-ended questionnaire with questions on their strengths and challenges in learning English. Data collected from participants' responses to an open-ended question were analysed using Thematic Analysis, a qualitative research method that enables researchers to uncover recurring themes and

patterns of meaning in a corpus of text (Caulfield, 2019). The researcher coded the responses in Microsoft Word to construct themes based on the participants' responses. The responses were then categorised according to common themes, and the main themes that emerged from the data were identified in the final step of the analysis. This method allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Strength in learning English

The polytechnic students' strengths in learning English were categorised into personal strengths and environmental strengths, each with its sub-themes.

Theme 1: Personal Strengths

The personal strengths included comprehension skills, versatility in communication, and affective factors.

Sub-theme: Comprehension skills

It is clear from the data that many students see their strength in learning English as the ability to understand messages and instructions. Six students specifically mentioned their comprehension skills. For example, "*I understand (the messages and instructions)*" (S59) and "*My strengths in English are that I understand the language and that I have no problems learning English*" (S55). These responses suggest that a solid understanding of the basics of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary, can be crucial for successful language acquisition.

Sub-theme: Grammatical knowledge

Some students mentioned grammatical knowledge, encompassing grammar and vocabulary, as a personal strength. For example, S41 said, "*My strength in learning English is that I like to write essays to improve my grammar*" (S41). Three other students highlighted vocabulary as a strength. For example, S37 said, "*The strength in learning English is that you can improve your communication skills, [including] learning new words that I have never heard before.*" This suggests that building an extensive vocabulary can be essential to language learning, especially for effective communication. In addition, some students mentioned vocabulary as a personal strength. S47 said, "*I can understand a lot of vocabulary. It does not take me a lot of time to memorise new words.*" S57 also stated that her strengths were learning new words and improving her English skills. These responses suggest that speaking and communicating fluently in English can be a valuable skill for language learners.

From the students' perspective, they were good English learners because they had a strong foundation of grammatical knowledge (grammar and vocabulary), which enabled them to understand messages and instructions well. These areas may be difficult for other learners of English but not for the students quoted in the excerpts in this section.

Sub-theme: Versatility in communication

It is clear from the data that the students in this study have strong confidence in their versatile ability to speak English. For example, S2 said that she "*can easily talk to anyone who does not speak Bahasa Melayu*", indicating a high level of confidence in using English to communicate. S11 said that she "*can speak fluently*", which underlines her competence and confidence in her language skills. Regarding adapting to different contexts, S3 mentioned that they could speak English in "*available situations*", which underlines their versatility in using the language as needed. Meanwhile, S7 emphasised the practical importance of English proficiency, stating that their strength in learning the language is that they can "*talk with each other by using English fluently when travelling to other nations*." S53 also highlighted her ability to "*communicate in English fairly well*," suggesting an intermediate level of proficiency.

The students focussed more on speaking rather than writing and reading, indicating that the former may be a bigger obstacle in their language learning from their perspective. S59 mentioned that she could write in English but did not elaborate on her skills, while S22 stated that she could "*read English sentences*", suggesting a basic level of literacy skills. Overall, the responses indicate a strong confidence in English and recognition of the practical benefits of English language skills, but there may be differences in writing and reading skills.

Sub-theme: Affective factors

According to the data, some students cited confidence and passion as strengths in learning English. For example, S1 emphasised that his strength is that he is confident in writing essays based on facts that he understands. Similarly, S15 expressed that he feels confident speaking in front of others while working with peers, while S52 stated that he feels confident communicating in English. These responses suggest that confidence plays a crucial role in language learning and can help individuals overcome the fear of making mistakes and communicating with others (Hiney, 2022; Osboe, Fujimura, & Hirschel, 2007).

In addition, passion was mentioned as a strength by some students. For example, S50 mentioned being able to concentrate on his lecturer during class fully, S61 attributed her strength in learning English solely to her determination and desire to improve, and S62 shared that her interest in watching English movies and series (TV) helped her learn the language. These responses suggest that a passion for learning a

language can motivate people to invest the time and effort necessary to improve their language skills (Muñoz-Restrepo, Ramirez, & Gaviria, 2020; Fryer, 2019).

Overall, these responses suggest that confidence and passion are important strengths in language learning and that individuals with these qualities and a good mastery of grammar and vocabulary have an advantage in language acquisition.

Theme 2: Environmental Strength

Only one respondent, S58, mentioned the sub-theme of "supportive friends, parents and teachers" as a strength in learning English. S58 stated that her strength in learning English is the help she receives from her friends, parents and teachers. This response highlights the crucial role that social support can play in language learning. The response of S58 highlights the crucial role of supportive friends, parents and teachers in language learning. Educators and parents must recognise this and give learners the support they need to succeed in language learning.

Research has shown that social support can positively impact language learning outcomes (Liu & Jackson, 2008). When students are encouraged and supported by their classmates, family and teachers, they tend to be more motivated and engaged in language learning, leading to greater success in achieving language proficiency (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In addition, supportive parents and teachers can create a positive learning environment that promotes language development (Kalayci & Ergül, 2020). Teachers who provide feedback and constructive criticism and parents who provide resources and encouragement can help learners overcome obstacles and achieve their language learning goals (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Challenges in Learning English

The second objective of this study was to explore the difficulties that polytechnic students encounter on their way to learning English. The results show that the strengths of the better English language learners posed challenges for the weaker students, namely, poor comprehension and grammatical knowledge. What is the strength for one can be the weakness for another.

Theme 1: Oral communication

Sub-theme 1: Poor listening comprehension

The data suggest that the biggest challenge in learning English is the student's inability to understand what they hear, and the students' attention is on listening rather than reading. Seven students (S1, S4, S8, S9, S34, S42, S50) support this theme through their comments.

S1 has problems with comprehension when learning is too fast, emphasising that he needs more time to process the information. Similarly, S4 expressed the need to understand English better.

"Cabaran saya ialah kurang faham apabila pembelajaran yang dilakukan terlalu cepat." (S1)
"The challenge is, I need to learn (understand) English more."
(S4)

S8 pointed out the need to improve general language comprehension and emphasised a weak foundation in English. S9 struggles to understand and respond slowly, while S34 needs more time to process his learning.

"and (to strengthen general/ understand) knowledge." (S8)
"Sukar untuk memahami dan lambat memberi respon. Selain itu, saya juga sedikit lambat dalam menangka apa yang dipelajari." (S9)
"take times to digest what I learn" (S34)

S42 cited the challenge of being confronted with sentences she does not understand, further illustrating the problem of poor language comprehension. Finally, S50 expressed difficulty understanding the language, highlighting the general theme of weak basic skills.

"Kekuatan dan cabaran semasa saya mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris ialah cabaran dalam menghadapi ayat yang belum difahami." (S42)
"Cabaran saya ialah susah memahami." (S50)

Overall, the data highlight the need for effective language teaching strategies to improve learners' comprehension and build a solid foundation. Lack of comprehension and weak basic skills are students' biggest challenges in learning English. Teachers can play a crucial role in overcoming these challenges by creating a supportive classroom environment, providing positive feedback and using communicative and interactive teaching methods. According to Matsuda and Gobel (2004), such methods can help learners develop the basic skills they need and overcome the barriers to learning English.

Sub-theme 2: Poor speaking skills

The theme of poor speaking skills refers mainly to fluency and not pronunciation (which is categorised as a separate theme). The results show that speaking in English is one of the biggest challenges for students on their language-learning journey. Many

students lack confidence in speaking English (S2, S4, S17, S18, S47), which hinders their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively (S3, S7, S15, S42, S43, S53, S59). In addition, some students struggle with stuttering when speaking English (S34).

"not confident while speaking English" (S2)

"I'm not confident when I speak." (S47)

"Bercakap dalam Bahasa Inggeris dengan tidak terlalu lancar tetapi mengetahui apa yang ingin disampaikan." (S42)

"Stuttering whenever trying to speak in English" (S34)

In addition, some students find it difficult to speak English fluently (S5, S6, S8, S14, S31, S37, S40, S49, S60, S61), and some feel intimidated when speaking to someone who speaks English fluently (S38).

"When I nervous giving a speech, my mind become confuse." (S14)

"However, my challenges is I can't speak very well." (S40)

"Manakala cabaran saya ialah agak perlahan dalam pertuturan Bahasa Inggeris." (S61)

"The challenge in my English learning is sometimes I felt intimidate with someone who can speak fluent English." (S38)

This is consistent with past findings of Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) and Kara, Ayaz and Dünder (2017), which suggest that ESL students often attribute their difficulties in oral production to social reasons such as lack of confidence.

Although students recognise the importance of constantly practising their English skills to overcome these challenges (S37), some students find it difficult to balance bilingualism and spontaneity in speaking (S60). For example, one respondent understands English well but has difficulty responding in English (S49).

"The challenges are, you need to be consistently talking in English every day" (S37)

"Perlu bercakap secara dwibahasa dan tidak mahir dalam translate secara spontan." (S60)

"Faham Bahasa Inggeris tetapi kurang tahu/membalas dalam Bahasa Inggeris." (S49)

Overall, the data underlines the importance for learners to build confidence and fluency in English. Consistent practice and exposure to the language are crucial to help learners overcome these challenges.

Sub-theme 3: Poor pronunciation

Nine students expressed frustration with difficulties pronouncing English words correctly, a common problem for ESL learners (S30, S32). Some students were completely hampered because of words they did not know (S41). One respondent felt confused by the accent and found it difficult to pronounce the words correctly (S52). However, some students were confident they would understand the English words even if they struggled with pronunciation (S35, S57). These results suggest that some learners should prioritise vocabulary and comprehension before focusing on pronunciation.

"I am fast learner but I can't pronoun" (S30)

"I'm good at speaking but it is very difficult to pronounce words." (S32)

"Sebutan tidak lancar (S33) Sebutan perkataan tidak lancar." (S54)

"The challenges in my English is my pronunciation when I'm speaking for the word that I didn't know is very terrible." (S41)

"Confuse with the accent. Don't know how to pronounce." (S52)

"The strengths and challenges in my English learning is I cannot pronounce a words correctly, but I can understand the meaning of words." (S35)

"The challenge for me is I hardly pronounce some of the word but I know the meaning of it." (S57)

The students indicated that they understood the meaning of the English words well but had difficulty reading them correctly, indicating an inability to decipher unfamiliar words or to distinguish words with similar spellings but different pronunciations. For example, *"The challenges in my English learning is I can't read some word correctly but I know the meaning of the words."* (S36). Yacob and Yunus (2019) found that Malaysian high school students may have challenges learning English due to interference with their mother tongue. This challenge may be particularly pronounced for English learners whose mother tongue has a different writing system or phonetic rules. Improving phonetic skills or reading exercises focusing on pronunciation can help overcome this hurdle. The pronunciation difficulties identified in this study are consistent with the findings of Derwing and Munro (2015) and Mohammed and Idris (2020), who also identified a lack of practice as an important factor. Mohammed and Idris (2020) also highlighted vowel length and discrimination of consonant clusters as particular challenges for ESL learners.

Theme 2: Grammatical knowledge

The theme of grammatical knowledge posing challenges in learning English encompasses grammar and vocabulary.

Sub-theme: Grammar

The data shows that poor grammar is a major challenge in learning English for some students. In particular, four students mentioned struggling with grammar. They wrote about making mistakes (S2), feeling insecure when using the past tense and present tense (S10), and having to understand words with different meanings, past tense and present tense (S19). S52 said that she felt confused and nervous when it came to grammar.

"Grammar mistakes" (S2)

"Tidak pasti dan tidak yakin semasa menggunakan past tense dan present tense." (S10)

"Perlu memahami setiap perkataan yang membawa erti berbeza seperti past tense dan present tense." (S19)

"Still confuse and nervous with the grammar." (S52)

This finding is consistent with the research of Tshotsho et al. (2015), who found that students in the Democratic Republic of Congo often struggle with grammatical difficulties related to tenses, concord, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns and punctuation. These difficulties can hinder effective communication in English, as grammatical errors can lead to misunderstandings. Previous research by Jabbar and Hussein (2023) highlights the importance of developing effective teaching strategies and tools to support language acquisition. Effective language teaching methods include explicitly teaching grammar rules, using authentic materials and providing sufficient opportunities for practice and feedback. In addition, teachers can create a supportive and encouraging classroom environment to reduce learners' anxiety and increase their confidence in using English grammar.

Sub-theme: Vocabulary

The results show that many students have difficulties learning English due to inadequate vocabulary, supporting the adage that vocabulary constitutes the building blocks of a language. According to the responses, several students have difficulty understanding the meaning of certain words and phrases (S21, S22, S27, S28, S29, S33) and learning new English terms (S20, S45, S46, S54, S56). One respondent said, *"I need time to do some research when I come across unfamiliar words or phrases"* (S11). In addition, some students have difficulty remembering and retaining new vocabulary

(S39). To solve these problems, some participants rely on online tools such as Google Translate to facilitate their work and learn new words (S48).

"Menghafal dan mengingat semua fakta yang perlu saya sampaikan. Saya menggunakan google translate untuk memudahkan urusan kerja atau perkataan yang baru ketahui." (S48)

In addition, some participants have difficulty understanding English as a whole (S58), translating Malay into English (S24) and translating sentences into English (S62). Despite these challenges, some participants find learning English fun and easy (S20).

"Selain itu, cabaran saya pula ialah banyak tidak memahami maksud Bahasa Inggeris dan mudah merasa 91ance." (S58)
"To translate the language from Malay to English." (S24)
"Cabaran dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris adalah sukar untuk menukarkan ayat kepada Bahasa Inggeris." (S62)
"I sometimes forget the basics of English vocabulary. It takes time for me to fully understand English new terms or words. I find learning English is fun and easy to understand." (S20)

These findings are consistent with research showing that vocabulary knowledge is essential to language competence (Nation & Nation, 2001). To improve their vocabulary, students may need to engage in activities such as extensive reading, vocabulary-oriented exercises, and using context clues to infer word meanings (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997). In conclusion, although vocabulary is a major challenge for some students in learning English, they found strategies to overcome these challenges and improve their language skills.

Theme 3: Poor written communication skills

Poor written communication skills are a theme under challenges, but it is not put right after the oral communication skills because relatively fewer students mentioned writing. Poor writing skills encompass spelling problems. According to two students, spelling was a major challenge when writing in English. One student (S13) mentioned that he had difficulty spelling English words even though they came to him, while the other participant (S30) had a general problem with spelling words correctly.

"I can think of the English words I want but it's difficult for me to spell it." (S13)
"and can't spell word correctly." (S30)

Altamimi and Ab Rashid (2019) have identified several factors that may contribute to difficulties in spelling English words in second-language learners. These factors include a lack of motivation or interest in improving written communication skills and interference between their first languages, such as Bahasa Melayu, and English due to grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary differences. As a result, such interference can lead to errors in writing words with similar spellings but different meanings.

Theme 4: Affective factors

The affective factors include a lack of confidence and passion for language learning.

Sub-theme: No confidence

In this data set, several students emphasise their lack of confidence when speaking or presenting in English. S12 admitted that she was nervous when speaking in front of a large audience, while S23 stuttered, spoke slowly and had difficulty finding the right words when under pressure. Similarly, S25 revealed that she sometimes stuttered when she could not find the words. S26 reported that her thoughts became unclear during presentations. These problems may be due to a lack of familiarity with the language or insufficient practice in public speaking. Research by Ibrahim and Ismail (2010) shows that high anxiety levels can create an unsafe learning environment and negatively impact academic performance.

Possible strategies to overcome these challenges include building confidence through practice, using a tutor or mentor to improve language skills, and practising public speaking in a supportive environment.

"I can talk and write but get nervous sometimes when it comes to presenting in front of a crowd." (S12)

"Stuttering when nervous, slow voice, need time to think, sometimes mouth won't open." (S23)

"Usual challenges that I always encounter was sudden stutter during speaking in English because at lost of words." (S25)

"Kadang kala fikiran saya semasa pembentangan menjadi blur." (S26)

Sub-theme: No Passion

The information given by S33 is "*Tidak minat*", which in English means "no interest". It is unclear in which aspect of English the respondent has no interest. However, a lack of motivation or interest can significantly hinder language learning by decreasing students' engagement with the subject matter and their willingness to improve their skills. Language programmes and teachers can address this challenge by using

engaging and relevant materials, incorporating students' interests and goals into lessons, and providing opportunities for authentic communication in the target language.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' experiences learning English in a Malaysian polytechnic, focusing on identifying their strengths and challenges. Using thematic analysis of student responses to open-ended questions, we found that oral communication (listening and speaking) poses greater challenges in English learning to learners than written communication, including pronunciation and coping with different accents. Inadequate grammatical knowledge is also an obstacle to English learning, but grammar and vocabulary seemed equally challenging to the Malaysian polytechnic students in the study. While oral communication and grammatical knowledge are the weaknesses of a majority of students, these same areas are strengths for other learners who are better language learners. Similarly, affective factors (particularly confidence and passion) were positive for the better language learners and negative for the weaker language learners. The better language learners' strengths included comprehension skills, versatility in communication, and affective factors, and they had environmental strength in the form of supportive friends, parents and teachers.

The results suggest that English courses for second and foreign language learners should provide a solid foundation of language skills and grammatical knowledge. These are seen as critical to successful language learning, at least from the perspective of the students in the study. Language programmes should focus on building vocabulary and fluency, among other things, and use communicative and interactive teaching methods to create a supportive and encouraging classroom environment that reduces students' anxiety and increases their confidence in using English grammar.

The study also highlights the importance of confidence and passion for language learners, particularly in developing oral communication skills. In the affective area, perhaps structures for better social support in the classroom and out-of-class environment may help to engage the students and enable them to develop an internal drive to overcome obstacles in their language learning experiences.

However, the study has some limitations, including the small sample size of only 62 participants from a single polytechnic in Malaysia, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. In addition, the use of open-ended questionnaires may have resulted in incomplete or inadequate responses from some participants, and the study did not consider other demographic factors that may influence English language learning, such as socioeconomic background, which constitutes an external environment that may support or hamper language learning. Future research should focus on the influence of socioeconomic status, educational background and cultural values on language learning outcomes and the effectiveness of different teaching methods or interventions in improving learning outcomes in English language

learning. Studying a larger sample or including participants from multiple polytechnics will also increase the generalisability of the findings. Future studies could also explore the relationship between confidence, passion and social support in relation to learning outcomes and examine the strengths and weaknesses of language learners in different contexts to develop language programmes tailored to individual needs. Finally, the researchers could examine the role of institutional support and the classroom environment in language learning and explore the most effective teaching strategies to address learners' challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors sincerely thank the students of Politeknik Kuching Sarawak for their voluntary participation in this study. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the Research, Innovation and Commercialisation Unit at Politeknik Kuching Sarawak for granting ethical approval and supporting the conduct of this research.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Marcus Gee-Whai Kho (Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing – Original Draft)

Su-Hie Ting (Conceptualisation; Supervision; Writing – Review & Editing)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study received ethical approval from the Research, Innovation and Commercialisation Unit (Unit Penyelidikan, Inovasi dan Komersilan), Politeknik Kuching Sarawak. The research was conducted in accordance with the institution's ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

REFERENCES

- Alharbi, A. M. (2022). Reading skills among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia: A review of challenges and solutions. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 15(3), 204-208. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2022.15.3.0922>
- Altamimi, D., & Ab Rashid, R. (2019). Spelling problems and causes among Saudi English language undergraduates. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 10(3), 178-191. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.12>
- Al-Zayed, N. N. (2017). Non-native pronunciation of English: Problems and solutions. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7(3), 86-90.

- Aziz, A. A., & Kashinathan, S. (2021). ESL learners' challenges in speaking English in Malaysian classroom. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(2), 983-991. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v10-i2/10355>
- Caulfield, J. (2019, September 6). *How to do Thematic Analysis?* Retrieved from Scribbr: <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/>
- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2015). *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research* (Vol. 42). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and researching motivation* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Farjami, F., & Aidinlou, N. A. (2013). Analysis of the impediments to English vocabulary learning and teaching. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 1(4-1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.s.20130101.11>
- Fryer, L. K. (2019). Getting interested: Developing a sustainable source of motivation to learn a new language at school. *System*, 86, 102120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.102120>
- Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 562-570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00161>
- Halim, T., Wahid, R., & Halim, S. (2021, November). Challenges of teaching and learning grammar in online classes at the tertiary level. In *ELT Forum: Journal of English Language Teaching* (Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 212-221). <https://doi.org/10.15294/elt.v10i3.47970>
- Hassan, I. J., & Dweik, B. S. (2021). Factors and challenges in English reading comprehension among young Arab EFL Learners. *Academic Research International*, 12(1), 18-30.
- Hiney, G. (2022). Helping a language learner gain self-confidence and awareness through advising. *Relay journal*, 5(1), 53-64. <https://doi.org/10.37237/relay/050105>
- Ibrahim, N. H., & Ismail, K. H. (2010). Kebimbangan terhadap penggunaan bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan pelajar Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. *Jurnal Personalia Pelajar*, 13, 73-87.
- Ilyosovna, N. A. (2020). The importance of English language. *International Journal on Orange Technologies*, 2(1), 22-24.
- Jabbar, W. K., & Hussein, H. J. (2023). English grammar—and the challenges its creates for learning English. *Eurasian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 16, 91-99.
- Kalayci, G., & Ergül, H. (2020). Teachers' perceptions of the role of parental involvement in teaching English to young learners. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 16(3), 1167-1176. <https://doi.org/10.17263/jlls.803608>

- Kara, E., Ayaz, A. D., & Dündar, T. (2017). Challenges in EFL speaking classes in Turkish context. *European Journal of Language and Literature*, 3(2), 66-74. <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejls.v8i1.p66-74>
- Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. (1983). *Natural approach* (pp. 20-20). New York: Pergamon.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *The modern language journal*, 92(1), 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x>
- Mamat, M. (2016). Penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan pelajar tahun satu di UKM. *Issues in Language Studies*, 5(2), 28-42. <https://doi.org/10.33736/ils.1636.2016>
- Matsuda, S., & Gobel, P. (2004). Anxiety and predictors of performance in the foreign language classroom. *System*, 32(1), 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.08.002>
- Mohammed, M. A. A., & Idris, S. A. M. (2020). Challenges of pronunciation to EFL learners in spoken English. *Multicultural Education*, 6(5), 193-203. 10.5281/zenodo.4408549
- Muñoz-Restrepo, A., Ramirez, M., & Gaviria, S. (2020). Strategies to enhance or maintain motivation in learning a foreign language. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 22(1), 175-188. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n1.73733>
- Nation, I. S., & Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (Vol. 10). Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Nor, K. M., Razali, M. M., Talib, N., Ahmad, N., Sakarji, S. R., Saferdin, W. A. A. W. M., & Nor, A. M. (2019). Students' problem in learning English as a second language among MDAB students at UiTM Malacca. *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy, and Language*, 2(7), 01-12. <https://doi.org/10.35631/ijhpl.27001>
- Osboe, S., Fujimura, T., & Hirschel, R. (2007, October). Students' confidence and anxiety in L2 speaking activities. In *Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference: Exploring theory, enhancing practice: Autonomy across the disciplines*. Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan.
- Paribakht, T. S., & Wesche, M. (1997). Vocabulary enhancement activities and reading for meaning in second language vocabulary acquisition. *Second language vocabulary acquisition: A rationale for pedagogy*, 55(4), 174-200. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139524643.013>
- Pathak, V., Jena, B., & Kalra, S. (2013). Qualitative research. *Perspectives in clinical research*, 4(3), 192. DOI: 10.4103/2229-3485.115389
- Rajadurai, J. (2006). Pronunciation issues in non-native contexts: A Malaysian case study. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, 2(1), 42-59.
- Rass, R. A. (2015). Challenges face Arab students in writing well-developed paragraphs in English. *English Language Teaching*, 8(10), 49-59. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n10p49>

- Ratnasari, A. G. (2020). EFL Students' challenges in learning speaking skills: A case study in mechanical engineering. *Journal of Foreign Language teaching and learning*, 5(1), 12-20. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.5145>
- Ravichandran, S., Kretovics, M., Kirby, K., & Ghosh, A. (2017). Strategies to address English language writing challenges faced by international graduate students in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.298>
- Rintaningrum, R. (2018). Investigating reasons why listening in English is difficult: Voice from foreign. *Asian EFL Journal*, 20(11), 6-15.
- Saengboon, S. (2017). English grammar and Thai university students: An insurmountable linguistic battle?. *English Language Teaching*, 10(11), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n11p22>
- Shak, P., Lee, C. S., & Stephen, J. (2016). Pronunciation problems: A case study on English pronunciation errors of low proficient students. *International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.15282/ijleal.v4.483>
- Siddiqua, A. (2016). Challenges of teaching English vocabulary at the higher secondary level in Bangladesh. *The Journal of EFL Education and Research*, 1(1), 1-8.
- Tshotsho, B., Cekiso, M., & Mumbembe, L. (2015). English language grammar challenges facing Congolese international students in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 9(1), 73-79. <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566322.2015/09.01.09>
- Utan, I. Y. (2019). *Listening strategies used by students to deal with the challenges in academic listening course* (Master's thesis, Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FBS-UKSW).
- Yacob, N. S., & Yunus, M. M. (2019). Students' perspectives on challenges and solutions to learning English in Malaysian ESL context. *Journal of Language and Communication (JLC)*, 6(2), 487-496.
- Zuraidah, M.D., & Mardziah, H.A. (2019, May 23). The Reform of English Language Education in Malaysia. *Free Malaysia Today*. <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/menimedia/printed-media/newspaper-clippings/the-reform-of-english-language-education-in-malaysia-free-malaysia-today-22-mei-2019>