# Exploring the Challenges and Strategies in Learning English as a Foreign Language A Qualitative Study at IAINU Bangil

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**Abstract**

Learning English as a foreign language presents unique challenges for students, particularly in educational settings where resources and exposure to the language are limited. This qualitative study explores the difficulties faced by students at IAINU Bangil, a higher education institution in Indonesia, in acquiring English proficiency, as well as the strategies employed to overcome these barriers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions with students and instructors. The findings reveal three primary challenges: (1) limited speaking proficiency due to insufficient practice opportunities, (2) reluctance to engage in English communication despite adequate vocabulary knowledge, and (3) inadequate institutional support, including the absence of language laboratories and standardized libraries. Conversely, effective strategies identified include creating supportive learning environments, encouraging consistent vocabulary acquisition, and integrating English into daily routines. The study highlights the critical role of institutional support and innovative teaching approaches in fostering English language acquisition. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of foreign language learning dynamics and offer practical recommendations for educators and policymakers in similar contexts.

**Keywords**: *Challenges, Learning English, Foreign Language*

**Introduction**

English is undoubtedly a language familiar to people across the globe. It has become a common medium of communication, widely adopted by numerous countries for daily interactions and exchanges with foreigners. In Indonesia, English is primarily taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, a distinction that carries significant implications for its acquisition and use (Wijaya, 2015). Unlike a second language, which is often integrated into everyday life alongside a native tongue, a foreign language like English is typically learned in a more structured, academic setting.

This classification shapes the way English is approached in educational systems and highlights its role as an additional skill rather than a natural extension of communication. As a result, English holds a unique position in Indonesia, balancing its global importance with the challenges of mastering it in a non-native context. The teaching of English in Indonesia has evolved to become increasingly innovative and diverse, particularly with the integration of information technology (IT) and information and communication technology (ICT).

These advancements have transformed traditional language learning into a dynamic process influenced by digital tools and resources (Sya et al., 2022). From interactive applications to online platforms, technology has enabled educators to create engaging and accessible learning experiences tailored to students' needs. This shift not only enhances the efficiency of English instruction but also reflects the broader impact of technological progress on education. By leveraging IT and ICT, English learning becomes more adaptable, allowing students to explore the language in ways that align with modern demands and global connectivity.

Proficiency in English offers substantial benefits, particularly in opening opportunities beyond national borders. For individuals who excel in the language, it serves as a gateway to international mobility, facilitating career advancement and personal growth in foreign countries (Sya & Helmanto, 2020a). English education in Indonesia begins at the primary school level and extends through university, underscoring its critical role in preparing students for future challenges. This long-term emphasis reflects the recognition that English is not merely an academic subject but a vital skill for navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

As a tool for communication and self-expression, mastery of English equips Indonesian students to compete globally, enhancing their prospects in diverse fields such as business, technology, and academia. Despite its widespread teaching, English remains a challenging language for many learners in Indonesia. According to Setyawan (2019), Indonesia's Human Development Index places it in a relatively low category in Asia, suggesting that the country's human resources, including language skills, require further development.

English proficiency is seen as a valuable asset for improving the quality of Indonesia's workforce, yet its mastery does not come easily to all. The difficulties stem from various factors, including limited exposure to the language outside the classroom and the complexity of its grammar and pronunciation (Susanthi, 2020). Nevertheless, English education aims to foster contextual and socially appropriate language skills, enabling students to use it effectively in real-life situations (Wijaya, 2015). This focus on practical application underscores the language's importance beyond academic achievement.

Language, in a broader sense, is an indispensable part of human life, serving as the primary means of conveying thoughts, emotions, and intentions to others. Without it, understanding one another would be nearly impossible, as it bridges the gap between individuals and their perspectives (Kurniati, 2016). In higher education, English as a foreign language is a compulsory subject for many students, reflecting its status as a global lingua franca (Syandri, 2023).

The study of English at this level is not just about linguistic competence but also about fostering cross-cultural communication and knowledge exchange. By engaging with English, students gain access to a wealth of global information, positioning them to interact meaningfully with people from diverse backgrounds. This role of English as a connector highlights its significance in both personal and professional spheres.

In Indonesia, English is predominantly taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, a distinction that shapes its instructional context. Unlike in regions like Hong Kong, where English is frequently used in daily life, Indonesian learners primarily encounter the language within the confines of formal education (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). This limited exposure poses unique challenges, as students rarely practice English outside the classroom, hindering their ability to use it as a natural communication tool.

As a result, the strategies employed by educators must compensate for this lack of real-world application by creating immersive and practical learning experiences within the classroom. The reliance on formal settings underscores the need for innovative approaches that simulate authentic language use, bridging the gap between academic lessons and functional proficiency.

Several factors impede the success of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia, necessitating strategic adjustments to overcome them. Research highlights issues such as inadequate teacher qualifications, limited language proficiency among instructors, oversized classrooms, low student motivation, and scarce learning resources (Sakkir, 2020). These challenges collectively undermine the effectiveness of EFL teaching, making it difficult to achieve desired outcomes.

For instance, a teacher with poor English skills may struggle to model correct pronunciation or grammar, while a lack of resources can restrict access to supplementary materials. Addressing these obstacles requires strategies that enhance teacher training, leverage available technology, and foster student engagement, ensuring that the learning process remains robust despite external limitations.

Government policies on EFL education in Indonesia have faced scrutiny for their shortcomings, further emphasizing the importance of well-designed strategies. Halim (2013) argues that the government's definition of professional teacher competence is overly narrow, failing to account for the broader social and professional context of teaching. Additionally, inconsistencies between policy and classroom practice have been noted, with Lie (2007) advocating for better-informed curriculum design and implementation to address these gaps.

The competency-based curriculum for junior and senior high schools, for example, aims to expose students to English texts and develop skills for future job opportunities. However, its success hinges on strategic execution that aligns with students' developmental stages and needs. At the elementary level, strategies focus on building foundational skills like vocabulary and pronunciation, which are critical for communication but often hampered by limited practice and fear of errors (Rahayu, 2013).

The challenges in mastering English stem from both internal and external factors, requiring strategies that address both dimensions. Internal factors, such as students' attitudes, motivation, focus, and study habits, interplay with external influences like teaching methods and classroom resources (Nurani et al., 2019). Among the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking and writing often pose significant difficulties due to issues with pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Nurwahidah & Herlina, 2015).

Strategies to improve these skills might include vocabulary drills, pronunciation practice, or structured writing tasks, all supported by a classroom environment that encourages experimentation without fear of ridicule. Ultimately, effective strategies not only target skill development but also cultivate a supportive learning culture, enabling students to overcome barriers and achieve fluency in English as a vital global language. The challenges of learning English persist despite its integration into Indonesia's educational system. Issues such as pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and listening comprehension remain common hurdles for students (Sya & Helmanto, 2020b).

These difficulties are often compounded by a lack of motivation or inadequate teaching strategies, which can hinder progress (Nurani et al., 2019). However, the classroom remains the most effective environment for overcoming these obstacles, provided it is supported by conducive conditions and engaged participants—

teachers, students, and appropriate materials alike (SUCANDRA et al., 2022). While technology and innovative methods have elevated the quality of English education, success ultimately depends on addressing both internal factors, such as student motivation, and external factors, like teaching resources. Thus, English learning in Indonesia is a multifaceted endeavor, balancing opportunity with ongoing challenges.

**Method**

The research employs a qualitative research type with a case study approach. Qualitative research focuses on an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon within its natural context, without manipulating variables as is typical in quantitative research. The case study approach emphasizes an intensive exploration of one or several specific cases—in this instance, the challenges of learning English—to produce a rich and detailed understanding.

Data Collection Techniques

Data is collected in groups, meaning the researcher involves participants (likely students or learners) in a collective setting to inquire about the challenges they face while learning English. Data collection is conducted directly by the researcher in the field through the following methods:

1. Observation: The researcher directly observes the training process to see how students of Tadris Bahasa Inggris in IAINU Bangil interact and encounter difficulties in learning English. This observation is naturalistic, meaning there is no intervention that alters the original situation.
2. Recording of student conversations: The researcher records students' verbal interactions during the training to obtain authentic data about how they communicate, the errors that arise, or the barriers they face in using English.
3. Collection of students' written work: The researcher requests students to submit written assignments, which are then analyzed to identify issues such as grammar, vocabulary, or sentence structure.

The data obtained from these methods is primary, as it comes directly from the original source (the students) through observation and interaction in the field. Additionally, the research utilizes secondary data, gathered through Library research such as books, journals, or scientific articles and interviews with students to enrich the context and support findings from the primary data.

Data Analysis

The collected data is then analyzed by the researcher to identify patterns, themes, or categories related to the challenges of learning English. This analysis is

qualitative, meaning it does not involve statistical calculations but rather a deep interpretation of the data's content. The results of the analysis are presented in a narrative or descriptive form, describing the findings in detailed textual explanations rather than numbers or graphs. This approach allows the researcher to tell the "story" of the data, such as how students experience specific difficulties and the factors influencing them.

**Results**

***Challenges in Learning English as a Foreign Language***

In the process of learning English, it is undeniable that students often face various obstacles that can hinder the achievement of optimal learning outcomes. These obstacles can stem from both internal and external factors that affect students' ability to understand and apply English effectively. Three main elements that frequently become challenges in learning English are pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. These three aspects play a fundamental role in developing language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. If students struggle with any of these aspects, their ability to communicate in English will be significantly hindered.

Pronunciation is one of the primary challenges in learning English. The ability to pronounce words correctly is crucial, as mispronunciations can lead to misunderstandings in communication. Many students struggle to distinguish certain sounds that do not exist in their native language. If pronunciation errors persist, students will have difficulty conveying information clearly to their interlocutors. Therefore, intensive and consistent pronunciation practice is essential to help students become familiar with the various sound variations in English.

In addition to pronunciation, mastering vocabulary is also a significant challenge for students learning English. The more vocabulary a student knows, the easier it is for them to understand and use English in various situations. However, many students struggle to expand their vocabulary due to a lack of exposure to English in their daily lives. They often find it difficult to remember and understand new words, especially when those words have multiple synonyms or different meanings depending on their usage context.

Another obstacle in learning English is grammar. The structure of the English language follows different rules from students' native languages, making it challenging for them to construct grammatically correct sentences. Every language has its own grammatical patterns, and for students who are accustomed to the structure of their regional language or Bahasa Indonesia, these differences can pose a significant challenge. A weak understanding of grammar can make it difficult for students to write and speak properly, as well as cause confusion in

comprehending English texts.

Internal factors also contribute to the challenges in learning English. Some of these internal factors include students' attitudes toward learning English, their level of motivation, concentration while studying, study habits, and self-confidence. If a student has a negative attitude toward English or lacks confidence in using the language, they are likely to struggle in developing their language skills. Additionally, poor concentration and ineffective study habits can slow down the process of understanding English.

Aside from internal factors, external factors also have a significant impact on the effectiveness of learning English. Some external factors that can hinder learning include the quality of teaching, students' social environment, school curriculum, and the availability of learning facilities. Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators in the learning process, so if a teacher lacks competence in teaching English or fails to provide sufficient motivation to students, their learning outcomes may be suboptimal. Furthermore, an unsupportive social environment, such as peers who lack interest in learning English, can also hinder students' language development.

Interviews with students of Tadris Bahasa Inggris in IAINU Bangil, such as those conducted at IAIN Bangil, indicate that the challenges of learning English are not limited to pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Many students admit to having difficulty understanding teachers' explanations during the learning process, especially when the teaching methods are unengaging or do not align with their learning styles. Additionally, inadequate facilities—such as limited access to technology or supporting materials—as well as negative peer influence, are common obstacles faced by students.

The role of teachers in the English learning process cannot be overlooked. Teachers are not only conveyors of material but also role models for students, both inside and outside the classroom. A teacher's personality and competence significantly influence students' interest and enthusiasm for learning. If a teacher fails to exhibit a positive attitude or lacks effective classroom management skills, students tend to lose motivation, struggle to grasp the material, and may even display disrespectful behavior. Conversely, an inspiring teacher can ignite students' enthusiasm for English through a creative and motivating approach.

Supporting facilities also have a significant impact on learning success. Learning aids such as flashcards, educational apps, language games, films, songs, and internet access can enrich students' learning experiences. However, if these facilities are unavailable or insufficient, the learning process can be hindered. Teachers and students must collaborate to overcome these limitations, for example, by creatively utilizing available resources. With maximum guidance from teachers, the lack of facilities can be transformed into an opportunity to foster independence and innovation in learning.

Peer influence, although not always a dominant factor, can also affect the English learning process. Classmates encountered in school environments can serve as either a source of support or a distraction, depending on the dynamics of student relationships. While friendships in school are temporary, choosing a positive circle of friends can help students stay motivated and focused on their learning goals. On the other hand, negative peer influence can exacerbate existing challenges, such as a lack of concentration or enthusiasm for learning.

Overall, learning English involves a complex and diverse set of challenges, ranging from mastering language elements to external factors such as motivation, teachers, facilities, and the social environment. The four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—require full support from all these aspects to develop optimally. Therefore, overcoming these obstacles requires collaboration between students, teachers, and the surrounding environment to create a conducive and effective learning atmosphere, making English no longer seem difficult but rather an engaging tool for communication.

### *Solutions to Overcome Difficulties in Learning English*

To address the challenges students, face in learning English, various factors need to be considered, including the role of teaching media and the learning environment. One significant issue is the lack of adequate teaching media, which directly impacts students' interest in learning. Teachers often have to prepare their own teaching materials, which inadvertently increases their personal expenses. Despite this additional burden, many teachers remain passionate and delighted to teach their students. However, they are frequently left to shoulder this responsibility alone, even though it should ideally fall under the school's obligation to provide an optimal teaching atmosphere. The absence of proper resources forces educators to get creative, but this is not a sustainable solution for fostering effective language learning.

Another critical challenge is the lack of essential facilities, such as language laboratories and standardized libraries. Over time, language labs have gradually disappeared from many schools, and libraries often fail to meet the necessary standards to support English learning. These shortcomings hinder students' ability to immerse themselves in the language and practice it effectively. Schools are responsible for ensuring that such facilities are available to create an ideal learning environment, yet many fail to do so. This gap in infrastructure exacerbates the difficulties students encounter, making it harder for them to develop confidence and proficiency in English.

Community service programs offer a potential solution by sparking students' interest in learning English. These initiatives can provide alternative avenues for engagement, encouraging students to participate actively in language activities.

According to Darsiana (2018), several factors contribute to why students find English challenging. First, their speaking skills are often underdeveloped due to a lack of familiarity with the language. Second, some students remain hesitant or even silent when prompted to speak in English, despite having a basic grasp of vocabulary that should enable them to form simple sentences. Third, many struggle with communication because they find speaking English inherently difficult, further compounding their reluctance to practice.

To overcome these difficulties, creating a comfortable and supportive learning environment is paramount. The first step is to improve the learning atmosphere—students should not feel pressured or stressed while studying English. Teachers must foster a space where learners feel encouraged to experiment with the language without fear of judgment. A positive environment can significantly boost motivation and participation, allowing students to take risks and make mistakes as part of the learning process. When students feel at ease, they are more likely to engage actively and develop their skills over time.

Another key strategy is to emphasize consistent practice and vocabulary building. Students should never shy away from memorizing new words, as expanding their vocabulary is crucial for effective communication. The more words they know, the easier it becomes to express themselves in English. Teachers Ascertaining new vocabulary can begin with everyday life—using English in casual conversations with friends or creating a study schedule in English—helps students gradually become more familiar with the language. Regular practice, such as speaking to oneself in front of a mirror, also builds confidence and fluency over time.

In addition to these foundational steps, there are several practical ways to enhance English skills. One effective method is reading English literature, such as newspapers, magazines, novels, or graphic novels. While comprehension may be challenging at first, persistent reading helps students grow accustomed to sentence structures and word choices. Another approach is observing English in use—watching English-language films or listening to songs and interpreting the dialogue or lyrics in an enjoyable way. These activities make learning feel less like a chore and more like a natural part of daily life.

Finally, writing and speaking practice, along with leveraging technology, can accelerate progress. Writing simple sentences or journal entries in English, even with imperfect grammar, helps students get comfortable with the language; over time, they can refine their skills by identifying and correcting mistakes. Speaking practice is equally vital students should focus on conveying their thoughts clearly, even if their grammar isn't perfect, as the primary goal of language is communication. Using games and social media also offers an engaging way to learn—interacting with English-speaking friends online or playing games with English dialogue exposes students to new vocabulary and real-world usage.

Keeping a small notebook or digital note on a phone to jot down unfamiliar words ensures steady growth in language mastery.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight that learning English as a foreign language is hindered by linguistic, psychological, and environmental barriers. Pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and challenges in grammar comprehension significantly impact students' confidence and communication skills. Additionally, external factors such as teaching methods, peer influence, and limited access to English resources further complicate the learning process. Despite these challenges, the study identifies several effective strategies, including the use of multimedia tools, group discussions, and contextual learning techniques, which help students overcome their difficulties. To enhance language acquisition, educators should implement interactive teaching approaches and create an encouraging learning environment. Future research can explore the long-term impact of these strategies on students' English proficiency.

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