CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL STUDENTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Atrianus Toni

English Education Study Program, Kapuas University, Indonesia

Article info	ABSTRACT
Corresponding Author: Atrianus Toni atrianustoni3@gmail.com Kapuas University, Indonesia	English has become a global language of considerable importance; however, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) remains challenging for many students in non-English-speaking countries. This study aims to identify and analyze the key challenges faced by EFL students in learning English as a foreign language. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, the study involved undergraduate EFL students majoring in English education. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three major categories of challenges: linguistic challenges (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening comprehension), psychological challenges (anxiety, low motivation, and lack of self-confidence), and pedagogical challenges (limited exposure to authentic English input and teacher-centered instructional practices). These challenges were found to be interrelated and collectively hinder students' ability to develop communicative competence. The study concludes that addressing EFL learning difficulties requires an integrated pedagogical approach that simultaneously targets linguistic development, affective support, and instructional practices.

INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as a global language that plays a crucial role in education, technology, science, and international communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ur, 2012; Crystal, 2019). In many non-English-speaking countries, including Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) across various educational levels, ranging from primary education to higher education. As a result, English proficiency has become an essential competence that enables individuals to participate effectively in academic, professional, and global interactions.

Proficiency in English facilitates international communication and allows individuals to establish relationships and collaborations across countries. For this reason, educators are

expected to prepare students with the necessary linguistic competence to compete in an increasingly globalized world. Effective English instruction is therefore regarded as a critical responsibility in contemporary education systems.

Despite its global significance and strong curricular emphasis, many EFL learners continue to experience considerable difficulties in acquiring English language skills effectively. Numerous studies have reported that EFL students frequently encounter challenges in linguistic areas such as grammatical accuracy, limited vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension of spoken English (Horwitz et al., 1986; Nation, 2013; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). These linguistic challenges often hinder students' ability to express ideas clearly and comprehend authentic English input in real communicative situations.

Vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in English learning, as a rich lexical repertoire enables learners to communicate more effectively with both local and international interlocutors (Ur, 2012). Grammar is equally important, as accurate grammatical usage contributes to clarity, politeness, and comprehensibility in communication. However, many students in Indonesia perceive English as a difficult subject, which frequently leads to low motivation and reduced engagement in learning activities, ultimately affecting their learning outcomes.

Linguistic difficulties are often compounded by psychological factors, including foreign language anxiety, low motivation, and lack of self-confidence when using English in communicative situations. Contemporary second language acquisition research emphasizes that these affective variables play a crucial role in shaping learners' willingness to communicate and overall language achievement (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). High levels of anxiety, particularly during speaking activities, have been shown to significantly inhibit students' participation and communicative performance (Teimouri et al., 2019).

Students' low learning motivation has a significant impact on their academic achievement and is frequently influenced by inadequate instructional preparation and limited learning resources. Therefore, teachers are required to carefully plan and prepare instructional materials and learning activities to ensure effective classroom implementation and meaningful learner engagement.

In addition to learner-internal factors, pedagogical issues such as teacher-centered instruction, limited learning resources, and insufficient exposure to authentic English input further impede students' language development (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Richards, 2017; Ur, 2012). When instructional practices remain predominantly teacher-centered, students have fewer opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction, which is essential for the development of communicative competence.

The discrepancy between expected learning outcomes (das sollen) and students' actual language competence (das sein) remains a major concern in EFL contexts. Although curricular objectives emphasize communicative competence, many students are still unable to communicate effectively in real-life situations. While previous studies have tended to examine linguistic difficulties in isolation, comprehensive research integrating linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions remains limited.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify and analyze the major challenges faced by Indonesian EFL university students in learning English as a foreign language by adopting a holistic perspective that integrates linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by EFL students in learning English as a foreign language. Descriptive qualitative research focuses on describing and interpreting phenomena in depth using non-numerical data and is widely applied in educational and language studies (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at a university in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had sufficient experience in learning English within an EFL context and had completed several semesters of English coursework.

In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation to ensure an in-depth understanding of the naturally occurring learning phenomena. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires aimed to obtain general information regarding students' perceived difficulties in English language skills, while the interviews provided deeper insights into students' learning experiences, psychological responses, and perceptions of instructional practices.

The research procedure consisted of identifying the research problem, selecting an appropriate qualitative approach, collecting data, analyzing data, and drawing conclusions. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. This process enabled the identification of recurring themes related to linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical challenges.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Finding

The findings indicate that EFL students experience multiple and interrelated challenges in learning English as a foreign language.

From a linguistic perspective, students reported persistent difficulties in mastering grammatical structures, limited vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. These difficulties negatively affected both spoken and written performance and are consistent with findings in previous EFL studies (Ellis, 2015; Nation, 2013).

From a psychological perspective, students experienced anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low motivation, and lack of self-confidence, particularly during speaking activities. These affective factors significantly limit students' willingness to communicate, supporting previous findings on foreign language anxiety (Teimouri et al., 2019).

From a pedagogical perspective, students highlighted limited exposure to authentic English input and teacher-centered instructional practices. Such conditions reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction, which is essential for developing communicative competence (Long, 2015).

Taken together, these findings confirm that EFL learning challenges are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Linguistic difficulties increase anxiety, anxiety reduces participation, and pedagogical constraints limit opportunities to overcome both. Therefore, addressing EFL learning challenges requires integrated instructional designs that address cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions simultaneously.

Discussion

Linguistic Challenges

The findings indicate that students experienced substantial difficulties in grammar, particularly tense usage and sentence structure. These difficulties constrained both spoken and written production, consistent with prior findings in EFL contexts (Ellis, 2015). Limited vocabulary knowledge further impeded reading comprehension and oral fluency, confirming the central role of lexical competence in language acquisition (Nation, 2013). Listening comprehension emerged as a major challenge due to unfamiliar accents and rapid speech rates, suggesting insufficient exposure to authentic listening materials. Pronunciation difficulties also reduced students' confidence in oral communication, reinforcing the interdependence of linguistic and affective factors.

Psychological Challenges

Psychological factors played a significant mediating role in students' language learning. Many participants reported anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence during speaking activities. These findings align with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating the negative impact of foreign language anxiety on achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019). Low motivation was also linked to repeated experiences of failure and limited communicative success.

Pedagogical Challenges

From a pedagogical perspective, students highlighted teacher-centered instruction and limited communicative activities. Such instructional practices restrict opportunities for meaningful interaction, which is essential for developing communicative competence (Long, 2015). The lack of authentic input further reduced learners' exposure to natural language use, hindering pragmatic and sociolinguistic development.

Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the findings confirm that EFL learning challenges are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Linguistic difficulties increase anxiety, anxiety reduces participation, and pedagogical constraints limit opportunities to overcome both. This interaction underscores the necessity of integrated instructional designs that address cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL students face a range of interconnected challenges in learning English as a foreign language, encompassing linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions. Linguistic difficulties related to grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and pronunciation are closely linked with psychological factors such as anxiety, low motivation, and lack of self-confidence. In addition, pedagogical practices characterized by limited exposure to authentic English input and teacher-centered instruction further constrain students' opportunities to develop communicative competence. Therefore, improving EFL learning outcomes requires an integrated pedagogical approach that addresses linguistic competence, supports learners' affective needs, and promotes more communicative and student-centered instructional practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, H. D. (2007). Principles of language learning and teaching (5th ed.). Pearson Education.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design (4th ed.). SAGE.

Crystal, D. (2019). The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language (3rd ed.).

Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). The psychology of the language learner revisited. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315779553

Ellis, R. (2015). Understanding second language acquisition (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. The Modern Language Journal, 70(2), 125–132. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x

Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). How languages are learned (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Long, M. H. (2015). Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118884976

Nation, I. S. P. (2013). Learning vocabulary in another language (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139858656

Richards, J. C. (2017). Teaching English through English: Proficiency, pedagogy and performance. RELC Journal, 48(1), 7–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688217690059

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). Approaches and methods in language teaching (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Teimouri, Y., Goetze, J., & Plonsky, L. (2019). Second language anxiety and achievement. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 41(2), 363–387. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263118000311

Ur, P. (2012). A course in language teaching: Practice and theory. Cambridge University Press.

Vandergrift, L., & Goh, C. C. M. (2012). Teaching and learning second language listening. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843376