# Addressing The Predicaments Of The ESL Students And The Techniques To Facilitate Better Understanding

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**Abstract**

English as a Second Language (ESL), is an educational curriculum designed to help non-native speakers improve their English language skills. In today's increasingly interconnected and diverse world, having proficiency in English is a threshold to global opportunities. ESL students face a number of challenges as they venture down the path of learning the English language, hence the role of English teachers is substantial in helping students face and overcome the challenges. This paper focuses on the variety of learning difficulties the ESL students face in the classroom, which could negatively impact the student's learning progress, and features the valuable insights to effectively support students in overcoming them.

**Keywords:** ESL, learning, challenges, skills, strategies, understanding

**Introduction**

As I navigate my journey of teaching a new language to ESL students, it comes with its unique set of challenges; from lack of vocabulary, pronunciation hurdles, syntax to cultural differences…etc., and these obstacles shape their ESL learning experience. Globally, about 25% of English speakers are native speakers, while the rest 75% are non-native speakers. As they have different native languages (L1), English becomes their second language; and for these individuals, ESL education plays a crucial role in equipping learners with the language skills necessary for success in today's globalized world. In India, though there are many English medium schools teaching the core subjects in English language, still it is a second language for us, as we are not native speakers of this language. English is a non-phonetic language, learning English is not

as easy as learning one's mother tongue language, and there are many grammatical rules to look out for. Understanding ESL students' source of difficulty is the first step toward helping them succeed in their language-learning journey. By gaining insights into these predicaments and implementing targeted approaches, educators and learners can pave the way for more effective language acquisition and mastery. Learning English as a second language offers numerous benefits; firstly, it significantly improves communication skills, allows individuals to connect confidently with a worldwide audience, and opens the door to interact with people from various cultures and backgrounds. English proficiency is generally a key requirement in the global job market, which can lead to enhanced career opportunities with many multinational companies and industries considering it a valuable skill.

## Language Proficiency Challenges

Let us discuss the various impediments the ESL students undergo during their English language learning process. First, and foremost it is mandatory for the students to understand that- English is a non-phonetic language; and to know the difference between phonetic and non-phonetic language.

## English - A Non-Phonetic Language

Despite English being considered a global language, non-native speakers often struggle to adapt due to its non-phonetic nature. The discrepancy between alphabets and speech sounds poses a significant challenge, with English pronunciation not always following spelling conventions. The main reason for this impediment is that English being a non-phonetic language. The alphabets don't always relate to the same speech sounds; hence it is the primary cause of difficulty. The pronunciation of English words do not follow the way it is spelt and vice-versa.

For example:

Colonel (pronounced /kernel)

I like to read [ri:d].

I have read [red] that book.

Red [red] is my favorite colour.

To understand this, it is mandatory to have an insight of the brief history of the origin of the English language. English is a blend of various languages; its origin is from the Germanic tribal community- Angel, Saxon and Jute, and numerous words from different languages have been added from French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Dutch etc., to it. The words that entered English from foreign languages sometimes kept their original spelling and pronunciation; it means that the sounds that are used in those

words are foreign (non-English) sounds. In other instances, the foreign pronunciation was adopted to an English pronunciation, but the foreign spelling was maintained. This resulted in a disconnection between the English sound and spelling, giving English the 'non-phonetic' adjective.

Language perception is the process by which a linguistic signal is decoded and understood by a listener; in order to perceive speech the continuous acoustic signal must be converted into discrete linguistic units such as phonemes, morphemes, and words. The English language has just 26 letters, but more than 44 sounds known as phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest unit of sound, which is connected to meaning; knowing and recognizing those sounds help in good pronunciation, as well as in enhancing listening and speaking skills. A simple example from our day to day usage of words- the letter "ch" creates two different sounds while pronouncing Church and Chemistry, 'ough' sounds different in words like though, though, cough, bough, rough etc. Such sound patterns certainly create confusion for an ESL student. The phonemic chart, utilizing symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), aids in learning pronunciation. The symbols on this chart represent the 44 sounds used in British English speech (Received Pronunciation or RP, an educated accent considered as standard by the English Language Association).

## Vocabulary

Vocabulary mastery is crucial for learning and progress across the curriculum. ESL learners often face challenges due to limited vocabulary, hindering comprehension and expression. A robust vocabulary enhances communication, reading comprehension, writing skills, and critical thinking. Limited vocabulary not only affects academic understanding but also social skills, underscoring the importance of diverse vocabulary in conveying meaning effectively.

According to the National Curriculum in England (2014-2015) "command of vocabulary is key to learning and progress across the whole curriculum." Vocabulary is not just a collection of simple words; it includes synonyms, antonyms, idioms, phrases, confusing words like homophone, homonyms, figures of speech..etc.. One of the most significant challenges ESL learners face is limited vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to comprehend spoken and written English, as well as to express explicitly. A robust vocabulary enhances communication, reading comprehension, writing skills, and fosters critical thinking. Expanding vocabulary gives ESL students the power to express themselves with precision and confidence, opening doors to academic success, career advancement, and cultural understanding. Students with limited vocabulary will most often not progress academically as quickly as their peers without difficulties, as they are at risk of wider language weaknesses and reading comprehension difficulties, which will impact upon their educational achievement. Limited vocabulary not only affects academic understanding but also their social skills, underscoring the importance of diverse vocabulary in conveying meaning effectively.

Vocabulary is the backbone of effective communication, without which ESL students face many predicaments, hence the knowledge of varied vocabulary lets them choose words accurately, in conveying intended meaning and leading to clearer and more engaging conversations.

**Language Skills**

In addition to vocabulary and pronunciation challenges, educators must focus on improving the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW skills). Listening and Speaking are natural Language skills; without strong listening and speaking skills, students may have difficulty participating in class discussions, understanding lectures, and expressing themselves in English. To address these issues, opportunities to enhance listening and speaking practice can be provided during classroom teaching, like small group discussions, partner activities, role plays, and techniques like using audio materials with accompanying transcripts, active listening exercises, and interactive listening tasks can help learners improve their listening skills significantly. Similarly, fostering speaking skills requires creating opportunities for students to practice speaking in various contexts, role-playing activities, conversation practice, and structured speaking tasks can boost learners' fluency in spoken English. By giving students the chance to engage in meaningful conversations and practice their language skills in a supportive environment, they can build confidence and proficiency in listening and speaking English.

Reading and Writing skills are artificial skills, and play a vital role in language learning; and these skills require strong vocabulary and grammar knowledge as well as an understanding of English sentence structure and syntax. To help ESL students improve their literacy skills, teachers can provide explicit instruction on grammar and sentence structure, such as sentence-combining exercises, graphic organizers, sentence diagramming, and additionally, students should be encouraged to read and write in English outside the classroom, such as by reading English-language books or writing emails in English etc. Furthermore, fostering reading proficiency involves incorporating extensive reading activities, comprehension exercises, and vocabulary acquisition strategies into the curriculum. Finally, improving writing abilities among ESL students can be achieved through regular writing practice, feedback sessions, and guided writing tasks tailored to learners' language proficiency levels. By providing ample support and practice opportunities through language skills, ESL students develop strong reading and writing skills in English.

**Communication challenges**

Effective communication skills, including pronunciation and clarity of expression, are essential components of ESL education. Pronunciation errors, often stemming from differences between native languages and English. While almost all native languages are spoken first and written second. Here, the difficulty comes when it is first taught to write English and then told to speak it the same way. Pronunciation errors may be due to many issues; the most common reason is transfer or interference from the mother tongue (MTI). Generally, errors made in pronunciation are due to differences in the sound system and spelling symbols between the mother tongue and English, and while practicing pronunciation, prominence is given to the sound of the words. As English is a non-phonetic language, to address this obstacle, educators can implement various strategies aimed at improving pronunciation skills. This may include incorporating pronunciation drills, phonetic exercises, and speech therapy techniques into their teaching practices. Beyond pronunciation, students must also learn strategies for conveying their ideas clearly. This involves teaching techniques for active listening, articulating thoughts, and understanding cultural nuances in communication. By emphasizing these skills within the ESL curriculum, students are empowered to express themselves effectively in various social and academic contexts.

**Syntax**

One of the most common mistakes  ESL students make while speaking English due to lack of grammar knowledge are:

- Incorrect subject-verb agreement, where the verb does not correctly match the subject in number or tense.

- Improper pluralization, especially confusing the rules for regular and irregular nouns, leading to errors in forming plural forms.

- The correct use of articles - "A" and "an" are indefinite articles used when referring to something for the first time, or to a general item rather than a specific one.

- The distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, and how they interact with articles, quantifiers, and verbs. Countable nouns refer to objects or concepts that can be counted. They have both singular and plural forms.

- The right preposition in English is key to accurately conveying relationships between elements in a sentence, another component that ESL students have difficulties with.

- Adjectives and adverbs are essential parts of speech in English, serving distinct functions, but they can often be tricky for ESL students. To avoid such confusion, a clear distinction is needed.

- Understanding tenses helps ESL students express themselves better in English, especially about past experiences or ongoing actions, or future actions.

Being aware of these areas of difficulty and actively working to correct mistakes through ongoing practice and exposure to the language helps in improving English proficiency and effective communication.

## Cultural Adaptation and Learning Styles

ESL students from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives and communication styles to the classroom. Cultural differences can often pose a challenge for ESL students in the classroom. Students from different cultures may have different customs, beliefs, and communication styles, which can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications. Teachers can address this challenge by providing cultural awareness activities that promote understanding and respect for different cultures. Acknowledging and respecting these differences is fundamental to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where every student feels valued and understood. Educators must foster cultural awareness and sensitivity among students, promoting mutual respect and understanding across cultural norms and practices. Moreover, ESL educators must also recognize the diverse learning styles present among ESL learners. As an English teacher, we note that many students may have different learning styles. If this is not taken into consideration when planning teaching, it can make it difficult for them to fully engage with the curriculum and feel successful in their language learning. Some students may thrive in visual learning environments, while others prefer auditory or kinesthetic approaches. By incorporating various teaching strategies and materials that cater to different learning styles, educators can ensure that all students have equal opportunities to engage with the curriculum effectively.

## Lack of Confidence

A lack of confidence can be a major barrier to success for ESL students. They may be self-conscious about their language skills and hesitant to speak up in class. This can lead to a lack of participation and limited opportunities for practice. To address this challenge, teachers should create a supportive and positive learning environment, by providing opportunities for students to showcase their skills and knowledge in the classroom, and by regular encouragement and better feedback to their students; which can help to boost confidence and encourage further participation. To avoid frustrating ESLs and wasting their time, the teacher should thoroughly assess the students to establish a baseline of how much they actually know. The students themselves should consider attending specialized English courses to improve their command of the language at an increased pace.

## Lack of Motivation

Many students may experience discouragement, facing the complexities of language learning, which leads to lack of motivation and confidence in their abilities. In this case, educators must take active measures to identify and address the root causes of students' disengagement. They can boost the learners' enthusiasm for language acquisition by enhancing the learning environment and instructional approaches. In order to help the students stay motivated throughout the language learning process, it's important to find ways to make the learning relevant, interesting and fun. This can be done by taking the needs and interests of students into consideration and incorporating lesson materials that align with them. Setting achievable goals is a key strategy to provide students with clear milestones to work towards, nurturing a sense of progress and accomplishment. Positive reinforcement and acknowledgment of students' efforts and achievements further enhance their self-esteem and motivation to continue learning. Additionally, offering personalized feedback relevant to individual students' needs and progress promotes accountability and ownership over their learning journey, motivating students to engage in language studies. Adapting teaching strategies to meet the growing needs of ESL learners and creating an engaging learning environment are crucial steps in helping students overcome motivational and confidence issues, enabling them to thrive in their language acquisition journey.

## Conclusion

ESL students face a number of challenges as they proceed the path of learning the English language such as; low self-esteem, demoralized and disengaged, and finally misplaced in an academic setting etc. Hence, an English teacher plays a significant role in helping students to face and overcome the challenges by developing a strong understanding of effective ESL instruction and to support the students on their way towards becoming proficient English speakers. The primary aim is to enhance English language skills in various areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing, in ESL students. Technology has opened up a world of possibilities for language learners, and educators should not only integrate technology into the curriculum but also aim to embed it into teaching practices to provide comprehensive support throughout the learning process. By embracing technology, educators can empower their students to engage with languages in innovative ways, ultimately leading to more effective and interesting language acquisition experiences. Teachers should provide a variety of teaching strategies and activities to meet the diverse needs of their students. This can be done by providing different learning materials or activities that cater to different learning styles, such as visual aids, ESL regalia, and hands-on activities. Teachers should also be flexible and willing to adapt their teaching style to meet the needs of individual students; by rendering a variety of

teaching strategies and activities and being flexible in their approach, they are able to help students with different learning styles to succeed in the English language learning journey.

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