

A STUDY ON DIFFICULTIES FACED BY NON - AMERICAN STUDENTS IN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION**Banothu Shankar ¹, CH. Bhavani ²**

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Abstract:

The problems faced by students leaning a foreign language in non-English-speaking countries may not only be psychological in nature, like motivation, attitude, and perception, but also practical, in the sense that students lack the opportunity to learn English through day-to-day interaction. To address this latter issue, some students prefer to learn English in native English-speaking countries. This study has aimed to explore the lived experiences of learning ESL from the perspective of immigrant students in the USA. The descriptive phenomenology method was used in this study. All the participants indicated that their levels of English were insufficient before they came to the USA. In examining the primary difficulties, the participants faced in learning English, it was found that in terms of speaking, it was shyness, in terms of listening, it was accent, in terms of writing, it was the difference between alphabets, and in terms of reading, it was vocabulary. To overcome these difficulties, students should be encouraged to speak the language and be provided with psychological support to overcome their shyness about speaking. Studies similar to the present study should be conducted with immigrants who live in other English speaking countries.

Keywords: Difficulties in English learning, English learning, immigrant students, phenomenon study

Introduction

Second language learning depends on a variety of factors. Research and theories show that good language learners use various strategies to learn a second language. Studies on the strategies for learning a second language are influenced by the theories regarding second language acquisition and cognitive psychology, which show that not only are the learner and teacher important, but the learning environment also plays a role.

One of the world's most important languages is English. It is a global language because the world's knowledge is preserved in English (Khan, 2011). Therefore, people around the world try to learn English as a foreign language, and there are many studies concerning the difficulties in learning or teaching English.

To minimize these difficulties various methods and techniques are implemented by educators in the language classes. A purposive curriculum, suitable textbooks, qualified teachers, and effective administration are also influential factors in English teaching (Mckay, 2002; Harmer, 2007). However, sometimes these methods or techniques seem ineffective, especially when skill development is not as proficient as desired.

Learners also encounter many problems while studying English. One of these problems is not having a chance to learn English through day-to-day interaction. The other problems vary from country to country. Most

of the existing studies address the problems encountered by Arab learners of English in both speaking and writing (Abdul Haq, 1982; Harrison, Prator & Tucker, 1975). Zughoul and Taminian (1984) noted that Arabian students have poor oral communication, particularly in the following areas: tenses, verb structure, and subject-verb agreement. In addition, several problems were observed in the students' use of tenses, in terms of tense substitution, tense sequence, tense markers, and uncertainty of perfect tenses (Kambal, 1980). A study conducted with Vietnamese students learning English found that the common problems are the difficulty in pronouncing some consonant sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/, and /tʃ/ as well as some initial consonant clusters such as sp-, dr-, br-, fr-, pl-, and str-; the inability to express stress; not using "be" in sentences that consist of a subject and an adjective (She beautiful); and word-by-word translation, among others (Nguyen, 2002). Another study conducted with Thai learners of English states that they often have problems with pronunciation. In addition, Thai grammar is very different from that of English (Akkakoson, 2019). As a result, studies shows that the linguistic structure of the languages spoken in the East is different from that of English, and that is why English learners from the East have pronunciation and grammar problems.

In addition to these cognitive problems, students also have psychological problems such as motivation, attitude, perception, and so on. Despagne (2010) indicates in his study about the perspectives of Mexican students that 45% of them find English language difficult to learn. They feel an extrinsic motivation to learn English, and negative perceptions may be the main causes of the problems they encounter in the learning process. Chasan and Ryan (1995) support this result. Nguyen (2002) also states in his study that Thai and Vietnamese students are shy and do not feel comfortable asking the teacher questions. This differs from the American culture and makes it more difficult for them to learn English. Studies assessing motivation found that having a personal or professional goal for learning English may influence the need and desire for native-like pronunciation (Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner, & Reyes, 2004; Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid 2005; Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Elliot (1995a, 1995b) and Sparks and Glachow (1991) stated that students with a motivation to learn and positive attitudes towards the target language and its speakers were more successful than those with less positive attitudes.

Thus, it is difficult to learn English in non-English-speaking countries. As a result, some students prefer learning English in a native English-speaking country. There are six primary native English-speaking countries: The United States of America, The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. The United States has by far the largest population, which means that it also has a huge number of native speakers. There are more than one million international students in the United States (International Student Enrollment Statistics, 2019). These students attend English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) programs in the USA. For ESL or EFL students, accent and pronunciation are reported to be the most critical problems. There are also several studies about accents in a second language (Bongaerts Summeren, Planken, & Schils, 1997; Flege, 1987; Flege Yeni-Komshian & Liu, 1999; Moyer, 1999, 2004; Munro & Mann, 2005; Bialystok & Hakuta 1999; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000).

For all these reasons, this study aimed to explore the lived experience of learning ESL from the perspective of immigrant students in the USA.

Methods

Research Model

This study used descriptive phenomenology, which aims to uncover the meaning structure of a phenomenon as it appeared to the consciousness of those who experienced it. As consciousness is primarily concerned with something other than itself, this meaning structure describes the meaningful relationship that the person has with others and the world as well as his or her own place within the world. This meaning is as experienced by the person and is not merely a statement about the external world. Phenomenologists refrain from claiming existential truths and rather focus on how the phenomenon and its meaning appear to the person as manifest through his or her interactions with them (Bongaardt, Roseth&Baklien, 2016).

The purpose of studies using the phenomenology approach is to describe different ways people experience, interpret, understand or conceptualize a particular phenomenon or a particular aspect of reality. The phenomenology approach reveals understandings on a particular phenomenon and classifies them according to conceptual categories (Çepni, 2010). The current paper is considered as a phenomenology study since it focuses on the difficulties faced by students with at least undergraduate education while learning English in the United States and examines a phenomenon, which is based on experience, practice and true life experience, with its real aspects

Selection of Participants—Sampling Method

The data for this study were collected from foreign students who lived in the USA for more than one year. The participants did not know or had very limited knowledge of English. Individuals from different countries who had at least a bachelor's degree were selected, which shows that this study used purposive sampling. The participants were coded by the first letters of their first and last name. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1

The Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Nationality	Education Level	Time in the USA (Years)
NL	Vietnam	Masters	8
HM	China	Masters	6
MZ	China	Masters	5
MH	Iranian	PhD	5
MHE	Iranian	College	5
AH	Mexican	College	2
SH	Mexican	College	4
MT	Venezuela	College	3
GU	Turkish	PhD	1

DB	Turkish	College	3
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As seen in Table 1, the study included 11 participants who had been in the USA for at least one year and had at least a college degree. The data were collected through interviews with the participants, which were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The participants were encouraged to use their own words and to talk about what really mattered in the process of learning English. Two participants were not available for interviews, and their data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire.

The Interviewer and the Questions—Instrumentation

The data collection tool aimed to reveal the views of the participants in depth. In line with this, the interview consisted of four categories in which opinions of the participants were discussed. The first category included questions about personal information to know about the background of the participants. The second category covered questions regarding the difficulties the participants faced in speaking, reading, writing and listening skills. The third category questioned the solutions offered by the participants as a result of their personal experiences against these difficulties. The last category questioned the expectations of the participants from the United States of America according to their prior experience.

During the preparation of the interview form, the researcher had conversations with two people who were not included in the study but had similar experiences. The conversations were recorded and a draft interview form was developed after considering the notes taken by the researcher from the conversations and reviewing relevant literature. The researcher consulted opinions of a member of a foreign language department, an assessment and evaluation expert and native speakers of English. The form was finalized by making the necessary arrangements in the measurement tool upon expert opinions. A pilot study of the measurement tool was conducted with two participants who were not included in the study. These two participants were asked to express what they understood from the given questions. Incomprehensible or misrepresented items were revised and made ready for administration to the main participants.

Data Collection Process

The measurement tool was applied to 11 participants. The process was a one-on-one interview. However, the form was sent via email since two participants had no common time. Face-to-face interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes on average. During interviews, the participants were encouraged to give examples from their own experiences whenever possible. In the interviews, the first question was about participants' English level when they arrived in the USA, and the last question was about participants' English level at the time of the study. The questions were analyzed through frequency values. The other questions were read carefully to have an overall sense of the descriptions and then each transcript was explored and divided into meaningful units. All transcripts' meanings were explained by questions such as "What is being said," "How is it said," and "What is the meaning?" These questions were supplemented with critical questions such as "Is this the actual meaning or is there a different meaning?" All common meanings were classified and the quotes from the interviews were provided as examples for the explicated meanings.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on all data. The basic process in content analysis is to gather similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them by organizing them in an understandable way (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 2016).

The analysis and interpretation of the data process followed coding, classification, category development, validation and reliability stages. These stages are explained one by one in the following paragraphs.

Coding: Three researchers shared 11 interview forms in 4-4-3 forms. Each of the three researchers coded their own interview forms as follows; the code, the definition of the code, and the example. By comparing these separate codes, a common code was decided and a code book was formed by naming these codes.

Classification and Category Development: Three researchers coded 11 interview forms independently, in line with the codebook created during the coding phase. When the independently completed coding was completed, the researchers came together again, the necessary comparisons were made and the themes were decided. After the themes were composed, the codes were classified under the relevant themes.

Ensuring Validity and Reliability; Rather than treating validity and reliability as a separate step, the researchers followed a way to avoid any erroneous situations that would affect these properties throughout the whole process.

For validity, the researchers created a form by pre-interviewing, especially during the measurement tool development phase, and consulted expert opinions about the form. After making necessary adjustments in line with expert opinions, the researchers conducted a pre-application phase. In addition, the researchers examined incomprehensible points regarding the items in the form in the pre-application. At this stage, the researchers exercised due diligence to ensure that the measurement tool fully reflects the purpose of the study. This increased the coverage validity.

For reliability, the researchers questioned the compatibility between encoders. Comparisons were carried out in two steps. The first step was the forming phase of the code book, the second phase was the coding phase, which was completed according to the codebook. In the first stage, the codes that three researchers made for different transcripts were calculated using the formula $\text{Reliability} = \text{Consensus} / \text{Consensus} + \text{Disagreement}$ (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) state that a desired level of reliability is achieved if the harmony between evaluations of experts or researchers reaches 90% or exceeds 90%. The reliability at this stage was calculated as 0.85. The reliability was calculated as 0.96 in the comparison of the common opinion for the last stage. As a result of these analyzes, it was seen that the findings obtained about the reliability of the study were at sufficient levels.

Results

The findings are presented according to order of questions in the interview.

Participants' English Level when They First Arrived in the USA

The first question asked the participants' English level when they first arrived in the USA. This question was scored between 1 and 10; 1 (Very Poor) showing the lowest level and 10 (Excellent) showing the highest level. "Writing," "reading," "speaking," and "listening" levels were investigated. The participants' remarks are

shown in Table 2, which indicates that all of the participants, except MT and MHE, had low or average speaking skill. The reading skill was relatively higher than the other skills. Writing skill was at a moderate level.

Table 2

Participants' English Level According to English Comprehension

Participant	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Listening
NL	6	5	1	1
HM	4	8	4	4
MZ	4	8	1	5
MH	1	2	1	1
MHE	10	10	9	8
AH	3	3	1	2
SH	6	6	6	6
MT	10	10	9	10
GU	2	5	3	3
DB	5	5	3	3
MB	6	8	5	6

The Biggest Difficulties in Learning English

The biggest difficulties in writing, reading, speaking, and listening skill were questioned.

The themes and reviews for the speaking skill are shown in Table 3. Vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and mental and psychological characteristics were important. The participants generally had trouble with grammar. Participant MT said he could not make a sentence when he thought about grammar while speaking. Using the tenses and grammar correctly was very important for Turkish and Arabian participants. Turkish participants indicated that they felt shy while speaking, especially participant GU, who said, *“I feel very shy about making a grammar mistake and using the wrong word. Especially I am thinking the words' meaning in Turkish; that's why I prefer the wrong words. It makes my sentences meaningless in English. When people look at my face with blank faces I get shy and anxious and stop conversation.”* This shows that knowledge was important for fluent speaking, especially for the participants from Turkey. Pronunciation was a problem for the participants from the Far East as the structure of their languages makes pronunciation of English words difficult for them. Participant NL said, *“I could not pronounce the words correctly because we are using our tongue in a different way while speaking our native language. It took time for me to get it correct. I still have problems with it, but now, it is more understandable”*.

Table 3	
The biggest difficulties in the speaking skill	
Themes	Reviews
Shyness	<i>DB- "When I first came to the US, I went to the restaurant and I couldnot order my food. I got embarrassed and put a communication barrier between Native Speakers and me for a few months."</i>
	<i>GU- "I was feeling so shy when people didnt understand what I said"</i>
Pronunciations	<i>NL- "I could not pronounce the words correctly."</i>
	<i>MT- "I also had some pronunciation problems."</i>
	<i>MH- "The biggest challenge was pronouncing the words correctly"</i>
	<i>MZ- "Because I get excited when I am speaking, I cannot pronounce the words correctly"</i>
Anxiety	<i>MT- "When I first started to learn English, I was thinking about how to set up a sentence in the correct grammatical structure. It made me nervous while speaking."</i>
	<i>MZ- "I get very anxious when I am speaking, so I donot prefer speaking"</i>
Thinking in the	<i>HM - "What you want to say is often incomprehensible due to wrong translation."</i>
mother language	<i>MB - "Trying to speak English by thinking in Turkish."</i>
	<i>GU- "Using the wrong words because thinking in my first language. Most of the words have a different meaning than we think. So, people tried to understand what I meant using that word when I was speaking."</i>
Vocabulary	<i>SH- "I didnt know so many words, so I couldnot find the right words while speaking and</i>
knowledge	<i>couldnot explain myself"</i>
	<i>MH- "I could not find out the right words for conversation"</i>
Grammar	<i>AH- "I was confused about the difference between past tense and present tense"</i>
	<i>MT- "I was thinking about how to set up a sentence in the correct grammatical structure. But later, I became fluent and I was using sentence without knowing/thinking about their grammatical structure anymore."</i>
	<i>GU- "I was generally confused about using the right prepositions in the right way. Also, I did not feel comfortable while using the conjunctions"</i>

Listening is an important component of a conversation. The participants were asked what difficulties they had while listening people (Table 4). They said they had trouble when native speakers spoke fast and did not understand what the natives said. Participant HM said, "*Natives speak quite fast I didnt get the point.*"The participants also said that natives used an accent, abbreviations, and slang while speaking, making it difficult to understand them. Participant GU said, "*They speak very fast because they use abbreviation. Because of that some words sounded really different from how I learnt them. Native speakers have accents and use abbreviation and slang, so they use the words in a different way*".

English learners felt shy as they did not understanding what was said shy, and they did not ask speakers to repeat their sentences, which caused other problems while speaking. Participant MHE said, *“it was too embarrassing to ask them to repeat over and over again.”*

Table 4	
The biggest difficulties in the listening skill	
Themes	Reviews
Fast	<i>NL- “it was quite fast for me.”</i>
	<i>HM- “Native speakers talked so fast that I could not get the point.”</i>
	<i>MH- “I could not understand fast enough during a conversation with others.”</i>
	<i>AH- “I did not understand when people spoke very fast”</i>
Understanding	<i>DB- “In my country, I thought that I had known English but after being in the US, I couldnot understand the native speakers for a few months and I felt like it was totally another language that I had never learnt.”</i>
	<i>NL- “I could not understand what people said”</i>
	<i>MT- “At first, I couldnot understand long sentences, but after having listening practices, watching movies, and learning the grammar and vocabulary, I could understand better”</i>
	<i>MB- “Catching the words while people were speaking was so hard for me”</i>
	<i>MHE- “The major problem was that I could not understand the English speakers as fast as</i>

Table 5 shows the difficulties encountered in writing. For the writing ability, the words and grammar constituted a problem for the participants. Participant MH said, ***“I know limited number of words for writing an essay, and have difficulty with the grammar.”***The alphabet was a problem for the participants from the Far East because they were used to a different alphabet and needed to get used to the American alphabet. Participant NL said, ***“American writing style is completely different from the Vietnamese writing style,”*** and participant

AH said, *“Sometimes I confuse the word that sound the same but is written differently.”*

Table 5

The biggest difficulties in the writing skill

Themes	Reviews
Word and Grammar	<i>DB- “When I wrote something in English I used very simple sentences”</i>
	<i>MT- “Spelling and the grammar rules were challenging at the beginning.”</i>

HM- *“Too many grammatical errors really reduced my confidence in writing”*

MH- *“I know limited number of words for writing an essay, and have difficulty with the grammar.”*

SH- *“I had problems in grammar and still donot feel comfortable, I just use basic words.”*

GU- *“for academic writing, grammar is a problem for me. I get confused aboutthe right grammar while writing a paper”*

Alphabets NL- *“American writing style is completely different from the Vietnamese writing style.”*

HM- *“Our alphabet is different from the American alphabet; that’s why I had troubles in the beginning”*

Spelling and MT- *“Spelling and the grammar rules were challenging at the beginning.”*

Pronounce MB- *“Difference between writing and speaking.”*

AH- *“Sometimes I confuse the words that sound the same but is written differently.”*

For the reading skill, vocabulary knowledge was the most difficult issue (Table 6). Understanding what you read is related to word knowledge, Lack of which makes the sentence or paragraph meaningless. Participant MT explained her feeling as follows: *“At the beginning, I didnot know the grammar and vocabulary, but I could still understand main idea if I knew the vocabulary”*

Table 6

The biggest difficulties in the reading skill

Themes	Reviews
Anxiety	DB- <i>“When I read an official paper I really hesitated in case of misunderstanding”</i>
Vocabulary	NL- <i>“I lacked the vocabulary.”</i> MT- <i>“at the beginning, I didnot know the grammar and vocabulary, but I could still understand main idea if I knew the vocabulary.”</i> MB- <i>“Poor vocabulary.”</i> MH- <i>“I have a problem with the meaning of words while reading.”</i> SH- <i>“Unknown words”</i>

AH- "There are words of which meaning I donot know or which are used only in books."

Overcoming the Difficulties

The participants reported that they had problems in learning English in their hometown. All the participants had been living in the USA for at least one year. The participants were asked what they did to overcome these difficulties, and their answers are shown according to the writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills.

As seen in Table 7, speaking progress occurred through communication or practice with natives. Participant HM said, "*Being alone doesnt help the growth of my speaking. When I am alone, I cannot even think in English. I keep talking with native speakers all the time when they are available. This way I can repeat the communication in my mind again and again. It helps me to have more practice in English*" According to GU, practice with natives was better because it helped to learn how to pronounce the words correctly.

In addition, some participants indicated that receiving help from the media was beneficial. When asked how watching movies in English helped, a participant said, "*A native has some daily life communication structures. I am at school and reading academic paper all the time. By watching movies, I can learn words and sentence structures for daily life speaking.*"

Table 7

Overcoming the difficulties in speaking

Themes	Reviews
Media/Social media support	DB- " <i>I follow some Facebook groups about speaking English fluently or pronunciation.</i> " MT- " <i>I watched movies</i> "
Practice by myself	DB- " <i>I record and listen to my voice. I sometimes speak with myself about the daily routines in my life</i> " MT- " <i>I memorized the vocabulary and I did dialogs in my mind. For example, I was thinking what conversation I would have if I would be in market. If I didnt know how to say something, I would learn it and close my gap in the English language.</i> " AH- " <i>I practice the words that I cannot pronounce</i> " SH- " <i>Tried to say the same idea with different words</i> "
Practice with native	DB- " <i>I try to speak and not to be shy with native speakers</i> "

speakers

NL- *"I spent time to talk to native speakers."*

HM- *"Keep talking with native speakers all the time when they are available."*

MB- *"Speaking in English as much as possible with natives"*

MH- *"I am trying to get out more and join other people for conversations."*

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the results of this study, all participants reported that their English level was insufficient before they came to the USA, although they had taken English courses. Most studies support this finding. The results about high school and college students show that students have low self-confidence about their English level, and that they do not believe that they received a quality English education at school (Cheng, 2001, Gömleksiz, 2012; Gömleksiz & Kılınç, 2014; Igo, Toland, Flowerday, Song & Kiewra, 2002). From here, we can say that the English education given in schools is far from real life. This situation leads to a decrease in English skills and self-confidence encountered in real life.

The biggest difficulties in learning English were categorized as speaking, listening, writing, and reading. For speaking, the biggest difficulties were shyness, pronunciation, and some cognitive problems (grammar, vocabulary knowledge, etc.). For listening, the difficulties were shyness, accent, talking fast, and not understanding. For writing, the difference between alphabets, the English grammar, and the difference between spelling and pronunciation were the biggest problems. For reading, vocabulary knowledge constituted the biggest obstacle. Research shows that in the East, learners have some pronunciation and grammar problems because of the structure of their language (Abdul Haq, 1982; Harrison, Prator and Tucker, 1975; Kambal, 1980; Nguyen, 2002;). Also, studies on shyness, motivation, and attitudes in learning English show that the eastern culture is different from the American culture, making it difficult to learn English for these students (Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner, & Reyes, 2004; Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid 2005; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Nguyen, 2002). The studies conducted on accents in a second language supports the participants' views (Bialystok & Hakuta 1999; Bongaerts Summeren, Planken, and Schils., 1997; Flege, 1987; FlegeYeni-Komshian & Liu, 1999; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; Moyer, 1999, 2004; Munro & Mann, 2005, Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). Despite these difficulties, the participants said that they felt more comfortable when they overcame their shyness and that their pronunciation became understandable, but it took at least two years. They consider their current English level to be better than their beginning level. These observations conclude that the biggest factor in learning English by experiencing English in the home country is shyness. Especially adults can be more shy than children about imitating native speakers while pronouncing some words. As the level of shyness increases, there may be delays in learning the language. Participants indicated that they were less likely to participate in English-spoken environments because they were ashamed.

The participants' suggestions for overcoming the difficulties in speaking, listening, writing, and reading were not to be shy and to practice. For practice, their suggestions were receiving support from the social media, being active, and generally having conversations with native speakers. They indicated that native

speakers were generally very glad to support second language learners. They thought that native speakers were kind and understanding. Four participants indicated that they had only few expectations from the government. Most states already provide English courses at different levels and the participants did not think that more intervention from the state would be helpful.

The study observed that although individuals' initial levels of English were low, they could have good knowledge of English with others in the same time period. In this regard, it should be recognized that the initial levels of learners of English are not significantly important. In order to create this awareness, in addition to the cognitive dimension of English education given in schools, the psychological dimension should be considered. English-educated people can share these experiences with students.

The more someone is in the environment, the easier it becomes to learn English. Using a language in addition to listening will speed up the learning process. To ensure this, individuals can join websites that bring individuals together according to their common interests and participate in such events. Individuals' shyness about language learning is more related to backgrounds they bring from their own cultures. Overcoming this will be possible only with self-awareness. Bringing materials that contain real life English and explaining that being shy will not help in the language learning process will help learners at high schools.

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