

## **INVESTIGATING OBSTACLES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS**

**Badarch Baigal**

Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages  
Mongolian University of Science and Technology  
(Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia)

*Цель данной статьи – исследовать сложности, возникающие у первокурсников при изучении английского языка, который является одним из основных предметов для студентов языковых специальностей Монгольского университета науки и техники.*

**Ключевые слова:** первокурсники, трудности обучения, стратегии обучения.

*First-year students are beginners or novices, who are naïve students in their first year in higher educational institutions. This paper aims to investigate freshmen's obstacles*

*in learning the English language which is one of the core subjects for language-majoring students in Mongolian University of Science and Technology (MUST). Thirty-three first-year students from the School of Foreign Languages, MUST participated in this study. The data was collected through closed and open-ended questionnaires. The findings of the study revealed that students would like to improve their vocabulary knowledge rather than grammar structure. Moreover, the study showed that students are not experienced in learning independently as learning motivation is vital in learning process.*

**Keywords:** freshmen, learning difficulties, teaching strategies.

The teaching and learning process have expanded beyond the traditional classroom walls and now more than ever, effective teaching of first-year university students (FYSS) begins with understanding who they are, where they come from, their current state of intellectual development, their learning styles [2], and the adjustments they have to make as well the coping strategies they will need to have to succeed at institutions of higher education. First year students need help to adapt and adjust to academic, social, personal-emotional, institutional goals and commitments, as classroom instruction is undergoing a new change in emphasis. The focus in educating students has shifted from being teacher-centered to becoming more learning-centered.

Mongolia as the land of blue sky, while playing host to fast food, the Internet and international cinema, is now also undergoing social and systemic upheaval, a common phenomenon that many other newly independent nations face. With these upheavals, changes and transformation, Mongolians are also experiencing linguistic challenges especially with English [1]. The importance of the English language has arisen constantly since establishment democracy of 1990 in Mongolia. In accordance with this Mongolia began to expand its foreign affairs with western countries in various sectors of the country. One of these is the mining sector that has attracted many foreign companies due to the country's giant mineral resource deposits. Many new job vacancies for engineers, technicians, interpreters, etc., positions which are able to get a good salary compared to domestic companies began to exist. Therefore, the number of high school graduates who want to become translators of foreign languages particularly the English language has arisen for the last two decades. In fact, the profession of technical translator is often in the first five of the most desired jobs in Mongolia [6]. A foreign language is language that is learned in an area where that language is not generally spoken. Hence, learning English as a primary foreign language in Mongolia is a long period of process that often abides difficulties in order to having more productive and efficient learning outcome.

Since becoming a university student is a transitional period for high school graduates, the more that teachers know about the first-year students' social and academic backgrounds and abilities, the better they are able to help them to overcome difficulties and to provide better learning outcomes for the learners. There-

fore, teachers should consider knowing first-year students as who they really are and intentionally provide them with the needed academic support throughout their first year at their universities.

Annually, 30-40 students enter the School of Foreign Languages, Mongolian University of Science and Technology to pursue a degree in technical translating. However, after studying four years in a university, relatively few students graduate with this degree. Apparently, several factors influence this change a lack of family support not being able to afford course tuition not having the additional expenses to maintain the learning process, a lack of a student motivation in studying at a university, getting a degree by a chosen major, transferring to other affiliated schools, dropping out from school without any excuse, starting a family and taking an approved year off [5]. Thus, teachers need to provide first-year students with appropriate strategies in order to diminish the above mentioned issues and encourage students to overcome obstacles in learning and to finish university successfully in a given period of time.

Teaching is most effective when what is taught is tailored to suit the specific audience it is meant for. The teachers aware about the FYS's social and academic background and abilities more, the better they are able to help them to learn what they are expected to learn. Hence, the society's general vision about language learning, the learner's past educational and personal experiences influences the formation of learners' beliefs and language learning culture [3].

The teacher is the most important factor in the entire system of pedagogical activities. In this case, the education and training of teachers is always needed for effective learning outcomes [5]. Engaging teachers in professional development programs continuously is required in order to deliver more effective and productive teaching performance [4].

Motivation is one of the prevailing factors affecting students' performance of English language learning, which has widely concerned foreign language teachers and experts for a long time. In language learning, motivation is not only an intense desire to learn and acquire foreign language, but also inner desire that pushes students forward in language learning with enthusiasm and willingness [4]. In foreign language learning, motivation influences greatly in having achievements [4]. It was noticed that most students had failed to learn a target language due to lack of motivation so that family support and external communication among the family are very important for the high school graduates to select their future major.

According to Raju and Joshith's study both students and teachers are failed to introduce new words in classroom and are stick on the mother tongue. Also, teachers are rush to complete their syllabus thus students don't get exact aim of target language learning. Poor vocabulary is the result of lack of oral practice in

the classroom [8].

Current studies state that teaching grammar implicitly by exposing the learners to comprehensive input [7]. Though most of the learners are not really keen on being taught grammar, many teachers find the integration of grammar instruction with the activities is effective.

In this study, the quantitative approach was used as a research method. A total 33 (11 male; 22 female), first-year students participated in the study. The data were collected through closed and open-ended questions and were analyzed in the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 program. The questionnaire was adapted from Khan's study in 2016. The students were properly informed about the research, its aim, and the content of the questions. They were also informed that any personal information gathered would be kept confidential and no individual would be identified in any publication of the findings.

#### Demographics of participants

In the study thirty-three (11 male; 22 female) first-year students participated. The age range of the respondents was between 17–22 years old with the majority mean age being 18, the usual age range of the first- students in a tertiary level. Twenty-two (67%) students were from rural area and eleven (33%) are from urban area. Out of 33 respondents 32 took an English language test for their university entrance exam and ten (30%) of them received 650-780 score out of 800, while twenty-one (63%) received a score between 400-650 out of 800 points. Regarding to the amount of credit hours of English language courses taught in the first semester of the university, most respondents 33 (91%) are satisfied with.

Table 1. The gender of participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Male	11	33.3	33.3
Female	22	66.7	66.7
Total	33	100.0	100.0

Table 2. Student self-evaluation of English language proficiency

English language proficiency	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
very bad	2	6.1	6.1
bad	9	27.3	27.3
average	17	51.5	51.5
very good	4	12.1	12.1
Unanswered	1	3.0	3.0
Total	33	100.0	100.0

Most of the respondents twenty-eight (85%) have more than 5 years of English language learning experience beginning from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade in high school. While most respondents have quite long period of language learning experience, twenty-eight (85%) of them have evaluated their language proficiency average or less than average.

Table 3. Barriers of learning English language in a university

Barriers	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Personal	20	60.6	6.1
Family	3	9.1	27.3
University	5	15.1	51.5
Unanswered	5	15.2	15.2
Total	28	100.0	100.0

Table 3 shows the barriers that students face students. A number of participants (f=20) have indicated that they have difficulty because of their personal barriers, family, school and teaching. According to the respondents' answers the barriers can be grouped as: personal barriers (f=20), family barrier (f=3) and teaching and lesson material barriers (5). Of the thirty-three respondents only few (f=5) students didn't respond to this question. Regarding to family support only (f=4) respondents revealed that their family don't sustain for their studies in terms of finances and emotional support.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of obstacles to learning English

Obstacles	Responses	Frequency	Percent
Personal	vocabulary knowledge is weak	7	21.0
	background language knowledge is poor (understand lessons but sometimes confuse to use grammar; I don't understand the lesson so it's difficult for me to study)	9	27.0
	not able to manage time (waste time)	7	21.0
	I don't revise my lessons more often (busy with outdoor class activities; not interested in language much)	9	27.0
	students' language level is different so it's difficult to work in a team	4	12.0

Teaching and learning material	Instructor needs to work with every single students	3	9.0
	Instructor needs to focus on improving students' vocabulary knowledge than exaggerated grammar	4	12.0
	Course syllabus is not good	2	6.0
	Not enough textbooks and other materials	3	9.0

Table 4 reveals that first-year students often face difficulties towards learning language because of their personal reasons. They responded that due to the weak background language and lack of vocabulary knowledge are the main factors in having difficulties in the learning process. Also, they stated that because of time management, self-confidence, motivation, anxiety and autonomous learning skills they encounter barriers in learning more often which has led some of them to become demotivated and passive learners.

Table 5. Recommendations to improve language teaching performance in the university

Recommendations	Frequency	Percent
1. to have native-speaking teachers	3	9.1
2. to interact more in English during lesson	4	12.1
3. to provide enough textbooks to the students	4	12.1
4. to improve students' self-motivation	4	12.1
5. to teach lesson more interesting ways	5	15.2
6. instructor needs to focus on improving students' vocabulary skill	7	21.2
7. instructor needs to take tests more often	1	3.0
8. instructor needs to work with weak students	1	3.0
Unanswered	29	87.9
Total	33	100.0

The participants in the study have recommended the above mentioned responses as the ways to overcome obstacles in learning English language and perceive to have better learning outcome.

The findings of the study can be useful for foreign language teachers since they have to deal with the obstacles their students experience while learning a foreign language. Knowing the factors that hinder each student's language learning experience may help instructors to prevent the problems by applying appropriate methods and techniques in their teaching performance. The students can also be informed about the difficulties that they may face while learning the target language so that they would be prepared and not feel disappointed or unmotivated during the process. The results should also be shared with the course curriculum makers so that appropriate precautions can be taken while preparing

the foreign language curriculum. In order to develop the learning outcome and overcome barriers not only teachers and schools but also parents must encourage their children with internal and external support.

### References

1. Cohen, R. The Current Status of English Education in Mongolia / R. Cohen [Electronic resource]. – 2005. – Mode of access: <https://www.asian-efl-journal.com/1422/quarterly-journal/the-current-status-of-english-education-in-mongolia/#squelch-taas-tab-content-0-3>. – Date of access: 13.11.2020.

2. Erickson, B. L. Teaching College Freshmen / B.L. Erickson, D.W. Strommer. – San Francisco : Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993. – 249 p.

3. Gabillion, Z. L2 Learner's Beliefs: An overview / Z. Gabillion // Journal of Language and Learning. – 2005. – № 3(2). – P. 233–260.

4. Gardner, R. C. The role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning: Correlation and experimental considerations / R.C. Gardner, R.N. Lalonde, R. Moortcroft. – London : Language Learning, 1985. – P. 207–227.

5. Khan, I. A. Barriers in the learning of English: An exploratory study / I.A. Khan // British journal of education, society and behavioral science. – 2016. – № 15(2). – P. 1–10.

6. Mongolian recruitment agency report, 2011 [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: [https://www.ilo.org/wemsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_emp/--emp\\_ent/--ifp\\_seed/documents/publication/wems\\_164526.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wemsp5/groups/public/-ed_emp/--emp_ent/--ifp_seed/documents/publication/wems_164526.pdf). – Date of access: 15.11.2020.

7. Orhan Kocaman. Factors impeding the learning of a second language in Spanish school system: Valladolid University Sample / Orhan Kocaman // Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies. – 2017. – № 13(2). – P. 578–592.

8. Raju, N. Adversities and obstacles in learning English as a second language in Indian context / N. Raju, V.P. Joshith // International Journal of Advanced Education and Research. – 2017. – № 2(4). – P. 48–51.