

## EFL Students' Difficulties Encountered While Trying to Master English: A Kazakh Case Study

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**Abstract:** This study focused on difficulties that students face while mastering English. We were interested in their English skills, types of difficulties with learning English, and their emotional states caused by EFL issues. A total of 130 Kazakh students participated in this study. There were 60 females and 70 males in our sample. Participants' mean age was 19 and the standard deviation of their age was 1.16. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were utilized in order to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistical values were calculated and some inferential statistical procedures were conducted for the quantitative data. The most frequent EFL-related difficulty reported by students was the lack of vocabulary and the least frequent one was a set of problem with understanding materials written in English. Self-reported English skills were not in a statistically significant correlation with the overall frequency of difficulties encountered while mastering English.

**Keywords:** English, foreign language, learning difficulties, mastering.

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## İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Öğrencilerin İngilizceyi Öğrenirken Karşılaştıkları Güçlükler: Bir Kazak Olgu Çalışması

**Öz:** Bu çalışma öğrencilerin İngilizceyi iyice öğrenirken karşılaştıkları güçlükler üzerine yoğunlaşmıştır. İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretimi (EFL) konularından kaynaklı öğrencilerin duygusal durumlarıyla, İngilizceyi öğrenirken öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları zorluklarla ve öğrencilerin yetenekleriyle ilgilenilmiştir. Çalışmaya toplam 130 kazak öğrenci katılmıştır ki bunların 60'ı kız ve 70'i erkek'tir. Katılımcıların ortalama yaşı 19 olarak ifade edilmiştir ve yaşlarının standart sapması 1.16'dır. Araştırma sorularını cevaplayabilmek için hem nicel hem de nitel metodolojilerden faydalanılmıştır. Tanımlayıcı istatistiksel değerler hesaplanmış ve nicel veriler için bazı çıkarımsal istatistik işlemleri yapılmıştır. Katılımcılar tarafından İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretimi ile alakalı en sık karşılaşıldığı beyan edilen zorluk sözcük dağarcığının eksikliğiydi ve en az karşılaşıldığı ifade edilen zorluksa İngilizce yazılan materyalleri anlamaktaki bir takım sorunlar olarak görülmüştür. Katılımcılar tarafından kendileri için beyan ettikleri İngilizce becerileri ile İngilizceyi iyice öğrenirken karşılaştıkları genel anlamdaki zorluk sıklıkları arasında anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmuyordu.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İngilizce, yabancı dil, öğrenme güçlükleri, iyi öğrenme.

## Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) can sometimes be a difficult task even to students who regularly interact in English on a daily basis (e.g. via social media, emails, etc.). The first reason is that they are not native speakers of this language. The second could be students' level of motivation (Do they perceive that they really need English?), and the third one could be students' ability to learn foreign languages (e.g. verbal intelligence). Besides, there are lots of other influences on the verbal (oral) and written performance of EFL students.

Accordingly, students experience a variety of difficulties while trying to learn, use, and master English as a foreign language. They can be summarized as follows: insufficient vocabulary repertoire (Al Hosni, 2014; Alqahtani, 2015), problems faced while learning and using grammar rules (Almekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Ebrahimpourtaher & Eissaie, 2015), students' do not know how and which learning strategies to use while learning English (Akbari, 2015), making mistakes due to comparing English with students' own mother tongue (Khan, 2011), difficulties associated with reading English texts (Kheirzadeh & Tavakoli, 2012), English learning anxiety (Chan & Wu, 2004; Chen & Chang, 2004), issues related to English pronunciation (Hago & Khan, 2015), students' problems with motivation to learn English (Khajloo, 2013; Kong, 2009), difficulties emerged from teachers' English accent and lack of knowledge (Moussu & Llurda, 2008), students' perception of themselves as not enough talented/able to learn foreign languages (Banks, 2008), etc.

According to some EFL sources and frameworks (e.g. Rosenfeld, Leung, & Oltman, 2001), the following four English language skills could be identified: reading, writing, listening and speaking. These skills are usually mutually correlated (e.g. Bozorgian, 2012). Hence, students who work on some of them (e.g. on writing and speaking) will perceive an improvement of some other language skills (in line with our

example, their reading and listening skills will improve). However, students can face various problems in all the four (English) language skills.

Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to examine students' English skills in relation to difficulties encountered while learning, using, and mastering English. Five research questions were asked:

1. What is the level of English skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) reported by Kazakh students?
2. What are the most common difficulties encountered by Kazakh students in relation to learning, using and mastering English as a foreign language?
3. What is the relationship between English skills and the frequency of EFL-related difficulties in a sample of Kazakh students?
4. What are the most common emotional states experienced by Kazakh students while trying to learn, use and master English?
5. How can Kazakh students help themselves and how can teachers help them overcome those difficulties?

This article aimed to answer these questions by using both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A total of 130 students from Kazakh National University in Almaty took part in this study. Sixty of them were females (which was 46.2% of the total sample) and 70 students were males (53.8% of the total sample). Participants' mean age was 19 ( $SD = 1.16$ ), where the youngest participant was 17 and the eldest was 22 years old.

### **Instruments**

Firstly, participants were asked to provide their genders and ages. Secondly, two instruments were applied. These two scales were applied to estimate English skills and difficulties

encountered while mastering English as a foreign language. The first scale was used to assess the four basic language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Each of them was accompanied by a five-point Likert scale, which helped students estimate the level of their English skills (1 – poor to 5 – excellent). This scale was internally consistent (i.e. reliable) because its Cronbach's alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .824$ .

The second scale included the following eight categories of difficulty encountered in EFL context: lack of vocabulary, problems with employing correct grammar rules, experiencing a delay while communicating in English, insufficient motivation to learn English, feeling of not being talented to learn languages, difficult curriculum of English as a school subject, problems with understanding materials written in English and problems due to English teachers' poor knowledge and skills. Here it was also utilized a five-point Likert scale, in which students estimated the frequency of experiencing each difficulty that was listed above (from 1 – almost never to 5 – almost always). Its reliability (more precisely, internal consistency) was acceptable due to the value of Cronbach's coefficient alpha ( $\alpha = .772$ ).

Lastly, participants answered the following four questions: "Could you provide some other problems (not listed above) you face while learning and improving your English?", "What emotional states do these problems with learning English cause to you?", "What can you do to improve your English skills and competencies?", and "What can your English teacher do to help you with the problems you encounter while learning English?" These questions were, in fact, the qualitative part of this study.

**Research Procedure and Data Analysis:** Data were collected by authors of this study. It took participants approximately 20 minutes to provide answers to the questions from the administered instruments. The authors of this study followed the ethical rules and standards of educational sciences (asking for informed consent, and ensuring the anonymity of

participants along with the confidentiality of the gathered data).

Descriptive statistical values (minimum and maximum values, arithmetic means, and standard deviations) were calculated for the key variables of this study. Next, the coefficient of correlation was calculated and its scatterplot was made. In the end, content analysis of participants' answers to the last four questions was conducted.

### Findings

Firstly, the quantitative part of the obtained ones and then the qualitative part of our findings were displayed.

Table 1: Descriptive statistical values of the four English skills

Skills	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Reading	130	1	5	3.72	0.89
Writing	130	1	5	3.40	0.91
Listening	130	1	5	3.42	0.96
Speaking	130	1	5	3.31	1.06
Overall level of English skills	130	1	5	3.46	0.77

In general, Kazakh students from our sample estimated their English skills as moderate to high (because  $M = 3.46$ , see Table 1). The highest estimate was obtained for reading skills ( $M = 3.72$ ) whereas the lowest one was calculated for speaking skills ( $M = 3.31$ ).

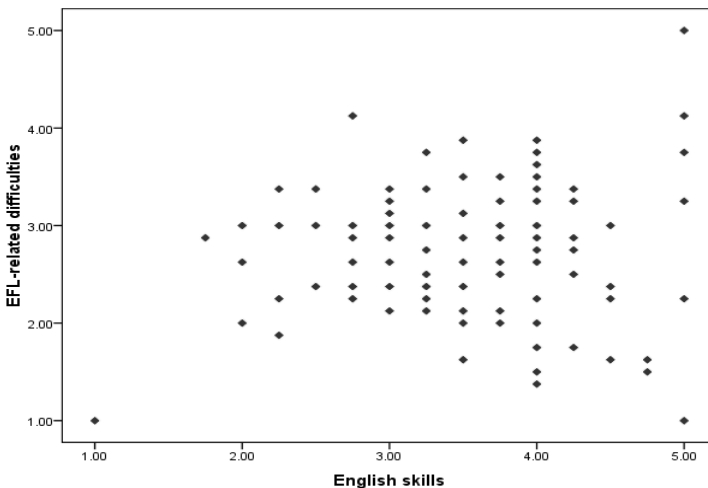
Table 2: Descriptive statistical values of the eight categories of difficulties with learning English as a foreign language

Types of EFL-related difficulties	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Lack of vocabulary	130	1	5	3.01	0.99
Problems with employing correct grammar rules	130	1	5	2.85	0.94
Experiencing a delay while communicating in English	130	1	5	2.81	0.95

Insufficient motivation to learn English	130	1	5	2.96	1.13
Feeling of not being talented to learn languages	130	1	5	2.52	1.23
Difficult curriculum of English as a school subject	130	1	5	2.65	1.11
Problems with understanding materials written in English	130	1	5	2.46	1.18
Problems due to English teachers' poor knowledge and skills	130	1	5	2.47	1.18
Overall (the average frequency of difficulties)	130	1	5	2.71	0.68

As shown in Table 2, Kazakh students rarely (orsometimes) face EFL-related difficulties ( $M = 2.71$ , where 2 meant "rarely" and 3 was "sometimes"). The most frequent difficulty experienced while mastering English was lack of vocabulary ( $M = 3.01$ ) whereas the least frequent EFL-related difficulty included problems with understanding materials written in English ( $M = 2.46$ ).

Figure 1. Scatterplot of the correlation between subjective estimates of English skills and the frequency of EFL-related difficulties



The relationship displayed in Figure 1 was small, negative and statistically non-significant ( $r = -.003, p > .05$ ). Thus, these two variables were not connected with each other.

Table 3: Some other problems students face while learning and improving their English

Problems/Issues not listed in Table 2	f
Not enough practice	6
Not knowing right ways to learn English	1
Laziness	1

By looking at Table 3, it was noticed that only eight participants provided one or some difficulties other than those listed in Table 2. Most of them reported a scarce of practice (six students). One of the answers (which was under the category "Not enough practice") was "We are not communicating with each other [in class]".

Table 4: Emotional problems (states) caused by EFL-related issues

Emotional states/problems due to EFL difficulties	f
Shame (embarrassment)	4
Anger (getting mad and annoyed)	3
Disappointment	2
Confusion	2
Sadness	1
Boredom	1

Obviously (Table 4), shame was the most common negative emotional state among our participants. While having problems with mastering English, they felt embarrassed. The next was anger (three students reported this emotional state). Next, disappointment and confusion were equally frequent and the least frequent emotional problems were associated with sadness and boredom.

Table 5: What can students do to improve their own English skills and knowledge?

Students' activities and habits that can improve their English competencies	f
Watching English films, reading English books, and listening to English music	23
Practice everyday	8
To converse with native speakers	6
To go to an English course	3

Most students (Table 5) thought they would improve their English competencies by watching English movies, reading English books and listening to English music (23 students). Eight students highlighted the importance of practicing English on a daily basis. Another way of mastering English was communicating with native English speakers. Three students thought going to an English course would be the best way of improving their English skills and broadening their English knowledge.

Table 6: What can English teachers do to help their students overcome EFL-related issues?

Teachers' interventions that have positive influence on students' English competencies	f
Focus on speaking in English	4
Helps more with grammar rules	4
Gives us more homeworks	4
Motivates us to learn English	2

Students wanted their English teachers to dedicate more time to practice English speaking skills, help with grammar rules, give more homework and increase their level of motivation. A student from our sample submitted the following answer: "Explain words or idioms that I do not understand" and another student answered: "Explain [something] again".

Apart from that, some participants wrote that they did not need teachers help and they should rely on themselves only while mastering English.

### Discussion

This study approached the problem of EFL-related difficulties in a quantitative and qualitative manner. The first finding (corresponding to the first research question) included students' estimates of their own English skills. All of them were estimated as being above the average. Students thought they perform best in reading English materials and worst in speaking. This result indicated that teachers should pay more attention to students' oral language development in EFL classroom. One of the instructional methods that can overcome students' problems with speaking skills could be the *Communicative Language Teaching-CLT* (Khan, 2011).

With regard to the second research question, students reported lack of vocabulary as their main (most frequent) problem with learning, using and improving their English. This finding was comparable to the result obtained by Al Hosni (2014) and Alqahtani (2015). The next problem for students was insufficient motivation to learn English. It can be overcome by creating a relaxed and positive learning climate, providing opportunities for students to experience success, using rewarding systems appropriately, reinforcing cooperative activities, using various and interesting activities as well as by involving new and effective teaching techniques (Kong, 2009). Similar approach that can be used for the same purpose is *suggestopedia* (later known as *desuggestopedia*), created by G. Lozanov 40 years ago. This approach is based on "peripheral perception", i.e. learning some contents unconsciously and on designing learning process in a such way can be perceived as fun, quick and easy (Orosz, 2017). A foreign/second language class, designed according to Lozanov (1978) and his (de)suggestopedia, should have the following four phases: active concert (e.g. an English teacher reads a text accompaniey

by music and students follow the text), passive concert (students close their books and listen to their teacher), activation (students practice the language) and elaboration (students play around and use new language creatively).

The correlation between the frequency of difficulties encountered while trying to master English and self-reported English skills was very close to zero and thus statistically insignificant. This was probably due to participants' tendencies toward impression management which is one of the limitations of self-report measures. Therefore, the answer to the third research question was negative.

Kazakh students underlined the lack of practice with regard to the English language use. They did not have a sufficient number of opportunities to speak in English (especially with its native speakers). The most common negative emotional state which was a result of EFL-related difficulties was shame/embarrassment. This can be associated with anxiety as a more complex psychological state (or trait). English learning anxiety is a well-established phenomenon that usually has a negative effect on students' EFL achievements (e.g. Chan & Wu, 2004; Chen & Chang, 2004). Some students were angry while perceiving a sort of barrier during the process of learning and using English as a foreign language. Others were disappointed, confused, sad and bored. This finding could serve as the answer to the penultimate research question. Students' anxiety could be reduced with help of behavioural techniques (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, journaling, positive self-talk, etc.), as reported by Buchler (2013). Students' academic self-esteem should also be fostered by their teachers, peers and parents.

The last research question included ways of overcoming problems experienced in an EFL environment. Most students wanted to interact as much as possible with various contents in English (movies, music and books). They wanted their English teachers to focus more on the development of English speaking

skills. Lots of English teachers put aside speaking activities during English classes. It is better to put them at the forefront along with teaching in accordance with students' educational and linguistic needs.

Some shortcomings of this study encompassed the limitations of self-report measures, the completeness of the list that comprised EFL-related difficulties and giving socially desirable answers to the question considering English teachers' knowledge, skills and ways of improving EFL classes.

Further study should be focused on age and gender differences in the number and frequency of EFL-related difficulties. Another topic of future articles could be the relationship between the use of learning strategies and difficulties encountered while trying to master English as a foreign language.

First of all, Kazakh students wanted to develop their speaking skills. Some of them said they do not need the assistance and support of their teachers. Others wanted to have more homeworks and similar activities given by their teachers. Students from our sample also wanted to converse with native speakers of English and to practice this language everyday.

Despite the fact they estimated their English skills as moderate to high, they experience some difficulties while mastering this foreign language (vocabulary issues, problems with their own motivation, problems with grammar rules and their use in both spoken and written context, etc.). The usual consequence of these difficulties is the feeling of embarrassment, one of the indicators of English language anxiety. Some emotional states could last longer and become traits or characteristic patterns of reactions to negative internal and external stimuli. In the case of EFL context, these stimuli can be memories of previous negative experiences with regard to acquiring English (internal ones) or poor performance on oral English classroom activities and in written English exams (external ones).

Students' attitudes, experiences, learning habits and motivation regarding English language learning, English teachers' efforts and skills, and the quality of teaching materials (e.g. English textbooks and workbooks) could have a huge impact on EFL climate, performance and the use of the adopted competencies outside the EFL classroom.

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