

Original Paper

Challenges and Strategies for English as a Second Language (ESL) Students in Higher Education

Nguyen An Giang^{1*}

¹ Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages, Trade Union University, Viet Nam

* Nguyen An Giang, Email: giangna@dhcd.edu.vn

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Abstract

English proficiency plays a pivotal role in academic and professional success, yet English as a Second Language (ESL) students face substantial linguistic, academic, and psychological challenges that hinder their performance in higher education. This study examines key barriers, including the absence of standardized proficiency assessments, language anxiety, academic writing difficulties, and social isolation. The research highlights the significant impact of these obstacles on student retention rates, academic achievement in professional fields such as nursing and STEM, and overall mental well-being. Additionally, the study evaluates the effectiveness of various intervention strategies, including early language assessments, targeted academic support, linguistic modifications in evaluations, and the integration of technology-driven learning tools. Findings underscore the necessity for universities to adopt a holistic approach to ESL education by implementing structured support systems, peer mentoring programs, and mental health initiatives. By embracing these strategies, institutions can foster an inclusive learning environment that enhances ESL students' academic performance, confidence, and long-term career prospects.

Keywords

ESL students, Language barriers, Academic performance, Language anxiety, Higher education, Technology in ESL learning, Mental health support

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become an essential skill in both academic and professional environments, serving as a gateway to better career opportunities and global interactions. In the era of globalization, proficiency in English is no longer a luxury but a necessity for individuals seeking to excel in international markets and academia. English serves as the primary medium of instruction in many

universities worldwide and is often a prerequisite for job placement in multinational corporations. Given its significance, the demand for English language education has surged, particularly among students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL). However, ESL students continue to face numerous linguistic, academic, and psychological challenges that hinder their ability to fully integrate into English-speaking academic environments.

A major concern in university settings is that many domestic ESL students enter degree programs without undergoing standardized English proficiency assessments, unlike their international counterparts, who must provide certifications such as IELTS or TOEFL as proof of their language abilities (Gajewski, 2021). This gap in assessment often leaves domestic ESL students struggling with academic language comprehension, which negatively affects their coursework performance and limits their ability to engage in professional training programs. Research has consistently shown that ESL students tend to underperform in academic settings compared to native English-speaking peers, particularly in areas requiring advanced literacy skills such as writing, critical analysis, and verbal communication (Moore & Waters, 2020).

Moreover, ESL students often experience language anxiety, which refers to feelings of stress and nervousness when communicating in a non-native language. This anxiety can manifest in classroom discussions, presentations, and writing assignments, leading to lower confidence and reluctance to participate in academic activities. Studies have also linked higher levels of insomnia among ESL students to their struggles with language proficiency, as the stress associated with mastering a second language can contribute to sleep disturbances and mental exhaustion (Shen & Gellis, 2021). The cumulative effects of linguistic barriers, academic struggles, and psychological stressors highlight the pressing need for comprehensive support systems that enhance ESL students' English language learning experience. In addition to individual struggles, institutional challenges also play a role in shaping ESL students' language development. Many universities lack customized ESL support programs, leaving students to navigate complex linguistic landscapes on their own. Teaching methodologies in ESL classrooms also vary significantly, with some relying on outdated rote memorization techniques rather than incorporating modern, interactive, and technology-based approaches (Alobaid, 2021). Research suggests that integrating multimedia learning tools such as YouTube captions, digital simulations, and interactive language platforms can significantly improve ESL students' writing accuracy and overall proficiency over time. However, these tools remain underutilized in many traditional ESL learning environments.

The broader global education movement also recognizes the importance of adapting ESL curricula to meet the challenges of today's VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) world (Yaccob et al., 2023). This perspective underscores the need for dynamic, problem-based, and collaborative learning environments that not only teach language skills but also prepare students for real-world communication demands. Given these considerations, it is evident that addressing ESL students' linguistic challenges requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing technological innovations, social support mechanisms, and institutional policy changes.

Recognizing the challenges faced by ESL students, this study aims to examine their English learning experiences by analyzing linguistic, academic, and psychological difficulties encountered in university settings. A key focus is identifying effective strategies to improve ESL students' language proficiency and academic success, particularly through technology-driven solutions, linguistic modifications, and institutional support. By exploring these issues, the study will highlight both the obstacles ESL students face and the best practices that educators and institutions can adopt to enhance language acquisition. Special attention will be given to the integration of technology, including multimedia learning tools, linguistic modification strategies, and social support networks, to facilitate effective ESL learning and academic engagement.

To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer several critical research questions. First, it examines the main challenges ESL students face in learning English, both academically and psychologically, as they navigate higher education. Second, it investigates how English proficiency directly influences their academic performance and future career prospects. Third, the study explores the most effective strategies and technological innovations that can support ESL students in improving their language skills and overall educational experience.

By addressing these research questions, this study aims to provide educators, policymakers, and researchers with actionable insights into how ESL education can be improved. The findings will help ensure that students overcome language barriers, integrate successfully into academic communities, and achieve their full potential in higher education and beyond.

2. The Current State of ESL Students' English Learning

2.1 English Proficiency Admission Criteria and Academic Performance

One of the primary challenges faced by English as a Second Language (ESL) students in higher education is the lack of standardized English proficiency assessments upon university admission. Unlike international students, who are typically required to provide certifications such as IELTS or TOEFL, many domestic ESL students gain admission without formal proof of their English proficiency. This issue is particularly concerning because language barriers may not be identified upon entry, placing ESL students at a significant disadvantage in their academic journey (Gajewski, 2021).

A study conducted in undergraduate nursing programs found that domestic ESL students, despite having attended English-speaking institutions, still faced academic struggles due to incomplete second-language acquisition. The research revealed that these students underperformed in several academic variables when compared to native English-speaking students, demonstrating the ongoing challenges of language proficiency, even in immersive English-speaking environments. This issue is particularly evident in professional training programs such as nursing, engineering, and business, where effective communication is critical for both academic success and future career performance. Research indicates that ESL nursing students consistently score lower on multiple-choice exams due to difficulties in reading comprehension and understanding complex medical terminology (Moore & Waters, 2020). However,

these language barriers extend far beyond exams, directly impacting clinical performance, patient communication, and teamwork in hospital settings - all of which are essential skills for professional practice. Without strong language proficiency, ESL nursing students may struggle to interpret medical instructions accurately, interact effectively with patients and colleagues, and respond confidently in high-pressure clinical environments.

Further studies show that ESL nursing students require significantly more time to complete exam questions than their native-speaking counterparts, reflecting the extra cognitive effort needed to process complex academic language. This highlights the urgent need for linguistic modifications in assessments to ensure that exams provide a fair and accurate evaluation of students' subject knowledge, rather than disadvantaging them due to language barriers. In addition to nursing programs, ESL students in technical fields such as STEM and business disciplines face similar struggles with professional terminology and industry-specific communication. A study on ESL students in STEM fields found that those with lower English proficiency were significantly less likely to complete their degree programs, primarily due to challenges in understanding technical concepts, writing research papers, and actively participating in academic discussions (LaCosse et al., 2020). These findings emphasize that language proficiency is not just an academic concern but a crucial determinant of ESL students' retention rates and long-term success in higher education. Addressing these language challenges through targeted support programs, modified assessments, and discipline-specific language training is essential to ensuring equal academic and professional opportunities for ESL learners.

The Need for Early Assessment and Targeted Support Programs. The gap in academic performance between ESL students and native English speakers underscores the urgent need for early assessment, targeted language support programs, and academic assistance. Universities should consider implementing mandatory English proficiency screenings for all students upon admission, rather than assuming that previous education in an English-speaking environment is sufficient. By identifying language deficiencies early, institutions can provide appropriate linguistic support before students face academic difficulties.

To effectively address the challenges faced by ESL students, customized ESL support programs should be developed to meet the specific linguistic needs of students across various disciplines. These programs should include preparatory courses, academic workshops, and tailored English training, ensuring that students develop the language skills necessary for both academic success and professional growth. A well-structured approach to ESL support should incorporate targeted interventions designed to ease students' transition into university life and equip them with essential communication skills.

One of the most effective interventions is Bridge Programs, which are pre-university courses designed to improve academic English proficiency before students begin their degree programs. These programs help ESL students develop foundational skills in reading, writing, and verbal communication, allowing them to better adapt to the demands of higher education. Additionally, Targeted Academic Writing Workshops should be implemented to enhance students' ability to write research papers, essays, and

reports in English. These workshops should emphasize formal writing structures, citation techniques, and critical analysis skills, which are critical for academic success.

For students in specialized fields, Industry-Specific English Courses can be highly beneficial. Tailored English training for students in nursing, engineering, STEM, and business disciplines ensures that they can communicate effectively in professional and technical environments, improving their academic performance and future career prospects. Another essential intervention is Linguistic Modifications in Assessments, which involve simplifying exam questions, providing additional context, and offering clearer instructions to help ESL students better understand and accurately respond to assessments.

By integrating these strategies, universities can bridge the academic performance gap between ESL and native-speaking students, improve student retention rates, and enhance career readiness for ESL learners. These interventions not only support students in achieving academic success but also equip them with the language proficiency required for professional development in an increasingly globalized workforce. The diagram below illustrates how English proficiency levels impact academic success, dropout rates, and performance in specialized fields such as nursing, STEM, and business studies.

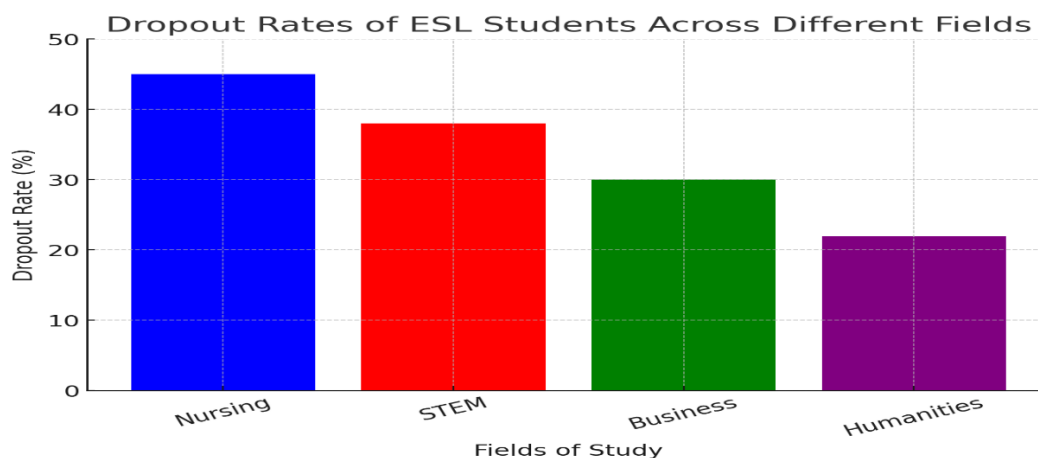


Figure 1. Dropout Rates of ESL Students across Different Fields

The bar chart above illustrates the dropout rates of ESL students across different academic disciplines due to language proficiency challenges. The highest dropout rate is seen in nursing (45%), followed by STEM fields (38%), business studies (30%), and humanities (22%). These figures highlight the significant academic struggles ESL students face, particularly in fields requiring specialized terminology and high levels of communication.

The findings of this study highlight that nursing and STEM students face the greatest risks due to the high demands for precise technical and professional communication in these fields. The complexity of medical terminology, engineering concepts, and scientific language presents significant challenges for ESL students, often leading to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. In contrast, business and humanities students also experience language-related difficulties, but their disciplines

generally allow for greater linguistic flexibility, making the transition to English-based academic work somewhat more manageable. However, even in these fields, ESL students may struggle with critical thinking, argumentation, and formal writing required for coursework.

To address these issues, early intervention programs, targeted language training, and adapted assessment methods are essential for enhancing ESL students' academic performance and retention. Universities should implement mandatory English proficiency assessments upon admission, offer customized ESL support programs, and integrate linguistic modifications in exams and coursework to accommodate ESL learners' needs. By providing structured language assistance and fostering inclusive learning environments, institutions can help ESL students overcome language barriers, build academic confidence, and successfully navigate their higher education journey.

By implementing proactive English proficiency assessments and tailored academic support, universities can help ESL students overcome language barriers, reduce dropout rates, and improve their long-term career prospects.

2.2 Common Language Barriers in ESL Learning

Language barriers remain one of the most significant challenges for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, affecting their ability to comprehend lectures, complete written assignments, and actively participate in academic discussions. These barriers not only hinder learning but also contribute to higher levels of academic stress and lower confidence in communication skills.

A particularly critical issue faced by ESL students is language anxiety, which refers to the fear of making mistakes while speaking or writing in English. This anxiety is especially prevalent in oral communication situations, such as class discussions, presentations, and social interactions. Students experiencing high levels of language anxiety tend to participate less in classroom activities, have difficulty expressing their ideas clearly, and may even avoid social engagement altogether. The impact of this anxiety extends beyond academics, often leading to feelings of isolation and reduced self-esteem in an English-dominant learning environment.

Key Areas of Language Difficulty for ESL Students: One of the most challenging aspects of ESL learning is listening comprehension. Many students struggle to follow fast-paced lectures, particularly when professors use idiomatic expressions, complex vocabulary, or different accents. Research indicates that students with limited English proficiency require more cognitive effort to process spoken language, leading to fatigue and reduced information retention. Additionally, many ESL students hesitate to ask for clarification due to fear of embarrassment, which further contributes to misunderstandings in academic discussions.

Another major challenge is reading and note-taking, as academic texts often contain advanced vocabulary, technical jargon, and cultural references that may be unfamiliar to ESL students. Poor reading comprehension forces students to spend significantly longer hours studying, often resulting in increased frustration and slower academic progress. Additionally, taking effective notes from dense, information-

heavy lectures presents further difficulties, as ESL students may struggle to identify key concepts in real-time.

Academic writing is another area where ESL students often encounter difficulties, particularly when trying to structure essays, develop strong arguments, and cite sources correctly. Writing in formal academic English is one of the most complex skills to master, and many ESL students require additional support in refining their writing style. Studies have highlighted that ESL students often struggle with organizing ideas coherently and using appropriate academic language, which can negatively affect their performance in written assignments and research projects.

Speaking and participation also pose significant challenges for ESL students, as fear of mispronunciation and grammatical errors makes many reluctant to engage in class discussions and group activities. Public speaking assignments, such as presentations and debates, can be particularly stressful, leading some students to avoid these activities altogether. ESL learners often speak less confidently, which can have long-term consequences on their academic performance and professional networking opportunities.

The Impact of Language Barriers on ESL Students. A major concern is that many ESL students hesitate to ask for help, either due to cultural factors, fear of embarrassment, or lack of awareness about available academic support services. This reluctance results in increased isolation, frustration, and higher dropout rates. Research indicates that students who do not seek academic support are more likely to struggle in coursework and experience lower retention rates, emphasizing the importance of proactive intervention strategies.

Moreover, language barriers often lead to mental health challenges, including higher levels of stress, anxiety, and insomnia. Studies show that language-related stress contributes to academic burnout, with ESL students reporting significantly higher rates of exhaustion compared to their native-speaking peers. The constant pressure to perform well in an unfamiliar language environment can lead to chronic fatigue, social withdrawal, and decreased motivation, ultimately affecting academic success and overall well-being.

Bridging the Language Gap: Effective Strategies. To address these challenges, universities should implement linguistic modification strategies and enhance language support services for ESL students. One effective approach is providing simplified academic texts and lecture materials, especially for first-year ESL students. This can include glossaries and bilingual academic materials to help facilitate comprehension and ease the transition into English-based coursework.

Additional tutoring support and language mentoring programs can also play a crucial role in helping ESL students refine their reading, writing, and speaking skills. One-on-one language coaching sessions, as well as peer mentoring programs that pair ESL students with native English speakers, have proven to be effective in building language confidence and academic success.

Technology-driven solutions, such as interactive language learning tools, can significantly improve ESL students' academic outcomes. The integration of AI-powered writing assistants, YouTube captions, and gamified language learning apps has been shown to enhance writing accuracy and comprehension over

time. Additionally, speech recognition software and pronunciation training applications can assist ESL students in improving their spoken English skills and increasing their confidence in academic discussions. Creating safe and inclusive learning environments is another crucial strategy for encouraging classroom participation. Professors should foster supportive classroom settings where ESL students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Incorporating small-group discussions, interactive activities, and structured speaking exercises can help students build confidence in their spoken English and academic communication skills.

Finally, mental health and academic counseling services should be made readily available to ESL students. Universities should provide stress management workshops tailored for ESL students, focusing on coping mechanisms for language anxiety and cultural adjustment challenges. Counseling services designed to address language-related stress can also offer ESL students the necessary psychological support to navigate the academic challenges of studying in a second language.

By implementing these targeted interventions and academic support mechanisms, institutions can effectively bridge the language gap for ESL students, helping them overcome linguistic challenges, reduce academic stress, and achieve long-term success in higher education.

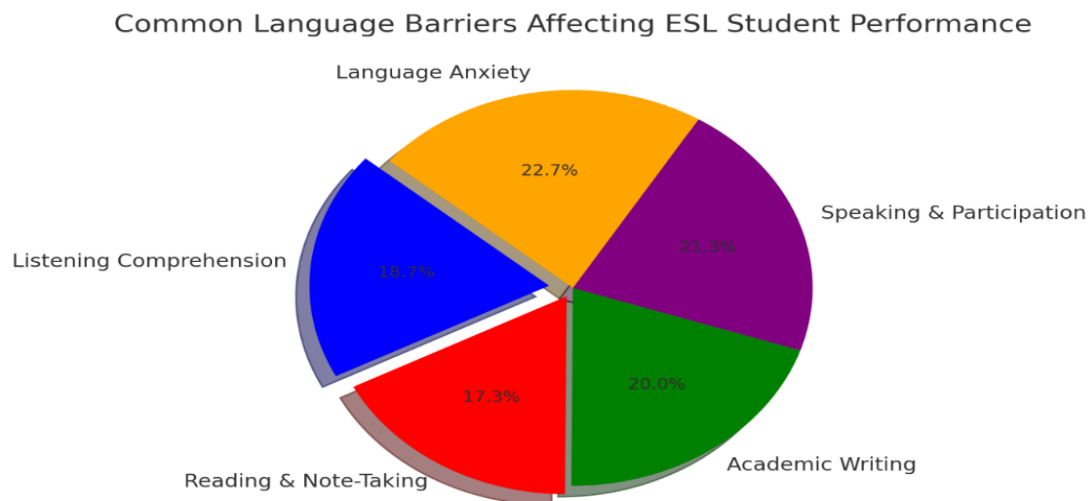


Figure 2. Common Language Barriers Affecting ESL Student Performance

The pie chart above illustrates the common language barriers that impact ESL students' academic performance, with language anxiety being the most widespread issue, affecting 85% of students. This is followed by speaking and participation difficulties (80%), academic writing struggles (75%), listening comprehension challenges (70%), and reading and note-taking difficulties (65%). These findings emphasize the critical role of language proficiency in determining ESL students' success in higher education.

Among these challenges, speaking and writing emerge as the most difficult skills for ESL students, often leading to reduced classroom engagement, lower academic performance, and diminished confidence. Language anxiety significantly hinders participation, making students hesitant to speak in discussions, ask questions, or seek academic assistance, further widening the gap between ESL learners and their native-speaking peers. Additionally, comprehension challenges in listening and reading force ESL students to spend longer hours studying, experience higher frustration levels, and struggle with retaining complex academic information. These difficulties highlight the urgent need for targeted ESL support programs to provide students with linguistic, academic, and psychological assistance.

To address these challenges, universities should implement linguistic modifications, integrate technology-driven learning tools, and expand mental health support services to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. By leveraging AI-powered writing tools, interactive language applications, and structured academic support, institutions can enhance ESL students' learning experiences, improve their language proficiency, and boost their confidence in academic settings. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach that combines language intervention strategies with mental health support can empower ESL students to overcome language barriers and achieve long-term academic success.

2.3 ESL Students and Psychological Challenges

Beyond academic struggles, mental health issues have become a growing concern among ESL students. The process of adjusting to a new language, academic system, and cultural environment often leads to psychological stress, emotional distress, and social isolation. Research indicates that ESL students experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders compared to their native English-speaking peers. These mental health challenges can significantly impact academic performance, confidence, and overall well-being, making it difficult for ESL students to thrive in a university setting. A notable study by Shen & Gellis (2021) found that ESL students report significantly higher levels of insomnia than native English-speaking students, with language anxiety being a primary contributing factor. The inability to communicate fluently in English leads to self-consciousness and stress, making even routine academic tasks more challenging. Lack of sleep and prolonged stress negatively impact cognitive functioning, concentration, and overall academic performance, further exacerbating academic struggles and mental exhaustion. The pressure to perform well in an unfamiliar linguistic environment amplifies stress, often leading to feelings of isolation, frustration, and a diminished sense of belonging. One of the most prevalent psychological challenges faced by ESL students is social isolation. Language barriers hinder their ability to form friendships, which contributes to loneliness, exclusion, and decreased participation in campus activities. Many ESL students hesitate to join extracurricular activities or engage in informal conversations due to fear of being judged for their English proficiency. Limited social interactions further increase the risk of depression and anxiety, highlighting the importance of strong social networks and peer support systems to ensure ESL students feel included and supported.

Another major psychological challenge faced by ESL students is acculturation stress, which arises from adapting to a new educational, social, and cultural system. Many students struggle with understanding cultural norms, leading to miscommunication, frustration, and a sense of alienation. Some even experience identity conflicts, feeling disconnected from both their home and host cultures, resulting in low motivation and social withdrawal. The feeling of being caught between two cultural identities can negatively impact confidence, engagement, and long-term academic persistence.

Fear of public speaking is also a significant issue among ESL students, who often avoid presentations, group discussions, and debates due to self-consciousness about their pronunciation, fluency, and grammar mistakes. Research shows that public speaking anxiety is considerably higher among ESL students, affecting their willingness to participate in academic discussions and limiting opportunities for networking and professional skill development. As a result, many ESL students hesitate to contribute to class discussions, which lowers their confidence, reduces academic engagement, and ultimately affects their overall performance.

Furthermore, lower self-esteem and academic confidence are common among ESL students as they struggle with language barriers in an academic environment that requires advanced literacy skills. Many students experience imposter syndrome, believing they are less capable than their native-speaking peers, even when they possess strong academic abilities. The constant struggle with language proficiency leads to feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, and reluctance to seek academic or emotional support, which can further hinder academic progress and personal development.

A landmark study by LaCosse et al. (2020) examined the impact of social-belonging interventions on ESL students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs. The study, which included over 12,000 STEM students across 19 universities, revealed that ESL students who participated in social-belonging activities demonstrated higher academic confidence and improved GPA scores. These interventions helped ESL students develop a sense of belonging, which significantly improved their academic engagement and retention rates. The findings underscore the strong connection between psychological well-being and academic performance, emphasizing the importance of fostering an inclusive academic environment that encourages ESL students to actively participate in academic and social life.

Strategies for Addressing Psychological Challenges in ESL Students. To address these challenges, universities should implement mental health and social support programs specifically designed for ESL students. Peer mentoring programs have proven to be highly effective, where ESL students are paired with fluent English-speaking peers for language practice, academic guidance, and social engagement. These programs not only help students develop confidence in English communication but also create a sense of belonging and support within the academic community.

Additionally, counseling services tailored to ESL students should be readily available to help them manage language anxiety, cultural adjustment difficulties, and academic stress. Universities should train counselors and academic advisors to understand the unique challenges faced by ESL students, ensuring

that they receive the necessary psychological and academic support to navigate their educational journey successfully.

Another impactful intervention is the introduction of cross-cultural exchange programs, which encourage ESL students to participate in language exchange activities, multicultural clubs, and international student organizations. These programs enhance students' exposure to diverse cultures while providing a safe and supportive environment for improving language skills and developing social connections. Hosting multicultural events and workshops can further foster a sense of community, ensuring that ESL students do not feel isolated or marginalized.

Furthermore, universities should offer mindfulness and stress-reduction workshops to help ESL students develop coping mechanisms for academic pressure and anxiety. Meditation, yoga, and relaxation techniques have been shown to provide students with effective strategies for managing stress, improving mental clarity, and enhancing emotional well-being. Additionally, providing online resources and mental health support networks can give ESL students safe spaces to discuss their challenges, seek guidance, and access necessary resources for personal and academic success.

The psychological challenges faced by ESL students have a profound impact on their academic performance, social integration, and emotional well-being. Universities must take proactive measures to create an inclusive environment where ESL students feel supported and empowered. By implementing structured peer mentoring programs, culturally inclusive support services, and stress management initiatives, institutions can help reduce language anxiety, foster a sense of belonging, and improve academic outcomes for ESL students.

The following diagram illustrates the most common psychological challenges experienced by ESL students and their impact on academic performance.

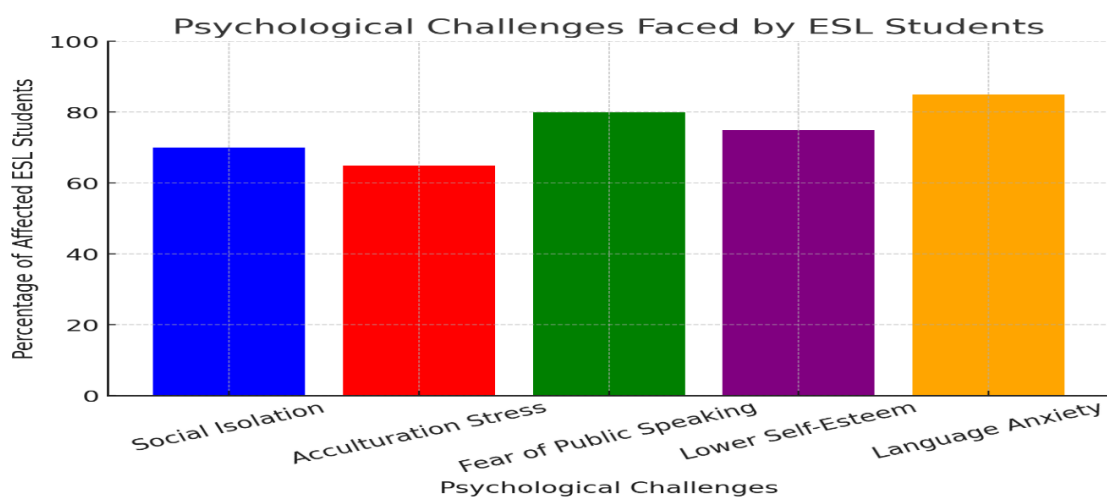


Figure 3. Psychological Challenges Faced by ESL Students

The bar chart above illustrates the psychological challenges faced by ESL students and their impact on academic performance. Among these challenges, language anxiety is the most prevalent, affecting 85% of students, followed by fear of public speaking (80%), lower self-esteem (75%), social isolation (70%), and acculturation stress (65%). These findings highlight the significant emotional and mental health barriers that ESL students encounter, which can negatively influence their academic engagement and overall well-being.

Language anxiety and fear of public speaking are among the most critical issues, significantly affecting ESL students' confidence and classroom participation. The fear of mispronouncing words, making grammatical mistakes, or struggling with fluency often leads students to avoid speaking in discussions, presentations, or group activities, which can result in lower academic performance and professional setbacks. Additionally, social isolation and acculturation stress contribute to feelings of loneliness, depression, and difficulty in forming meaningful connections, further exacerbating mental health concerns and affecting students' ability to integrate into academic and social environments.

Another key issue is lower self-esteem, which directly reduces students' academic confidence and makes them less likely to ask for help, engage in collaborative learning, or take leadership roles in academic settings. This reluctance to participate not only limits learning opportunities but also affects long-term academic and professional growth. The combination of these psychological challenges underscores the urgent need for universities to implement targeted mental health initiatives, peer mentoring programs, and culturally inclusive activities to support ESL students' psychological well-being and academic success.

By offering structured mental health support, social integration programs, and academic guidance, institutions can help ESL students navigate these challenges, enhance their academic experience, and foster long-term success. Proactive measures such as counseling services, peer-led support networks, and tailored ESL intervention programs can significantly reduce stress levels, improve confidence, and create a more inclusive educational environment. With the right support systems in place, ESL students can overcome psychological barriers, develop stronger academic skills, and achieve their full potential in higher education and beyond.

3. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges that English as a Second Language (ESL) students encounter in higher education, particularly regarding academic performance, language barriers, and psychological well-being. These challenges not only affect students' ability to succeed academically but also have long-term implications for their confidence, career opportunities, and overall integration into university life. This section synthesizes the key themes identified in the study and explores their broader implications for ESL education and student success.

3.1 Challenges in English Proficiency and Academic Performance

One of the most pressing issues identified in this study is the lack of standardized English proficiency assessments for domestic ESL students upon university admission. Unlike international students, who must demonstrate proficiency through standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL, many domestic ESL students enter academic programs without formal language evaluation. This places them at a disadvantage, as they may struggle with reading comprehension, academic writing, and verbal communication, leading to lower academic performance (Gajewski, 2021).

The gap between ESL students and native speakers is particularly evident in professional fields, such as nursing and STEM disciplines, where technical vocabulary and precise communication are crucial. Research indicates that ESL nursing students underperform on multiple-choice exams due to difficulties in understanding complex medical terminology and interpreting technical materials (Moore & Waters, 2020). Similarly, ESL students in STEM fields face higher dropout rates and longer completion times due to challenges in comprehending technical content, writing research papers, and effectively engaging in academic discussions (LaCosse et al., 2020). These findings emphasize the urgent need for early assessment programs, customized ESL academic support, and targeted interventions to help students develop the necessary linguistic competence for academic success.

3.2 Impact of Language Barriers on ESL Learning

Language barriers remain a persistent obstacle for ESL students, hindering their ability to follow lectures, participate in discussions, and complete written assignments. This study found that language anxiety is a major factor influencing student performance, particularly in oral communication. Many ESL students experience fear of public speaking, hesitation in classroom participation, and avoidance of group activities, all of which lower confidence and reduce academic engagement (Shen & Gellis, 2021).

In addition to verbal communication, academic writing presents significant challenges for ESL students. Many struggle with structuring formal essays, using correct citation formats, and engaging in critical analysis. Research suggests that linguistic modifications, such as simplified exam questions and structured writing workshops, can enhance ESL students' academic outcomes (Moore & Waters, 2020). However, many universities lack comprehensive language support programs, leaving ESL students to navigate these difficulties on their own.

The role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in mitigating language barriers has gained increasing attention in recent research. Studies indicate that digital learning tools, such as YouTube captions, interactive language platforms, and AI-powered writing assistants, can help ESL students improve their writing accuracy, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition (Alobaid, 2021). Despite these technological advancements, many traditional ESL programs have not yet fully integrated these tools, underscoring the need for modernized teaching approaches that incorporate digital solutions to support ESL learning.

3.3 Psychological and Social Challenges Faced by ESL Students

Beyond academic struggles, ESL students experience significant psychological challenges, including higher levels of anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Research has shown that language anxiety is a leading cause of insomnia among ESL students, with increased stress negatively affecting cognitive functioning and academic performance (Shen & Gellis, 2021). The pressure to excel in an unfamiliar language often results in social withdrawal, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Acculturation stress is another major challenge faced by ESL students. Many struggle to adapt to new cultural norms, academic expectations, and social environments, leading to miscommunication, frustration, and a lack of belonging. Some students also experience identity conflicts, feeling disconnected from both their home and host cultures, which can result in low motivation and disengagement from academic life. Studies have demonstrated that social-belonging interventions significantly improve ESL students' confidence, retention rates, and sense of inclusion in university communities (LaCosse et al., 2020). These findings emphasize the importance of fostering inclusive and welcoming environments that support ESL students both academically and socially.

3.4 Strategies for Improving ESL Education

The findings of this study suggest several key strategies to enhance ESL students' learning experiences and improve their academic success rates.

Implementing Early English Proficiency Assessments. To ensure that ESL students receive appropriate language support, universities should implement mandatory English proficiency screenings for all students upon admission. Early assessment allows institutions to identify students in need of additional language training and provide targeted interventions before academic challenges arise. Additionally, universities should offer bridge programs and intensive writing workshops to help students develop essential academic English skills before starting their degree programs.

Leveraging Technology to Support ESL Learning. Advancements in multimedia learning tools, AI-powered writing assistants, and digital language platforms have shown great potential in improving ESL students' language proficiency (Alobaid, 2021). Universities should invest in e-learning resources and incorporate ICT-driven teaching approaches into their ESL curricula. Tools such as speech recognition software, online grammar checkers, and interactive vocabulary applications can help students develop confidence in both written and spoken English.

Expanding Mental Health and Social Support Services. Given the psychological challenges faced by ESL students, universities should expand mental health support services, including peer mentoring programs, cultural exchange initiatives, and counseling services focused on language anxiety and acculturation stress. Institutions should create inclusive classroom environments that encourage participation without fear of judgment, helping students overcome social and academic barriers.

This study underscores the complex and multifaceted challenges that ESL students face in higher education. While linguistic, academic, and psychological barriers remain significant obstacles, targeted

interventions, technology-driven solutions, and social support networks can greatly improve ESL learning outcomes.

To ensure long-term success, universities must adopt a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to ESL education, integrating early assessments, innovative teaching methodologies, and culturally responsive support systems. Future research should examine the long-term effects of social-belonging interventions on ESL student retention and investigate the impact of AI-driven learning tools on language acquisition. By addressing these gaps, educators and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to support ESL students, ensuring that they achieve academic success and professional growth in an increasingly globalized world.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the linguistic, academic, and psychological challenges faced by English as a Second Language (ESL) students in higher education. The findings underscore the critical role of English proficiency in academic success and highlight the disadvantages ESL students experience due to the lack of standardized admission assessments. The gap in academic performance between ESL and native-speaking students, particularly in professional training programs such as nursing and STEM fields, reveals the need for targeted language support, early intervention strategies, and modified assessment methods.

Language barriers continue to be a major obstacle for ESL students, impacting their listening comprehension, reading, writing, and oral communication skills. Language anxiety and fear of public speaking significantly contribute to lower academic engagement and reduced confidence. The integration of technological tools, such as multimedia learning resources and AI-powered writing assistants, has shown promising results in improving ESL students' writing accuracy and comprehension. However, many institutions have yet to fully incorporate these advancements into their ESL curricula.

Beyond academic struggles, psychological challenges such as social isolation, acculturation stress, and insomnia further exacerbate the difficulties faced by ESL students. Research has demonstrated that social-belonging interventions and peer mentoring programs can enhance academic confidence and retention rates among ESL students. Institutions must prioritize mental health support, inclusive classroom environments, and culturally adaptive learning approaches to foster ESL students' success.

To address these challenges, universities should adopt a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to ESL education. This includes implementing mandatory English proficiency screenings, developing tailored ESL support programs, and incorporating modern teaching methodologies. Expanding mental health and social support services will also help ESL students navigate linguistic and psychological barriers more effectively.

Future research should explore longitudinal studies on ESL students' academic performance and the impact of AI-driven language learning tools. By addressing these gaps, educators and policymakers can

develop more effective strategies to ensure ESL students achieve academic success and long-term professional growth in an increasingly globalized world.

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