

Challenges Faced by the Undergraduates in Enhancing their English Language

Abdul Majeed Mohamed Aaqil¹, Muhaz Faizer²,
Rimaza Rizwan Moulana³



Abstract

Language is the medium which is used to express the ideas and thoughts of human beings. English is an international language and coordinated with all the sectors, prevailing in Sri Lanka especially, in the educational sector. In the state universities of Sri Lanka, English language courses are being integrated as a common subject in most courses. Hence, the study aimed at identifying the challenges faced by the undergraduates in enhancing their English language skills. Based on Mixed methods, the primary data were collected through closed-questionnaire distributed among 100 students of second year undergraduates of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka and the semi-structured interviews held among them. Secondary data contributed to construct its theoretical structure. The major findings showed the emergence of several issues with regard to the speaking and listening skills due to the dominance of their mother tongue, Tamil language other than writing and reading skills because of their involvement in improving such skills through various strategies.

Keywords: *Challenges, Skills, English Language, Undergraduates*

1. Introduction

Language is a kind of medium through which human beings are to express their ideas / thoughts/ concepts. Language should not be considered as a tool or instrument only. It is an inseparable part of the natural ability to understand the things. Language is the function and intuition and power of the human mind and the witness of one's mind. That is, language is the total cognition of the human mind (Raja & Selvi, 2011). Thus, more than 6500

¹ Temporary Assistant Lecturer, Department of Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka Email: aaqilamm@seu.ac.lk

² Student, Department of Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka Email: MuhazFaizer96@gmail.com

³ Student, Department of English Language Teaching, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka Email: rimasafathima19@gmail.com

languages are spoken by people in 195 countries worldwide (Klappenbach, 2022). Although, most of these languages are spoken only within certain countries. Simultaneously, English is one of the most widely spoken languages around the world.

Due to the massive influence of the English Language, on education administrative services, people around the world are very forced to master the English language whether they prefer it or not. On that basis, English is being taught and manipulated in some way in all countries. English is spoken as a mother tongue in some countries and as a Second or target and third language in other countries. However according to Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Tamil and English are generally spoken by the varieties of people. Here, Sinhala and Tamil are mostly spoken along ethnic lines. While, English is seen as a common language spoken by the majority of the people.

As such, English language is considered essential in all sectorial and academic activities in Sri Lanka. English is taught in Sri Lanka from preschool to university and in the faculties of higher technology. For that, people are trained in the four skills of writing, reading, comprehension/listening and speaking in order to become a proficient in the English language.

Although, the academic activities and the curriculum in most of the Universities situated in Sri Lanka, are taught in English. English is also taught as a general compulsory subject in most curriculum. Nevertheless, English language proficiency is low among the second year general students of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. The study aims to address the challenges faced by students as they seek to improve their English language skills.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

English language and the usage of English language are extremely significant among the University activities in each and every part. Even though, during this period, according to this research and evaluation, the utilization of English language is very low among the students of Faculty of Islamic studies and Arabic language due to some various factors. In this circumstance, those identified students are getting not involved to develop their English language and facing plenty of problems in their educational activities due to the lack of knowledge in English language skill. Therefore, this is the major issue identified and the study was conducted.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study included to;

1. Identify the challenges faced by the undergraduates in enhancing English language skills.

2. Self-assess the English language skills of undergraduates to recognize the challenges encountered.

1.3 Research Question

Following research question was formulated to achieve objectives of the study;

1. What are the challenges faced by the undergraduates in enhancing English Language skills?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The researchers hope that this study can be useful for everyone who wants to develop his / her knowledge, especially the students who are pursuing a degree program at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. By Identifying challenges in enhancing English language, the researchers also hope that the results of the study will be useful for the undergraduate. And the results can serve as a material to help in enhancing English language, so that they can learn them easier.

2. Literature Review

The English language has become an inseparable part of the educational curriculum and it is used as a second or foreign language in most countries (Akbari, 2015). Akbari in her research article (2016) discussed various difficulties with learning English. She conducted research on MA English students in Iran and discovered the following challenges in learning English: limited vocabulary knowledge, limited grammatical knowledge, weakness in four language skills, limited knowledge of pronunciation and spelling, and a lack of appropriate learning strategies. Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing are the main four skills of English language. Therefore, the study of these four skills have received the attention of various scholars. It is approached by (Aydogan & Akbarov , 2014) on the basic, there are four skills belong to English language and they are Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. It is how; it was recognized by the above-mentioned scholar.

Learning strategies, according to Akbari (2016), are specialized instruments for improving learners' learning capacity; using a particular type of learning strategy can help learners gain a better comprehension. She went on to say that language learning challenges could be caused by a lack of understanding of the critical function English plays in their lives, implying that motivation is crucial in learning a language. Learners may be strongly motivated to learn English if they are informed about how English is used in their everyday lives.

Similarly, (Masduqi, 2016) says that, English skills can be categorized into two major ways such as Receptive skills and productive skills. He stated

that, Receptive skills are used to receive the information from the teacher to students. There are two included in Receptive skill which are Listening and Reading. In addition, both productive skills are used to produce the proper, meaningful language by the students. The both productive skills are Speaking and Writing. Moreover, (Gan, 2012) has found that, the students significantly encountered several problems leading to their limitation of fluent Speaking performance such as lack of vocabulary focusing much on grammar structure having limited in class speaking opportunities and out of class English speaking environment.

Alam and Ashrafuzzaman (2018) conducted a study to find out the challenges of developing speaking skills through classroom interaction of EFL learners and found the nervousness, fearfulness, inattention to the class, mistakes in grammar were the main problems faced by the EFL students. In the same way, Heriansyah (2012) found lack of vocabulary and being afraid of making mistakes as the main problems of developing speaking skills. Another study by Sokip (2020) on overcoming the problems of learning foreign language skills in the classroom, found that in speaking skills students encounter mainly motivation problems, students are often worried about committing mistakes while speaking. Similarly, Anandari (2015) carried out research on Indonesian EFL students' anxiety in speech production: possible causes and remedy and explored mainly three causes of foreign language anxiety in speaking: fear, shyness, and discomfort and to reduce this anxiety self-reflection strategy played a key role.

Mohammed and Rashid (2019) reported in a study that, source of difficulties encountered by Saudi EFL learners. Data were sorted through the questionnaire survey. The results showed that, the learners largely feel that, there are several factors that cause problems in reading comprehension including, cultural impact, teacher style of teaching and difficulty levels of the text books.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study was carried out by using both primary and secondary level data collection methods. It is a mixed method of data collection. These both data collection methods were utilized throughout this study to accumulate the proper data in relation to this study.

3.2 Sample & Sampling Technique

Following simple random sampling technique, sample of study included hundred students from 2nd year general degree of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language.

3.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaire, Interview and focus group discussion methods which were conducted for one month period were used as the primary data collection method.

3.4 Data Collection

The questionnaire data were collected from hundred second year general degree following students of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language through simple reversal method. In addition, an interview was conducted based on 30 students among the second-year general students of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. Further, focus group discussion also was successfully conducted twice with some of them. On the other hand, secondary data were collected in relation to this study through some websites, research articles and reports.

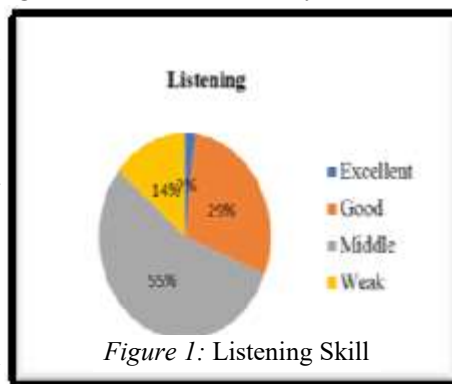
4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data obtained from primary and secondary methods were analyzed by MS Excel- 2019 software and the results are presented in the subsequent section.

4.1 Skills Analysis

This section includes English language proficiency assessment prevailing among the 2nd year general degree following students of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. Figure 1 elaborates the results of a survey provided to 2nd year general degree undergraduates regarding the question asked about the level of English language listening skill.

Based on this pie chart, there were four types of responses received from the particular respondents. According to the responses, the majority of the students are in the middle position in their listening skill with the percentage of 55%. In addition, 29% of students are good in their English listening skill. And then 14% of students are weak in their English language listening skill. Eventually, rest of the minority people are excellent in their English listening with the poor percentage of 2%. Consequently, the listening skill of English need to be improved by the majority of the low performance students of 2nd year Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language.



The figure 2 clearly depicts the speaking capacity of the 2nd year Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language students. According to this pie chart, the

majority of the 44% of students are in the middle level of their speaking skill of English language. In addition, 30% of the students are having good position in their English speaking skill. Rest of the 26% of poor students are weak in their speaking skill. As a result of it, it clears that there were no excellent people detected in their speaking skill. It is to be improved among the students.



Figure 2: Speaking Skill

The figure 3 displays the proportion of the writing skill. Writing is one of the most pivotal skill in English language. It reforms the human thoughts and ideas to visual form. According to this pie chart, 44% of majority students are good in their writing skill. In addition, the next majority of 26% of students are middle position in their writing skill of English language. Moreover, 19% of less minority students are in the excellent position of their writing skill. Eventually, the minority 11% of students are in the weak position. Therefore, writing skill should be developed among this student severely.

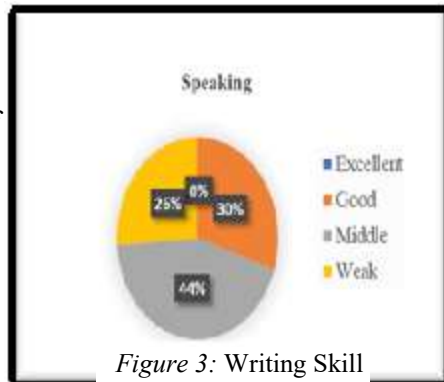


Figure 3: Writing Skill

Reading skill is one of the receptive skills of English language. It is used to acquire the information by reading something. In that respect, the given pie chart illustrates the capacity of the reading level of the selected students of FIA. In this pie chart, higher number of students is good position in their reading. Their percentage is 42%.

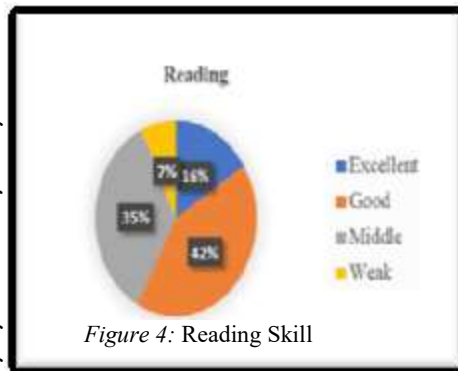


Figure 4: Reading Skill

As well, the second highest students are in the middle position of their reading skill. In addition, 16% of students are found excellent in their reading skill. Rest of the minority 7% of students are in the weak position of their reading level. Consequently, the lack of

capacity students should be guided with the proper reading strategies by their lecturers or their guiders.

4.2 Recognized Challenges in English Language Skills

The stated pie chart shows the adopted language which was mostly carried out in their academic activities during their schooling period. According to figure 5, it can be seen the major influence of Tamil language in their schooling period with the percentage of 90%. In which, Tamil language has been utilized by the majority of the students. Eventually, the rest of the language English and Sinhala have been utilized most probably in the equal level with the percentage of 5%. As a result of it, most of the undergraduates are get influenced by their L1.

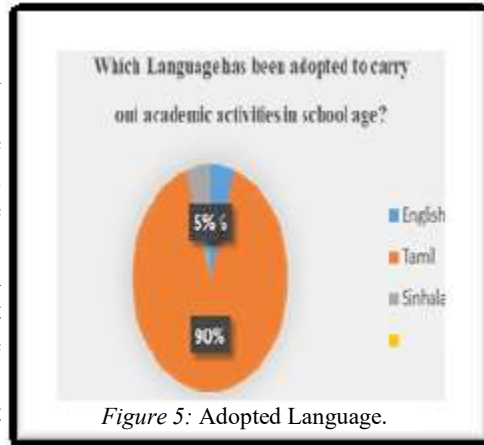


Figure 5: Adopted Language.

Furthermore, family background is an integral part of a child's language development. That is to say, from the moment a child is born, the child becomes proficient in the language that is most spoken in the family. It was found that in the interview conducted some were born in the families with no government jobs or education was recognizable. In addition some said, "I was the first child in my family to go to university. In such a situation, even if we learn English to some extent in school, there were no one in our family who could give us the opportunity to speak English in the family or provide training to develop teaching skills." They also said.

The figure 6 shows the proportion of the percentage of attending private classes of the respondents. According to this chart, the majority of the students have gone to private classes to improve their English language with the percentage of 70%. As well, the minority of 30% of students have not gone to any English language private classes. Moreover, the same fact was detected through the interview conducted with

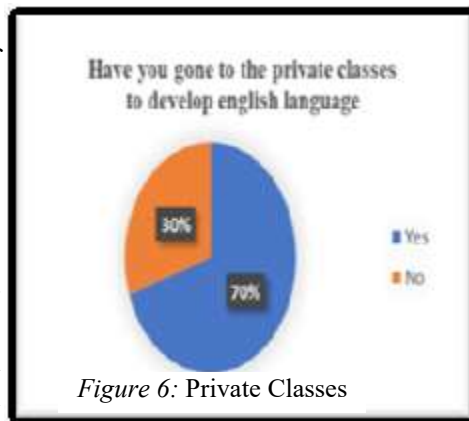


Figure 6: Private Classes

the selected students that due to the economical vulnerability, the students were unable to follow private classes to enhance their English language skills. In the interview conducted a student reported that “his father was selling vegetables and his family depended on him for his livelihood”. There are more than 05 English language classes in his hometown. “However, I did not go to such classes because of the minimum monthly fee is 800 rupees”. She said. It was an evident from the discussion among the students that such economic weakness is an essential factor for the undergraduate students behind the lack of development of English language proficiency. Students are not interested to refer any English dictionaries. It is apparently shown through this pie chart.

The given figure 7 elaborates the capacity of the students understanding the vocabularies in English. Through this pie chart, it is clear that, the majority 42% of students agreed to understand the vocabularies, used in English language. As well, the less majority 31% of students strongly agreed that they are able to understand the vocabularies, used in English language. Moreover, 18% of students have clicked the option "disagree" that they are unable to understand the English vocabularies. And then, 6% of students strongly disagreed that they are not intelligible about the English vocabularies. Eventually, only 3% of students able to understand the vocabularies which are used in English language.

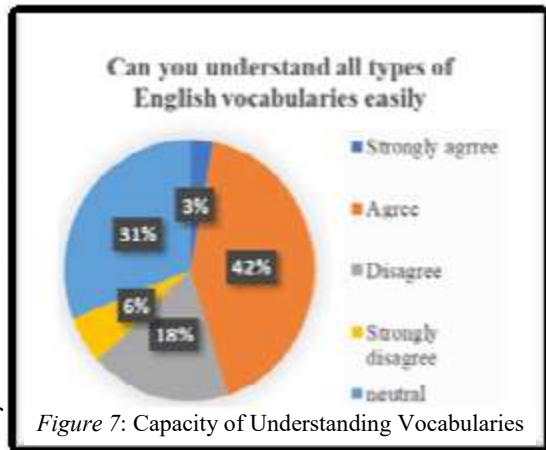


Figure 7: Capacity of Understanding Vocabularies

Figure 8 clearly depicts the proportion of the pronunciation level of the particular selected respondents. In that respect, 60% of the students are facing more difficulties in case of pronunciation during speaking or reading in English. While, rest of the 40% of students are able to pronounce English vocabularies well.

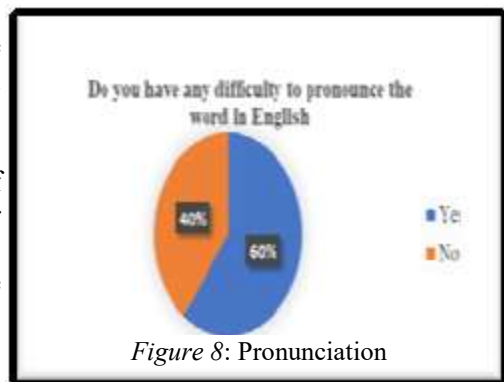


Figure 8: Pronunciation

According to the figure 9, it vividly illustrates that 56% of students are vigilant of the varieties of vocabularies. As well, 44% of students are unaware of the plenty of English vocabularies.

In this figure 10, majority of the respondents are able to understand the English slang promptly with the percentage of 60%. As well, rest of the minority people are not able to understand the English slang so easily with the percentage of 40%.

According to the figure 11, awareness of English grammar, the majority 58% of students are in the middle position in case of their English grammar knowledge. As well, less minority 21% of the students are good in their English grammar knowledge. In addition, 19% of students are in the weak position.

Eventually, rest of the 2% of minority people are in the excellent position in case of their English grammar knowledge. Hence, the grammar knowledge among the 2nd year undergraduates of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language may be enhanced.

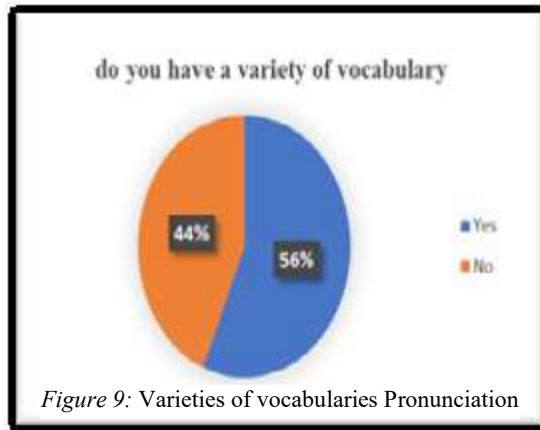


Figure 9: Varieties of vocabularies Pronunciation

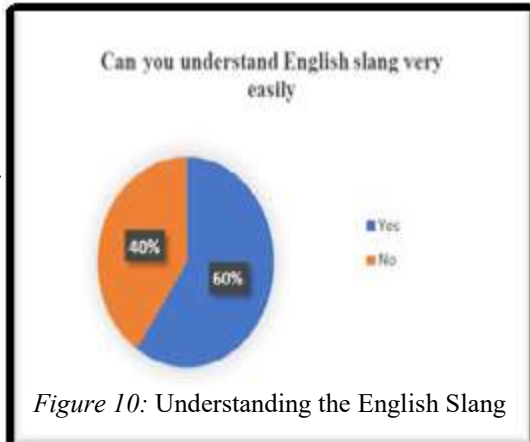


Figure 10: Understanding the English Slang

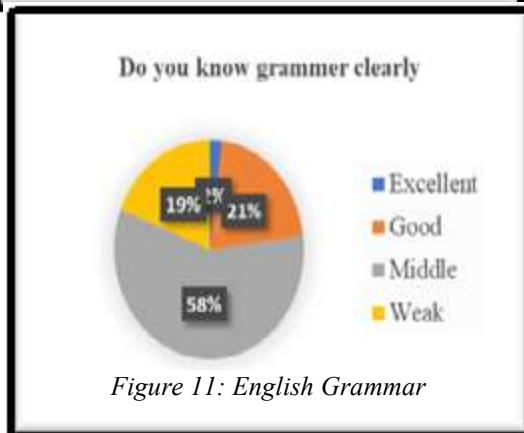


Figure 11: English Grammar

The figure 12 talks about the very specific question asked to examine whether the selected students listen to English speeches. According to the questionnaire survey 43% of the respondents had replied in the affirmative that they are listening to the English speech by usually. Nevertheless, 57% of respondents had replied in the negative that they don't listen to English speech regularly. Moreover, it was identified through the interview that due to the dominance of their mother tongue Tamil language they were not influenced or guided to focus on listening to English speech on their daily basis.

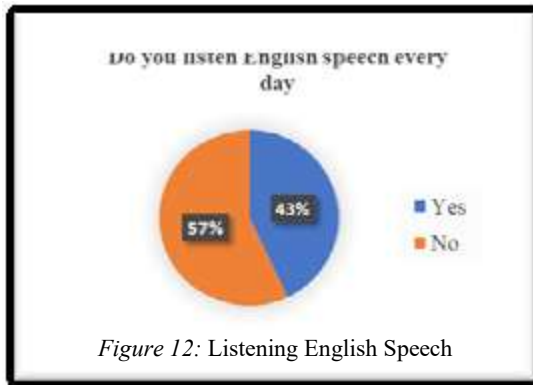


Figure 12: Listening English Speech

In figure 13, it can be seen that, approximately 57% of the students are very much interested on reading English books. Nevertheless, rest of the 43% of the students are not interested in reading English books. Therefore, it contains both the affirmative and negative responses from the respondents.

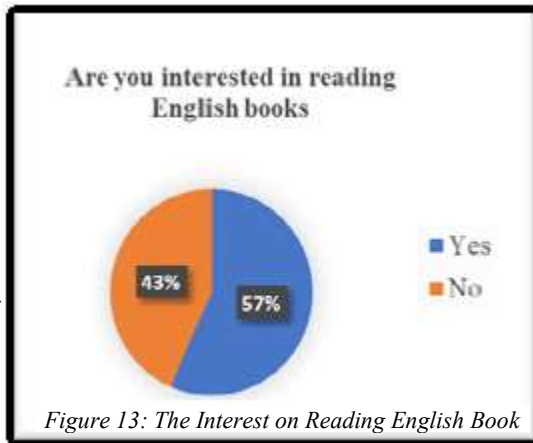


Figure 13: The Interest on Reading English Book

5. Discussion and Conclusion

By considering these questionnaire survey results, encountered verities challenges in enhancing English Language skills. Like issue in Speaking and listing skills, the main reason for it the dominance of their mother tongue Tamil language. Though, they had shown severe interest on English language and done many conversations on English language, they were unable to obtain the effective outcome in case of English language. Moreover, it is known that approximately 90% of the selected students had their schooling education in the medium of Tamil language. It clearly illustrates the influence of their mother tongue. At the same time there were no remarkable issues identified by the researchers in their English language writing skill and reading skill. Because, the selected students

for the purpose of improving their English language, they use to provide importance to their target language, following private classes for enhancing the capacity of their English language, giving more importance to the grammatical part of English language, reading English books and writing articles in the medium of English. Therefore, particular issues were not detected in regards of these both Writing skill and Reading skill among the selected students. The conclusion of the this study resembles the challenges, limited vocabulary knowledge, limited grammatical knowledge, weakness in four language skills, limited knowledge of pronunciation and spelling and lack of appropriate learning strategies which were verified in the studies "The study of EFL students' perceptions of their problems, needs and concern over learning" conducted by (Akbari, 2016) and the study " Problems and difficulties of speaking English of students of Engineering colleges" conducted by (Phyak, 2016). At the same time, there were some challenges personal, social, environmental, and linguistic problems for speaking difficulties and teacher and teaching, social content, overuse of mother tongue, poor schooling and classroom culture as the casual factors of speaking deficiency which were identified in the research entitled " Challenges faced by bachelor level students while speaking English conducted by (Chand, 2021). These identified challenges are slightly differentiated from this study's conclusion. Language is the medium through which human beings express their idea or thoughts. Therefore, learning a second language is an essential thing for every person as well student. Since English is an international language, it is to be must learned by everyone. However, there were several problems recognized in improving English language skills among the 2nd year general following degree students of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. According to the findings, listening skill and speaking skills were the most problematic task among the selected students. Hence, they will be able to improve both skills Listening and Speaking by watching English speech on particular you tube channels, watching English news reading, telecasted on TV channels and having conversations in the medium of English language with their peers. Further, plenty of ways are available to enhance their Reading and Writing skills i.e. reading English magazines, newspapers, books, articles and creating their own piece of writing etc.

6. Recommendations

The research has outlined following recommendations;

1. Establishing a positive English-language learning atmosphere in the classroom.
2. Enhancing student group conversation and implementing speaking events such as speaking contests, debates, public speaking, and other activities to

give students experience speaking

3. Practicing listening in a variety of context such as lecturing, radio news, watching videos or film, listening some music, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation and dialogues, some monologues, and interviews.

References

- Akbari, Z. (2015). Current Challenges in teaching/learning English for EFL learners: The case of Junior High School and High School. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 394-401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.524>
- Akbari, Z. (2016). The study of EFL students' perceptions of their problems, needs and concerns over learning English: The Case of MA paramedical students. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 24-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.006>
- Alam, M. A., & Ashrafuzzaman, M. (2018). Challenges of developing speaking skill through classroom interaction of EFL learners. *Prime University Journal*, 12(1), 45-67.
- Anandari, C. L. (2015). Indonesian EFL students' anxiety in speech production: Possible causes and remedy. *Teflin Journal*, 26(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v26i1/1-16>
- Aydogan, H., & Akbarov, A. A. (2014). The four Basic language skills, whole language & intergrated skills approach in Mainstream University classroom in Turkey. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5, 672.
- Chand, G. (2021). Challenges Faced by Bachelor Level Students While Speaking English. *IJELTAL (Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics)*, 6(1), 45. doi: 10.21093/ijeltal.v6i1.853
- Daghri, I. (2018). *Investigating the challenges of Learning speaking skills in EFL Classes: Perspective from preparatory year Female students* . Al- Imam Mohammed Ibn Saudi Islamic University .
- Gan, Z. (2012). Understanding L2 Speaking problems: Implications for ESL curriculum Development in Teacher Training Institution in Hong Kong . *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* , 43-59.

- Heriansyah, H. (2012). Speaking problems faced by the English department students of Syiah Kuala University. *Lingua Didaktika*, 6(1), 37-44.
- Klappenbach, A. (2022, January 7). *The 12 most spoken Languages in the world*. Retrieved from Busuu: <https://blog.busuu.com/most-spoken-languages-in-the-world/>
- Masduqi, H. (2016). Intergrating receptive skills and productive skills into a reading lesson . *2nd international conference on Teacher Training and Education*, (pp. 507-511).
- Misbah, N. H., Mohamad, M., Yunus, M. M., & Yaacob, A. (2017). *Identifying the Factors contributing to Students' Difficulties in the English Language Learning*. Scientific Reseach Publishing .
- Mohammed, Q., & Rashid, A. (2019). The sources of Reading comprehension difficulties among Saudi ELF Learners. *Trends in Social Sciences*, 7-16.
- Nadesan, N., & Shah, P. (2020). Non- Linguistics Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students in Enhancing Speakuig skills . *Scientific Research publishing*, 1988-2001.
- Phyak, P. (2016). *For our Cho: Tlung: Decolonizing Language Ideologies and (Re) Imagining Multilingual Education Policies and Practices Nepal* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hawaii]. Manoa.
- Raja, B. W. D., & Selvi, K. (2011). Causes of problems in learning English as a second language as perceived by higher secondary students. *i-manager's Journal on English Language Teaching*, 1(4), 40-45.
- Sokip. (2020). Overcoming the problem of learning foreign language skills in the classroom. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(2), 723-729. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2020.080246>
- Wahyuningsih, S. (2018). Challenges and opportunities of Teaching Academic writting skills: A case study of students at Iain Kudus. *Jurnal Edulingua*, 5(1), 1-10.

Citation of this Article:

Aaqil, A.M. M., Faizer, M., & Moulana R. R. (2022). Challenges Faced by the Undergraduates in Enhancing their English Language. *International Journal of Innovation in Teaching and Learning (IJITL)*, 8(1), 20-32.