Obstacles in English Language Learning: Student Perceptions

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Abstract:

The current study explores the learning challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) in transition to Western higher education from their home countries. The study included 18 participants from various ESL sites in Indiana. A basic qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of English Language Learners (ELLs) about their learning obstacles and previous educational experiences in their home country. The challenges include language-related issues such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation, motivation, communication, and self-confidence. The research emphasizes the obstacles that stem from insufficient English education in non-English speaking countries, which cause increased anxiety and cognitive challenges to academic achievement. The study shows the representation of non-native English teachers' struggles, including anxiety and lack of experience, which ultimately impacts their effectiveness as instructors. The results showcase the importance of professional development, specifically for educators, and support strategies to help English Language Learners (ELLs) in their academic journey. This study discussed barriers to adult language learners and provided results to enhance education. This study addressed the following question: How do English language learners overcome obstacles to reach their academic goals?

Keywords: Anxiety, Barriers, English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Learner (ELL), Higher Education, Motivation, Pronunciation, Obstacles, and Self-Confidence

1. Introduction

Academic globalization has increased the number of ESL learners in Western institutions of higher education. ESL students moving from L1 (mother tongue) backgrounds experience difficulties that can negatively affect their academic performance and college experience. While ESL learners bring a unique perspective to their learning environments, they also face many obstacles and challenges. Barriers such as language, cultural differences, and a lack of quality education from the past can hinder their ability to fully engage in new academic settings.

This study is to understand the specific obstacles ELLs face and the impact of inadequate English education in their home countries. Earlier research has highlighted that many language learners experience high levels of anxiety and obstacles, which can lead to disengagement and hinder their academic performance (Ahmed, 2019). Additionally, non-native English teachers often contend with their anxieties and lack of experience in providing adequate instructional support to ELLs (Andriani & Subekti, 2022). These issues demonstrate a larger need for more effective preparation and support for students and educators.

The problem that ELLs encounter is obstacles that hinder their ability to achieve proficiency in the English language learning in higher learning. By focusing on the perceptions of 18 ESL participants from various higher learning institutions in Indiana, the purpose of this research is to expose obstacles ELLs face while transitioning into a Western academic environment. The findings will contribute to a broader understanding of ELL obstacles and provide valuable insights for educators and institutions to support ELLs more effectively. By examining themes such as pronunciation difficulties, communication barriers, and motivational challenges, this research aims to offer meaningful insights for educators and institutions working to better support adult ESL

learners. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the ELL experience and suggest practical strategies to help improve their academic success in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anxiety and Obstacles

Ahmed (2019) highlighted that extreme levels of nervousness can impede students' ability to achieve their academic goals. This anxiety is compounded by prior academic experiences in their home countries, which are often inadequate in equipping ELLs with the essential English language skills needed in Western universities (Ghafar & Mohamedamin, 2023). Language barriers for non-native speakers of a language pose learning obstacles with assignments, note-taking, and learning strategies (Sofyan et al., 2023). Other factors posing obstacles are pronunciation errors in the English language, which can deter language learners from being fully understood. Sofyan et al. (2023) suggest that interactive language interventions tailored to students' needs can minimize obstacles and enhance learner success.

2.2. Vocabulary Obstacles

Many ESL learners face obstacles such as insufficient vocabulary, difficulties in pronunciation, and ineffective communication skills, which impede their participation in college-level courses (Ahmed, 2019; Lao, 2020). Krashen's (1982) natural order hypothesis suggests that barriers to language acquisition can be addressed through suitable instructional practices. Proficient preparation and development for educators can ease the transfer of academic vocabulary instruction, ultimately aiding ESL learners in overcoming communicative obstacles (Cochi, 2020; Febriani et al., 2021).

2.3. Teacher Obstacles

Teachers' unpreparedness and self-confidence levels effectually influence teacher-related obstacles. Wong (2022) notes that non-native English language teachers often experience anxiety and tension when teaching ESL students, particularly due to a dearth of experience. Andriani and Subekti (2022) further discovered this phenomenon by investigating Indonesian preservice teachers who expressed feelings of nervousness linked to their instructional capabilities. Andriani and Subekti's (2022) study revealed that teachers' anxiety could be exacerbated by students' questions and their difficulty recalling vocabulary during lessons, which ultimately impacts students' learning experiences. Moreover, Zarzychi (2020) examined the perceptions of Omani ELLs concerning pronunciation obstacles and their learning approaches. As demonstrated in multiple studies, teacher anxiety can significantly impact the quality of instruction and, consequently, student learning outcomes (Andriani & Subekti, 2022).

2.4. Teaching Obstacles: Lack of Experience and Anxiety

Non-native English language teachers may feel nervous and tense when providing instructional academic support for ELLs. New second-language teachers need training and support to overcome nervousness and tension during classroom instruction (Wong, 2022).

Zarzycki (2020) used a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the perceptions of Omani ELLs' pronunciation issues, the obstacles they faced, and the strategies used to address and teach pronunciation to ELLs. Data from observations and a questionnaire were collected from university learners for this study. Zarzycki (2020) concluded that the results from the questionnaire determined that Omani adult English learners were aware of their pronunciation difficulties. However, teachers may need help finding teaching strategies for pronunciation issues, so students can use approaches to pronounce English more efficiently.

The topic and subtopics of this literature review identified key themes of ELL obstacles. These themes were teacher anxiety, teaching obstacles, non-native instruction, lack of confidence, motivation, proficiency, limited communication, anxiety, college readiness, pronunciation weaknesses, and previous inadequate learning experiences that adult language learners encounter. ESL educators ought to recognize potential barriers holding adult learners back from reaching their educational goals and be trained to find solutions (Soomro et al., 2023). Solutions explored and studied in literature reviews benefited this study.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in second language acquisition theory, with a focus on Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis. Krashen (1982) shared that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. The importance of this concept, combined with instructional strategies, responds to the varying needs of ESL learners. By fostering support for linguistic development and academic engagement, educators can play a critical role in promoting learner success. In the context of Western higher education, this theoretical framework provided insight into the barriers ESLs often face and the development of targeted instructional approaches and professional learning opportunities.

2.6. Research Question

How do English language learners navigate learning obstacles to achieve their academic goals?

3. Methodology

This basic qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of ELLs in Indiana. Using a questionnaire, the research captured the personal perceptions and lived experiences of the Participants. Convenient sampling was used to select ELL students who were either currently enrolled or aspiring to enroll in adult education or college programs in the United States. The questionnaire consisted of 19 open-ended questions designed to capture detailed responses about participants' learning experiences in their home countries and U.S. educational settings. Particular attention was given to the influence of non-native instructors on their language acquisition journeys, allowing flexible exploration of themes related to academic impact and learner perspectives.

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted at three adult learning centers or community colleges in Indiana, which together enrolled 315 ESL students. A total of 18 participants currently enrolled in ESL courses were selected through convenience sampling. Each participant provided informed consent before data collection. Inclusion criteria included being at least 18 years old, having learned English in their home country, and either being enrolled in or planning to enroll in a community college. Participants under 18 and those who did not learn English in their home countries were excluded.

3.2. Instruments

This study employed a custom-designed, 19-question open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix A) explicitly developed to address the central research question. The instrument was distributed to a targeted sample to gather insights into learners' practices with inductive coding to formulate themes aligned with the research question and capture participant quotes. Open-ended questions were intentionally chosen over Likert-scale items to allow for more responses and to capture better participants' attitudes, motivations, and interests related to language learning (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

3.3. Procedures

Three ESL locations in Indiana participated in this study, providing diverse perspectives from different counties. The target population included ELLs from three Indiana learning institutions that provide ESL programs. After receiving approval from the American College of Education Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were contacted via email to accept the informed consent form. It is important to highlight the need to reduce bias in research, as bias can distort results and create unfair experiences. Potential biases can prevent certain groups from participating equally in research (Qizi, 2023). The participants' email addresses were obtained through the chairs or directors of the ESL programs. All invitations were sent out simultaneously to ensure an equal response period. The primary focus was on ELLs enrolled in Indiana's three second-language learning institutions that met the study's criteria.
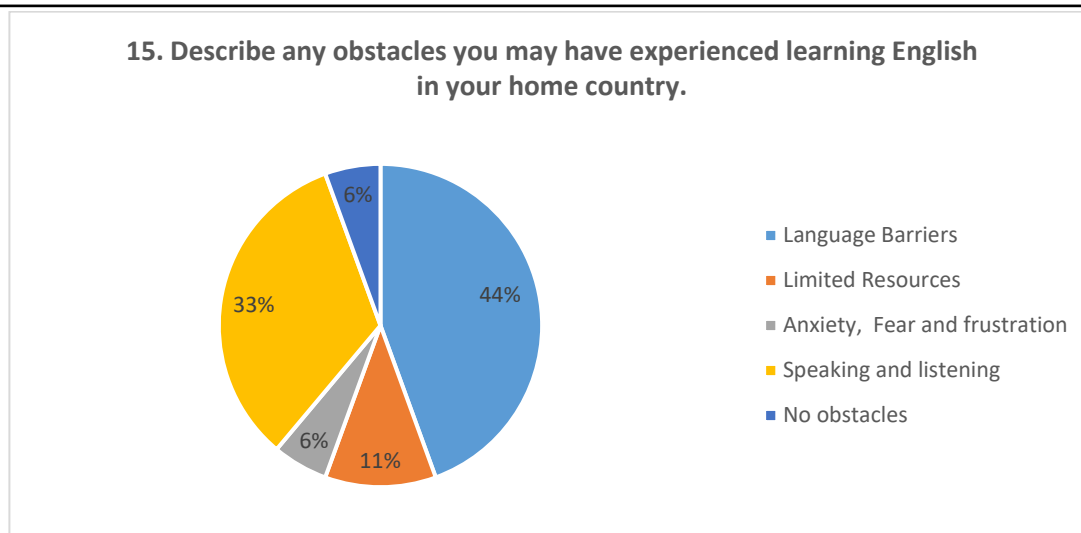
4. Results

The study identified several challenges ESL learners face when adjusting to Western universities. First, many students reported struggles with pronunciation, vocabulary, and communication, which often hindered their ability to participate fully in class. Some mentioned feeling anxious or discouraged, especially when speaking in front of others. This anxiety, in turn, affected their confidence and willingness to engage. Others came from schools where English instruction was limited or provided by instructors, leaving them feeling unprepared for academic expectations in the U.S. A few participants also said they lacked motivation to practice listening or speaking, because they felt disconnected from their classmates. Not everyone faced significant difficulties; some learners said their transition was smooth, even when taught by non-native English-speaking teachers. (see figure 1).

When asked to describe any obstacles they experienced learning English in their home countries, participant #1 responded, "In my country and here, I have problems with pronunciation and listening. Participant #2 explained, "The first obstacle was the non-native English speaker", and participant #3 added, "The obstacles are you learn a language with a person who learn English also, I had the problem with the pronunciation".

Participant #16 recalled a frustrating experience,
"I got an English language course in Jordan before I came to the US. Each student had only two minutes to speak. It was unfair I didn't get any 1% benefit. In my company that I worked in, the meetings with other countries were in English. I was writing everything I wanted to talk about and start reading it in the meetings. I was always afraid if anyone asks me any questions since I can't respond in English a quick answers. I remembered one time I cut the meeting call as the internet was bad but honestly I cut it because I couldn't answer in English."

15. Describe any obstacles you may have experienced learning English in your home country.

- Language Barriers — 44%
- Limited Resources — 11%
- Anxiety, Fear and frustration — 6%
- Speaking and listening — 33%
- No obstacles — 6%

Figure 1: Learning Obstacles

Reviewing the participants' results, the study revealed the need for adequate resources and training for learners and educators to enhance English language proficiency and ease a smoother transition into higher education for ESL learners. Identifying these obstacles and developing effective support systems empowers students to succeed academically.

5. Discussion

The problem that ELLs encounter is obstacles that hinder their ability to achieve proficiency in the English language learning. The findings of this study highlight the complex obstacles that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners experience when transitioning to Western higher education institutions. The participants shared issues such as insufficient prior English education, which impacts their language skills, confidence and motivation to language learning. As noted in the literature, psychological barriers, including anxiety and low self-confidence, deter their ability to fully participate in academic settings (Ahmed, 2019; Lao, 2020). Additionally, ESL teachers and instructional teaching methods play a role in the learning environment for ESL students.

The anxiety experienced by non-native English teachers, as documented by Andriani and Subekti (2022), further complicates instructional dynamics. This creates a learning environment that can hinder effective communication and learning, which are essential for ELLs adapting to an academic learning culture. The study demonstrated that the participants were aware of their pronunciation obstacles and dissatisfied with academic outcomes. There exists a gap in pedagogical strategies among educators to address these issues effectively (Zarzycki, 2020). Professional development is needed to equip teachers with the tools to support ELLs in overcoming speech-related barriers. Additionally, the literature stresses the importance of creating a supportive atmosphere that promotes self-efficacy and motivation, enabling ESL learners to boost confidence in their language and academic skills (Soomro et al., 2023). Institutions must prioritize addressing these obstacles through comprehensive training programs for educators, fostering an inclusive environment that recognizes the diverse needs of ESL learners.

The findings show that solving these issues requires a two-part approach: Enhancing training and support for non-native English teachers and implementing specific strategies to help ESL learners develop their language skills. Future research should continue exploring effective teaching methods and materials tailored to the unique needs of ELLs, emphasizing the importance of a supportive educational environment. By addressing the challenges identified in this study, schools can take steps to accommodate ESL learners to reach their academic goals and succeed in a competitive global world. Ultimately, by understanding and overcoming the barriers ELLs face, teachers can adopt a more effective educational experience for students.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the challenges faced by ESL learners in Western higher education and their impact on academic success. It emphasizes the need for effective teaching methods tailored to ELLs and advocates for a supportive learning environment. Conducted with 18 participants from Indiana institutions, the research highlights barriers such as inadequate English education in home countries, which leads to language difficulties upon enrolling in Western universities. Participants indicated that the lack of native-speaking teachers and opportunities to practice English are significant challenges. The scarcity of academic resources further complicates their academic pursuits in the U.S. (Murtada & Alsuhaibani, 2023).

The study aims to find solutions to help students succeed in listening, writing, speaking, and reading (Siripipatthanakul et al., 2023). Learning obstacles for ELLs include pronunciation issues, limited vocabulary, ineffective communication, lack of

motivation, and low self-confidence (Ahmed, 2019; Lao, 2020). It also addresses teaching obstacles like non-native English teachers experiencing anxiety when supporting ELLs. Language learners often experience inadequate English education, leading to disengagement in Western academic settings (Ma et al., 2023).

A questionnaire was used to gather data on obstacles impacting college success. Key themes include confidence issues, language barriers, inadequate instruction from non-native teachers, and the benefits of learning from native speakers. Additionally, addressing the shortage of qualified teachers is crucial. Addressing the shortage of qualified teachers and enhancing instruction are vital for improving education quality for non-native English speakers and helping them achieve their goals in Western higher education.

The study draws on Krashen's (1982) natural order language theory to suggest training for educators in teaching academic vocabulary (Cochi, 2020; Febriani et al., 2021). According to Krashen, practice is crucial for fluency. An inclusive learning environment is also essential, especially for those with limited English proficiency.

About the Author:
Dr. Allen-Abulhassan applies her ESL expertise to support online language learners and a community college where she assists both ESL and traditional students with their coursework. With over ten years of experience working with English language learners, she approaches her students with compassion. She holds a master's degree in liberal studies, focusing on ethics and values, from Valparaiso University, and a Doctor of Education from the American College of Education, with an emphasis on second language instruction. Her professional goal is to help English language learners achieve their academic aspirations.

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