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Challenges of Developing English Receptive and Productive Skills among Libyan University Students: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges encountered by Libyan university students in acquiring English language skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The primary objective is to identify the main factors causing these challenges and explore potential solutions. A quantitative research design was employed, using a self-developed questionnaire consisting of twenty closed-ended questions. The sample included fifty English language students randomly selected from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the most common difficulties faced by students. Findings revealed that students experienced significant challenges in listening and speaking due to limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and inadequate classroom interaction. Writing difficulties were primarily linked to poor grammar and spelling, while reading challenges stemmed from insufficient educational background and lack of motivation. The study recommends adopting communicative and student-centered approaches to enhance language skill development. These findings provide insights for educators and policymakers to improve English language teaching practices in Libyan higher education contexts.

Keywords:
EFL learners, language skills, challenges, Libya, quantitative study

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الملخص

تستقصي هذه الدراسة التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعات الليبية في اكتساب مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية، والتي تشمل مهارات الاستماع والقراءة والتحدث والكتابة. ويتمثل الهدف الرئيس للدراسة في تحديد العوامل الأساسية المسببة لهذه التحديات واستكشاف الحلول المحتملة لمعالجتها. اعتمدت الدراسة على منهج البحث الكمي، حيث تم استخدام استبيان من إعداد الباحثة يتكوّن من عشرين سؤالًا مغلقًا. شملت العينة خمسين طالبًا وطالبة من دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية، تم اختيارهم عشوائيًا من كلية الآداب والعلوم بجامعة بنغازي – فرع الأبيار. جرى تحليل البيانات باستخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية لتحديد أكثر الصعوبات شيوعًا التي يواجهها الطلاب. كشفت النتائج أن الطلاب يعانون من صعوبات كبيرة في مهارتي الاستماع والتحدث، ويرجع ذلك إلى محدودية المفردات، والخوف من ارتكاب الأخطاء، ونقص الثقة بالنفس، وضعف التفاعل داخل الفصل الدراسي. كما ارتبطت صعوبات الكتابة بضعف القواعد النحوية والإملائية، في حين كانت صعوبات القراءة ناجمة عن ضعف الخلفية التعليمية وقلة الدافعية. توصي الدراسة باعتماد أساليب تدريس تواصلية تتمحور حول الطالب لتعزيز تنمية مهارات اللغة. وتوفر هذه النتائج رؤى مهمة يمكن أن يستفيد منها المعلمون وصنّاع السياسات لتحسين ممارسات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي الليبية

الكلمات المفتاحية:

متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مهارات اللغة، التحديات، ليبيا، دراسة كمية

1. Introduction

English, as the world's foremost lingua franca (Crystal, 2003), has become indispensable in the twenty-first century for intercultural communication, academic advancement, and professional mobility. Mastery of English is no longer confined to elite circles but is increasingly viewed as a prerequisite for participation in globalized knowledge economies and for access to international educational opportunities. Within this framework, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are expected to develop proficiency across four interdependent skill domains: receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). The integration of these skills enables learners not only to comprehend and interpret language input but also to generate coherent and contextually appropriate output, thereby facilitating genuine communicative competence.

Despite this global emphasis, EFL learners in underrepresented and resource-limited contexts face persistent challenges in acquiring these skills. Libya, situated within the broader Arab world and undergoing sociopolitical transitions, presents a particularly

complex case. In the Libyan higher education system, English is recognized as a critical subject for academic and professional development. However, students' progress is hindered by intersecting linguistic, affective, and sociocultural barriers. These include minimal authentic exposure to English outside of classrooms, teaching practices dominated by teacher-centered pedagogies and rote memorization, and systemic limitations such as outdated curricular materials, inadequate access to technology, and inconsistent teacher training.

In tertiary education specifically, these challenges become more pronounced. University students are expected to engage in advanced reading of academic texts, produce extended writing assignments, participate in oral discussions, and comprehend lectures or media in English. Yet, the absence of communicative learning environments, coupled with limited opportunities for authentic language use, leaves many learners unable to transfer classroom knowledge into real-life communicative performance. Furthermore, affective factors—such as language anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation—exacerbate difficulties in oral communication. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the dominance of Arabic in public and academic life further reduces opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with English outside formal instruction.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to systematically examine the obstacles Libyan university students encounter in mastering the four core English skills. More specifically, it seeks to (a) identify the most salient challenges across listening, reading, speaking, and writing; (b) investigate the extent to which teacher practices and pedagogical approaches contribute to these difficulties; and (c) analyze the broader curricular and sociocultural factors shaping students' experiences. The research is guided by three central questions:

1. What are the most common difficulties faced by students in developing listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills?
2. Which skill is perceived as the most difficult by students?
3. To what extent does the teaching style contribute to these difficulties?

The significance of this study is twofold. First, at the pedagogical level, it provides English language instructors with evidence-based insights into the practical and

psychological barriers their students face, allowing them to design targeted, context-responsive interventions. Such interventions might include shifting from grammar-dominated approaches to communicative and learner-centered methodologies, increasing opportunities for peer interaction, and integrating multimedia resources to simulate authentic exposure. Second, at the policy level, the study highlights systemic challenges—such as gaps in teacher training, assessment misalignment, and resource scarcity—that require strategic reform at the national level. Policymakers may draw on the findings to allocate resources more effectively, initiate professional development programs, and revise curricula to better align with international standards of communicative competence.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on improving English language education in post-conflict and resource-limited contexts. By situating Libyan learners' experiences within global discourses on EFL challenges, it not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers practical pathways to enhance equitable access to quality English instruction. In doing so, it aims to empower Libyan university students to achieve communicative competence that aligns with international academic and professional demands, thereby strengthening their participation in the global knowledge community

2. Literature Review

Contemporary research on the Communicative Approach (CA) underscores its sustained efficacy in fostering learners' pragmatic and intercultural competencies, particularly within technology-enhanced and multilingual contexts. Recent studies (e.g., Nguyen, 2020; Sato, 2023) demonstrate that learners engaged in meaning-driven tasks—such as virtual simulations or collaborative digital projects—exhibit heightened motivation, fluency, and real-world communicative agility compared to traditional methods. This evidence has further refined understandings of pedagogical roles: teachers now act as "designers of interactional spaces" (Kumaravadivelu, 2018), curating blended or flipped environments to prioritize authentic communication (Chen & Wang, 2022), while learners co-construct knowledge as autonomous negotiators of meaning (Smith &

González-Lloret, 2022). Nevertheless, critical scholarship highlights persistent tensions. Fernández (2021) cautions that an overemphasis on fluency may marginalize grammatical accuracy and vulnerable learners, while Park (2023) notes how standardized assessments often reduce communicative tasks to formulaic exercises. Furthermore, critiques of CA's Western-centric assumptions (López, 2023) advocate for decolonial adaptations that center local linguistic practices. In response, hybrid models integrating translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) and critical language awareness (Pennycook, 2021) are emerging, affirming CA's adaptability yet urging contextually grounded implementations. Reading difficulties in EFL learners typically stem from interrelated factors: insufficient vocabulary knowledge, underdeveloped comprehension strategies, and limited meaningful practice. Contemporary research confirms that vocabulary remains a critical predictor of reading success; learners require knowledge of 98% of words in a text for adequate comprehension (Nation, 2020). Beyond vocabulary size, difficulties arise when learners lack metacognitive strategies (e.g., monitoring understanding, questioning texts) or awareness of text structures (Grabe & Jiang, 2018). Crucially, as Snow (2017) reaffirms, background knowledge significantly facilitates comprehension—yet EFL learners often struggle to activate relevant schemata due to cultural or curricular gaps. Limited practice opportunities further compound these issues, particularly when reading tasks lack authenticity or fail to build fluency through repeated exposure (Jeon & Yamashita, 2022).

Contemporary research underscores the Communicative Approach's (CA) sustained efficacy in fostering pragmatic and intercultural competencies, particularly within technology-enhanced classrooms (Nguyen, 2020; Sato, 2023). Studies demonstrate that learners engaged in digital task-based activities (e.g., virtual simulations, online collaboration) exhibit heightened motivation and fluency compared to traditional settings (Sato, 2023), though efficacy remains context-dependent (Lee, 2021). This evidence reframes teacher roles as designers of interactional spaces who scaffold authentic communication through flipped models and curated digital resources (Kumaravadivelu, 2018; Chen & Wang, 2022), while learners act as co-constructors of knowledge via peer feedback and reflection (Smith & González-Lloret, 2022). However, scholars caution against uncritical CA adoption, citing tensions between fluency-accuracy

balance (Fernández, 2021), standardized testing constraints (Park, 2023), and Western-centric assumptions that marginalize local linguistic repertoires (López, 2023). These critiques drive emerging hybrid pedagogies integrating CA with translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) and critical language awareness (Pennycook, 2021), adapting the approach to 21st-century multilingual realities.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design, as such an approach provides measurable data and allows for the identification of recurring patterns in a given population. The choice of a quantitative framework was guided by the study's aim of exploring the extent and nature of the difficulties Libyan EFL students face when attempting to develop their receptive and productive skills. By relying on numerical data, the study was able to generate generalizable findings and move beyond purely descriptive accounts of students' experiences.

The participants were fifty undergraduate students enrolled in the English Department at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. They were drawn from the second and third years of study, since these groups were assumed to have had sufficient exposure to the English curriculum to provide informed reflections on the challenges of language learning. A simple random sampling procedure was employed to ensure that all students within the target population had an equal chance of selection, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample. The participants reflected a degree of diversity in terms of gender and academic ability, which contributed to the robustness of the findings.

Data were gathered using a self-designed structured questionnaire consisting of twenty closed-ended questions. The items were evenly distributed across the four language domains: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. For instance, questions on listening addressed issues such as speech rate, unfamiliar accents, and pronunciation, while items on reading explored comprehension barriers, vocabulary limitations, and the lack of background knowledge. Speaking-related questions focused on psychological factors including shyness, anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, whereas writing items investigated difficulties with grammar, spelling, organization, and coherence. A Likert-

scale format (ranging from strongly agree to disagree) was used to capture the intensity of students' perceptions and to provide data amenable to statistical analysis.

The questionnaires were administered during regular class sessions in order to maximize response rates and ensure a consistent environment for all participants. Students were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential. They were given adequate time to complete the instrument independently, and the completed forms were collected immediately after to maintain data integrity.

Once collected, the responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each item, and the findings were presented in both tabular and graphical forms, including bar charts and pie charts, to enhance clarity and facilitate interpretation. This approach allowed the researchers to highlight not only the overall prevalence of difficulties across the four skill areas but also the relative weight assigned to each type of challenge by the students themselves.

To enhance the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot version was tested with a small group of students from the same department who were not included in the final sample. Their feedback was used to refine ambiguous wording and to improve the clarity of the instrument. Validity was ensured through expert review, as two faculty members specializing in applied linguistics evaluated the questionnaire and confirmed that the items adequately represented the constructs under investigation.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Students were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and their anonymity was preserved by excluding any identifying information from the instrument. The data were used exclusively for academic purposes, and the study was conducted with respect for the rights and dignity of all participants

4. Results

The analysis of the questionnaire responses provided a comprehensive picture of the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL students in the development of their four core language skills. The findings revealed a clear hierarchy of challenges, with listening emerging as

the most problematic area, followed by speaking, writing, and finally reading. Each skill was associated with distinctive sets of obstacles that highlight both linguistic and non-linguistic factors shaping students' learning experiences.

Listening was consistently reported as the most difficult skill, with 58% of the participants indicating significant challenges in this domain. Students explained that their difficulties stemmed largely from their inability to follow speech delivered at a natural pace, their limited familiarity with different English accents, and the scarcity of opportunities to engage with authentic listening materials such as podcasts, films, or lectures by native speakers. These factors combined to create a learning environment in which listening remained a passive rather than interactive activity, leaving students unable to transfer classroom instruction into real-life comprehension. The reliance on scripted audio materials in textbooks, often delivered at slower-than-natural rates, further reinforced this gap between classroom practice and real-world communicative demands. Speaking was identified as the second most challenging skill, reflecting the interplay of psychological and pedagogical barriers. Many students reported feelings of shyness, language anxiety, and a persistent fear of negative evaluation when required to speak in front of peers or instructors. This was compounded by the limited practice opportunities available within the classroom, where oral participation is often restricted to responding to teacher-led questions rather than engaging in interactive communicative tasks. Students expressed that the dominance of grammar-focused instruction and the absence of a supportive, low-anxiety environment constrained their ability to develop fluency and confidence in oral expression. The results suggest that the challenges in speaking are not purely linguistic but are deeply rooted in affective factors that inhibit risk-taking and active participation.

Writing difficulties were also prominent, with 52% of participants acknowledging that weak grammar had a direct and negative impact on their ability to produce coherent texts. Many students reported that their written work suffered from frequent grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, and poor organization of ideas. While spelling was less frequently identified as a critical barrier, it nonetheless contributed to the overall perception of writing as a demanding skill. The findings indicate that students often struggle not only with sentence-level accuracy but also with higher-order writing skills

such as cohesion, coherence, and logical structuring of arguments. This suggests that writing instruction may be disproportionately focused on correcting surface-level errors without sufficiently addressing the development of critical and analytical writing skills necessary for academic success.

Reading was generally perceived as the least problematic skill compared to the other three domains. However, this does not imply the absence of challenges. A notable proportion of students reported difficulties with comprehension, particularly when confronted with texts requiring background knowledge they did not possess. Vocabulary limitations also constrained their ability to grasp the meaning of longer or more complex texts. Moreover, some students indicated that the lack of instructional support—such as explicit teaching of reading strategies or scaffolding to activate prior knowledge—further hindered their ability to approach academic texts confidently. While reading difficulties were not as pronounced as those in listening, speaking, or writing, the findings highlight that comprehension remains an area where additional pedagogical attention is required.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that listening and speaking represent the most significant challenges for Libyan EFL learners, followed closely by writing, while reading is perceived as relatively more manageable. This distribution of difficulties underscores the impact of limited authentic exposure to English, the persistence of teacher-centered instructional methods, and the interplay of linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors in shaping language learning outcomes.

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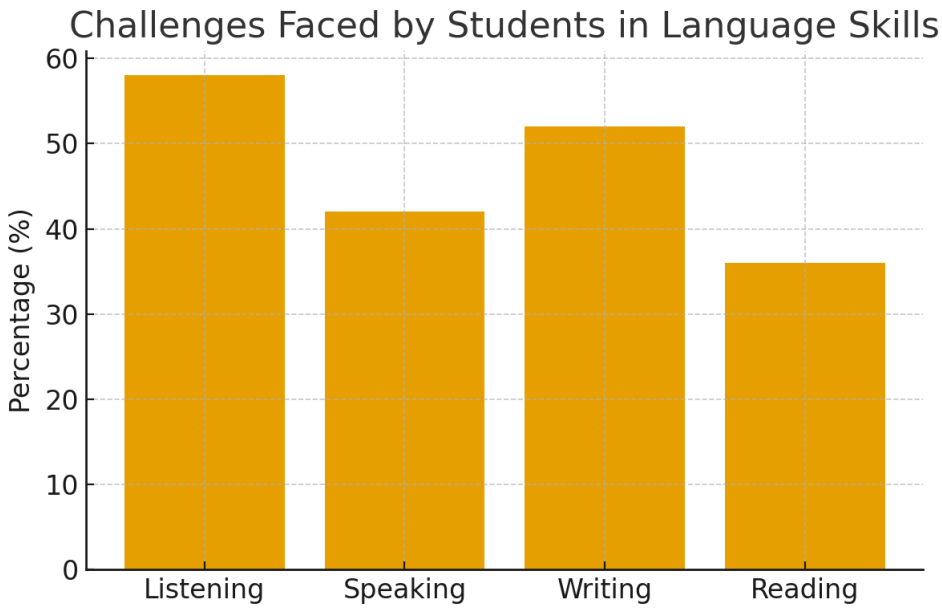


Figure 1: Distribution of challenges across the four language skills.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the complexity of challenges encountered by Libyan EFL learners and echo the difficulties documented in broader literature on second and foreign language learning. Listening and speaking emerged as the most problematic skills, reflecting the limited opportunities for authentic communication in Libyan classrooms. This aligns with Rajab (2013), who underscored the negative impact of teacher-centered instruction and the overemphasis on grammar drills. Within the Libyan higher education context, where English is rarely used outside academic settings, the lack of communicative classroom practices intensifies the problem, leaving students unprepared to comprehend natural speech or express themselves fluently.

Psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and shyness—widely noted by Juhana (2012)—were also reported in this study as major inhibitors of oral participation. These affective factors are amplified in classrooms where accuracy is prioritized over fluency and where students' errors are often highlighted rather than used as opportunities for constructive feedback. To address these challenges, educators must be encouraged to create low-anxiety, student-centered environments that foster participation. Practical interventions could include pair and group work, role-play

activities, and fluency-oriented speaking tasks that allow students to experiment with language without the fear of harsh correction.

Writing difficulties, largely tied to grammar and vocabulary limitations as well as weak organizational skills, mirror the findings of Ahmed (2010), who observed recurring cohesion and coherence issues in Arab EFL learners' essays. The persistence of such problems indicates that writing instruction in Libyan universities may be too narrowly focused on form at the expense of process. Teachers should therefore be supported to adopt process-oriented writing instruction, where drafting, peer review, and revision are emphasized. Moreover, providing targeted writing workshops that integrate grammar instruction with practical composition tasks could strengthen both accuracy and creativity.

Although reading was perceived as relatively less problematic, students nevertheless identified comprehension issues related to limited vocabulary and the absence of effective reading strategies. Snow et al. (1998) highlighted the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension, and the present findings suggest that many Libyan students lack sufficient exposure to diverse texts that would activate prior knowledge. To mitigate this, universities should invest in extensive reading programs and encourage teachers to adopt strategy-based reading instruction, equipping students with tools such as skimming, scanning, and inference-making.

Beyond the classroom, the results highlight systemic barriers to language acquisition, including resource scarcity, outdated curricula, and insufficient teacher training. These challenges call for policy-level interventions. At the institutional level, there is an urgent need for curriculum reform that aligns course content with communicative objectives rather than rote memorization. Policymakers should also prioritize professional development programs for English language instructors, focusing on communicative methodologies, technology integration, and learner-centered practices. In addition, universities should expand access to modern teaching resources, such as multimedia labs, digital platforms, and online collaboration tools, which can expose learners to authentic input and interactive tasks.

A particularly important implication of this study is the need for collaboration between educators and policymakers. Teachers alone cannot resolve systemic challenges

without institutional support. For example, while instructors may recognize the value of communicative language teaching, its successful implementation requires smaller class sizes, updated textbooks, and continuous training—all of which depend on administrative and governmental support. This research thus underscores the necessity of addressing challenges not only at the micro-level of classroom pedagogy but also at the macro-level of educational planning and policy.

In conclusion, the study highlights that addressing EFL learning challenges in Libya requires a twofold strategy: pedagogical innovation at the classroom level and systemic reform at the institutional and national levels. By equipping teachers with modern methodologies, providing students with opportunities for authentic interaction, and ensuring that curricula and resources align with global standards, Libyan higher education can better prepare learners to meet the communicative demands of academic and professional life.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate the challenges encountered by Libyan EFL students in the development of the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The findings revealed a consistent pattern that reflects both linguistic and contextual barriers to effective language acquisition. Listening and speaking emerged as the most problematic skills, with students reporting significant difficulty in comprehending natural speech, coping with different accents, and expressing themselves fluently in classroom discussions. These difficulties were found to be strongly associated with psychological barriers such as shyness, lack of confidence, and the pervasive fear of making mistakes. The findings highlight the extent to which affective factors can undermine communicative performance, particularly in contexts where opportunities for authentic language use are scarce.

Writing was also identified as a major area of concern. Students consistently reported struggles with grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and the logical organization of ideas. These findings suggest that writing instruction in the Libyan context may be overly focused on accuracy at the sentence level, without adequately addressing the broader discourse-level skills necessary for producing coherent academic texts. In contrast,

reading was generally perceived as less problematic than the other skills, but students nonetheless indicated difficulties with comprehension, particularly when background knowledge was lacking or when instructional support in strategy use was insufficient. Together, these results illustrate the interconnectedness of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors in shaping the learning experiences of EFL students.

The significance of these findings extends beyond individual learners to the wider educational system. The study underscores the limitations of traditional, teacher-centered methods that prioritize rote learning and grammar memorization over meaningful communication. In a context like Libya, where English is rarely used outside academic settings, the absence of communicative, interactive practices within classrooms leaves students ill-prepared to transfer their learning to real-world contexts. At the same time, the findings point to systemic issues—such as outdated curricula, insufficient teaching resources, and limited professional development opportunities for instructors—that contribute to the persistence of these challenges.

Drawing on these insights, several recommendations can be made to address the challenges identified in this study. First, there is a pressing need to adopt communicative and student-centered teaching methodologies. Teachers should be encouraged and trained to design lessons that emphasize interaction, problem-solving, and authentic use of language rather than rote memorization of grammar rules. Activities such as pair work, group discussions, role-plays, and task-based learning can create an environment in which students feel more confident to practice speaking and listening.

Second, students must be given more opportunities to engage with authentic materials that expose them to natural language use. Incorporating English-language films, podcasts, songs, and online lectures into classroom activities can help bridge the gap between textbook English and real-world communication. Likewise, creating spaces for student-led discussions, debates, and presentations can gradually reduce anxiety and build confidence in speaking.

Third, writing instruction should be restructured to follow a process-oriented approach. Instead of focusing solely on correcting grammatical errors, teachers should guide students through the stages of brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Peer review activities and writing workshops can further develop students' ability to organize

ideas and produce coherent, well-structured texts. At the same time, targeted reading programs should be introduced to help students expand vocabulary, strengthen comprehension, and develop critical reading strategies.

Fourth, the integration of technology into language learning is vital. Language learning applications, online discussion platforms, and digital resources can provide students with additional practice outside the classroom. These tools not only offer opportunities for individualized learning but also expose students to a wider variety of English input, thereby supporting the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills simultaneously.

Finally, there is a need for further research that explores effective intervention strategies and evaluates their impact on EFL learners in the Libyan context. Future studies could focus on longitudinal assessments of communicative teaching approaches, the role of technology in language acquisition, or the effects of affective strategies on reducing language anxiety. Such research would provide valuable evidence to guide both pedagogical practices and policy reforms.

In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to improving English language education in Libya. Addressing the identified challenges requires not only pedagogical innovation within classrooms but also systemic changes at the institutional and policy levels. By aligning curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment with communicative goals, and by providing students with the resources and support they need, Libyan universities can equip learners with the communicative competence necessary to thrive in academic and professional domains. Ultimately, the findings of this study emphasize that fostering effective English language learning is not solely the responsibility of learners or teachers, but a collaborative effort involving students, educators, administrators, and policymakers alike

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Appendices

Student's Questionnaire

Dear students:

This questionnaire is designed for "challenges faced by Libyan university students in English as a foreign language in the four skills classes". Your assistance in completing the following questions is greatly appreciated. Please put a thick (√) in the box provided for the option(s) that you choose

NO	Questions	Strong agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Does listening skill consider as the most important skills?				
2	Does the listening skill consider as hearing sounds and words?				
3	Does the difficulty of listening skills affect the attitude of the teacher?				
4	Does the listener affect by the accent in the listening process?				
5	Does Speed of speech or pronunciation make listening skill more difficult compared to other skills?				
6	Does writing consider as one of the most difficult skills in English?				
7	Does poor grammar and spelling make good writing?				
8	Does weak grammar cause difficulty in writing?				
9	Does the lack of vocabulary cause difficulty of writing?				
10	Does fear and confusion causes difficulties of writing?				
11	Does the lack self-confidence affect in reading skill?				
12	Does the reading skill consider an essential element in the learning chain?				
13	Does the difficulty of reading affect by professor's style?				
14	Does the Lack adequate education affect in reading skill?				

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15	Does the shy consider cause of difficulty in reading?				
16	Does the speaking with a native speaker help the students to improve their speaking skills?				
17	Does the difficult style of some teachers affect the students worry to speaking English?				
18	Does the development of English speaking depend on the teacher?				
19	Does allocating time for students to speak to each other increase their abilities?				
20	Does listening to English programs improve their speaking skills				