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Soran Mustafa Kurdi

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Challenges Kurdish EFL Learners Encounter When Learning the English Language Program: A Survey Study

Gashbin Dler
Independent Researcher, Iraq
gashbin117.dk@gmail.com
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Abstract

English is a global language widely used for communication across the world, impacting various fields such as technology, science, business, and education. Kurdistan, a region located in the Middle East with its own independent government and educational system, has seen a growing interest in learning English. Kurdish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners seek to advance in English for various reasons, including self-improvement, hobbies, and career opportunities. This study, conducted through a questionnaire survey with 110 students from different departments at Tishk International University, identifies the major challenges EFL learners face while learning the language. The study concludes that the primary issues include lack of confidence, speaking anxiety, and insufficient learning resources. By investigating these obstacles, the study recommends new strategies to support Kurdish learners in their journey to language proficiency.

Keywords: Kurdish, English as a Foreign Language, lack of confidence, language anxiety

1. Introduction:

English which is highly promoted by Kurdistan's educational system from elementary school through university. After graduating, it is crucial to know the English language for better career opportunities. This survey explores the challenges faced by Kurdish EFL learners, examining factors such as the reasons for their lack of confidence, the impact of teacher feedback, and their speaking anxiety, among other issues. The research aims to investigate the major challenges that Kurdish EFL learners face in the process of learning the language.

This research aims to analyze the challenges that Kurdish EFL learners encounter while learning the English language. To meet the aim, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What challenges do Kurdish EFL students face in achieving English language proficiency?

- What are the major reasons for a lack of confidence in language learning among Kurdish EFL learners?
- How do students' differences, such as culture and language proficiency level, affect the classroom environment?

Understanding these challenges is crucial to pinpoint the reasons why Kurdish students experience slow progress and thus develop strategies to address these issues. Implementing these strategies can create a better learning environment for Kurdish students. The results of the study can make a significant difference in educational outcomes if applied effectively. We aim to demonstrate that, despite Kurdistan's geographical location and the language gap between the first and second languages, there are always issues that can be addressed to improve learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review:

Learning English is important due to the opportunities which this language brings. However, there are challenges faced by EFL students in the world, and Kurdish EFL students are no exception. Motivation, speaking anxiety, and language anxiety are the main ones to name a few.

Motivation plays a crucial role in language advancement. We have types of motivation such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. A study conducted by Moskovsky & Alrabi (2009) shows that enjoyment and challenges are the two highest ranges for intrinsic motivation of their learners. Many of their respondents enjoy learning the English language because they are interested in their culture and language. According to the research in Iran by Vatankhah & Tanbakooei (2014), the role of social support such as support from parents and teachers can affect learners a lot. They can motivate them extrinsically by giving them positive feedback on their language progress. They also believe that motivation plays a fundamental role in learning a foreign language.

Amoah and Yeboah (2021), in their research in China, showed that Chinese learners have a fair level of motivation, which means they push themselves to learn the English Language. Their study also mentioned that psychological factors like lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes, or fear of negative evaluation are more effective than linguistic factors for learning the English language. On the other hand, we have different perspectives too, Wallace (2020) mentions that most of the students have positive motivation toward learning the English language. In our research too, most of the Kurdish EFL learners are highly motivated to learn

another language. The research above showed that the level of motivation can be different among learners.

Language anxiety can affect learners everywhere. According to the research in Turkey Seyit Ahmet Capan & Harun Simsek (2012) They mention that FLA (Foreign Language Anxiety) has a lot of impact on learner's achievements. This anxiety can be the main reason for slow learning progress. The findings of Cutrone's (2009) research show that language anxiety can affect a lot on learners' abilities. Javid (2014) discovered that most students have fear during the exams and they recommend the teacher to give them support and positive feedback. In addition to that, Gerencheal and Mishra (2019) investigated the anxiety level among students. They found out that anxiety levels were medium to a high level, and also found out the anxiety level among female students is higher than male students. Anxiety can cause slow progress in students.

Another challenge that many learners face is speaking anxiety. According to the research Amoah and Yeboah (2021), one of the problems of Chinese EFL learners is the anxiety of speaking English. When they meet someone who speaks English, they immediately say that their English is bad or they're not good at speaking English. This shows that speaking takes a crucial place in language learning. The researchers, Ozturk and Gubuz (2014), mentioned that speaking is one of four language skills and students want to improve more. However, many reasons cause speaking anxiety. The findings from the research done by Toubot et al. (2017) highlight the impact of speaking anxiety. It indicates that fear of negative evaluation can affect learners creating speaking anxiety. Speaking is essential for some schools. According to Erdiana et al. (2020), junior high school students in Indonesia must master speaking skills and get 70-80 for passing.

3. Method:

3.1 Research Design:

This study employs a quantitative method that is designed to investigate the challenges Kurdish EFL learners encounter in achieving English language proficiency.

3.2 Participants:

The participants of this research included 110 learners from various departments at Tishk International University and Salahaddin University-Erbil. 91 of which were females and 19 were males.

3.3 Data Collection:

Data was collected through an online questionnaire survey. Google Forms link to the survey was distributed to the learners, allowing them to participate at their convenience.

3.4 Instrument:

The survey comprised 11 multiple-choice questions, including demographic questions such as age, gender, and department. Additionally, a "select all that apply" question was included. One Likert scale question was used to assess students' confidence in speaking English.

4. Results

A survey was designed and conducted among 110 learners. This survey holds questions from general to more specific questions. We wanted to identify the issues that Kurdish EFL learners face and the reasons behind each. Moreover, we found different points of view and perspectives about slow progress in their language proficiency.

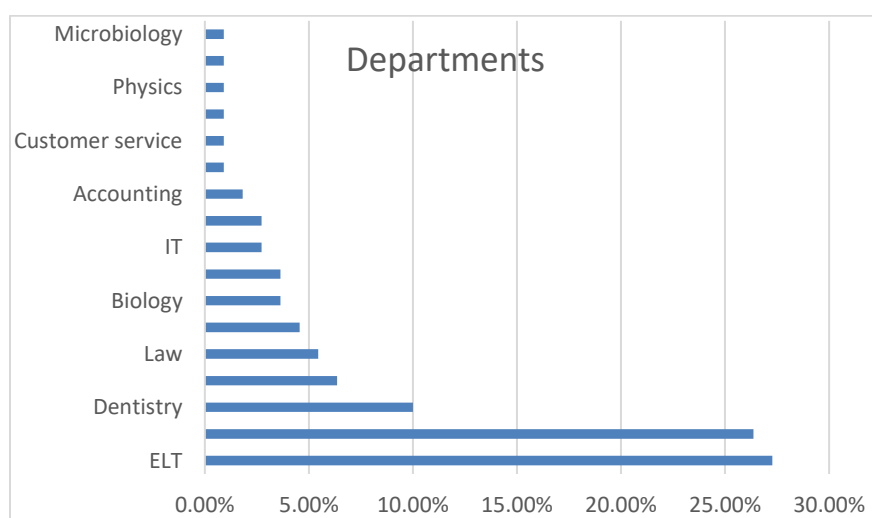


Figure 1. Departments where learners participated

Figure 1 shows that 30 learners are from the English Language Teaching (ELT) department which takes 27.27%. 29 students, who did not disclose their departments, participated in this survey to show that they are willing to learn the language. Students from various departments participated in the survey. The aim was to find the challenges ELT learners face. However, there were also learners from other departments who were ready to share the same experience.



Figure 2. Student's motivation

Figure 2 shows the reasons that motivate learners the most in learning a new language. Around 59 learners chose career opportunities. Moreover, around 34 people chose cultural interest, which shows that one of the reasons that make learners motivated is the cultural background. Hobbies are another reason for motivation for some people. However, it was the least factor to motivate the students to learn the language. Career opportunity was the most effective factor that motivated the learners to know another language. This pinpointed that many learners were motivated to learn the language to find a job after graduation. Others were motivated to learn English as a cultural interest and to use it when traveling.

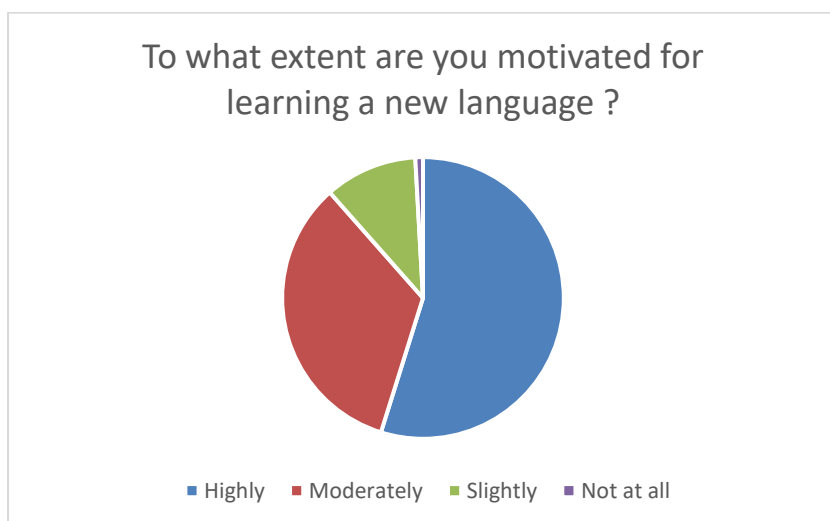


Figure 3. Motivation level

Figure 3. shows the extent of motivation of learners to learn a new language. 59 learners are highly motivated to learn a new language. On the other hand, 38 learners are moderately motivated for language learning. We have some learner who are slightly motivated to go out of their comfort zone and try something new. Apart from these, we have a learner who is not

motivated to learn a new language. Overall, the data shows that most of the Kurdish EFL learners are highly motivated to learn a new language, which makes them try harder and progress in their learning language journey.

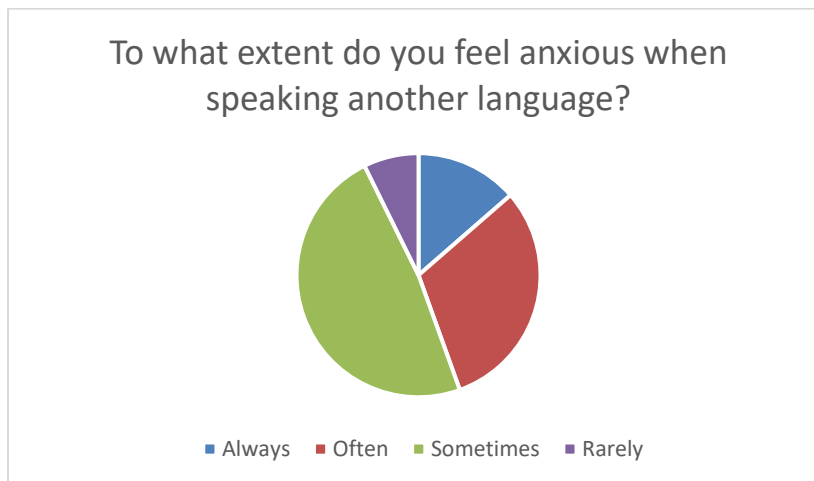


Figure 4. Anxiety level

Figure 4 shows the level of anxiety learners have in speaking a foreign language. 15 learners indicated that they *always* feel anxious when it comes to speaking another language. Moreover, around 34 students *often* feel anxious about speaking. Almost half of the learners, 53, *sometimes* feel anxious which shows that the participants have less speaking anxiety. On the other hand, 8 learners *rarely* have anxiety when it comes to speaking another language.

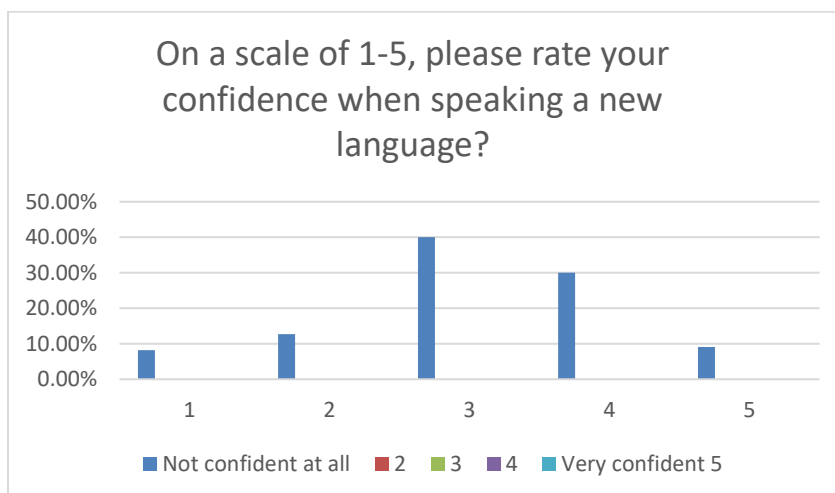


Figure 5. Confidence level in speaking

Figure 5 shows the confidence level among the participants on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being *not confident at all* to 5 being *very confident*. The aim was to know how the learners see themselves in terms of confidence in speaking. 8 learners, which is 8.2%, were *not very confident at all* when speaking a foreign language. Around 14 learners, which took 12.7%,

were *not confident*. Most learners, 44 learners which took 40%, selected *neutral*. On this rating scale, 33 learners who took 30% selected *confident* in speaking another language, which means among the participants we have learners who are confident in speaking and have less anxiety. In addition, we have 10 learners who selected *very confident*, meaning their level of confidence is higher and they believe on themselves with having less anxiety in speaking a foreign language.



Figure 6. learners' concerns

Figure 6 shows the reasons that learners have concerns while learning a foreign language. One of the most selected answers is pronunciation difficulties, with around 41 learners saying that the main problem for them is having a hard time because of word pronunciation. At the same time, 33 learners, have a fear of *making mistakes*. However, we have 14 learners who think that *not having enough time* is a concern for them. 21 learners found *speaking anxiety* to be concerning for learning a new language.

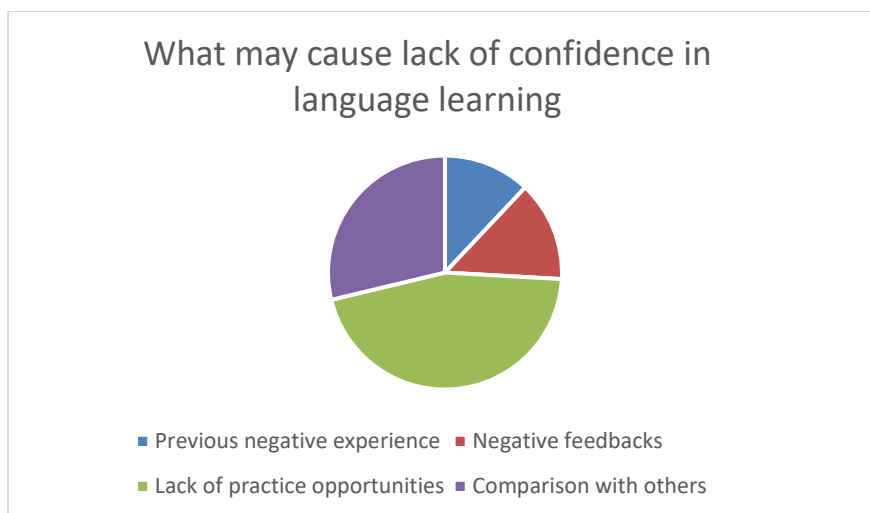


Figure 7. Reasons for lacking confidence among Kurdish EFL learners

Figure 6 shows the main reasons for a lack of confidence for learners in language learning. 13 learners mentioned that previous negative experiences caused not having enough confidence in language learning. 15 learners indicated that negative feedback can cause a lack of confidence for them. On the other hand, most of the learners mentioned that because of lack of practice opportunities, they were not confident in learning another language. Comparing with others could affect a lot as well. About 31 learners who participated in this survey said that comparing themselves with others caused them not to have enough confidence. Moreover, some learners pointed out that fear could make them lose confidence in language learning.

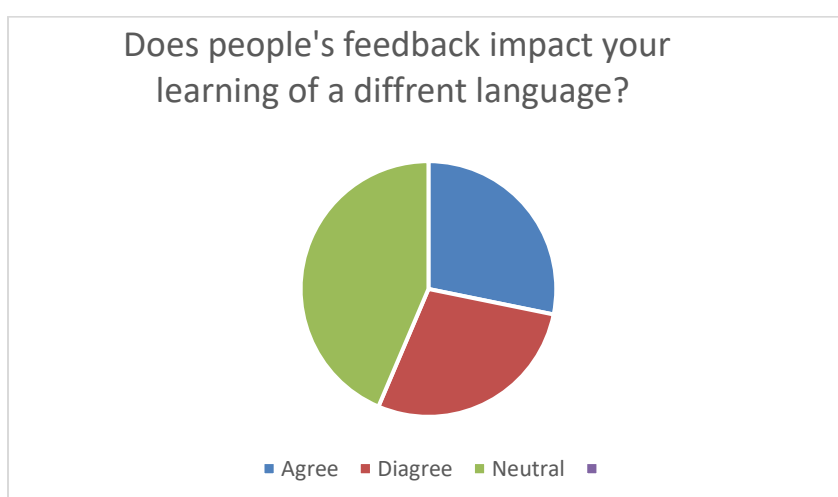


Figure 8. Learner's perception of external feedback

Around 48 learners stayed on the fence, believing that people's feedback could or could not influence their language learning. On the other hand, 31 learners disagreed that people's feedback would impact language learning. Another 31 had the opposite opinion, thinking that people could impact their language learning.

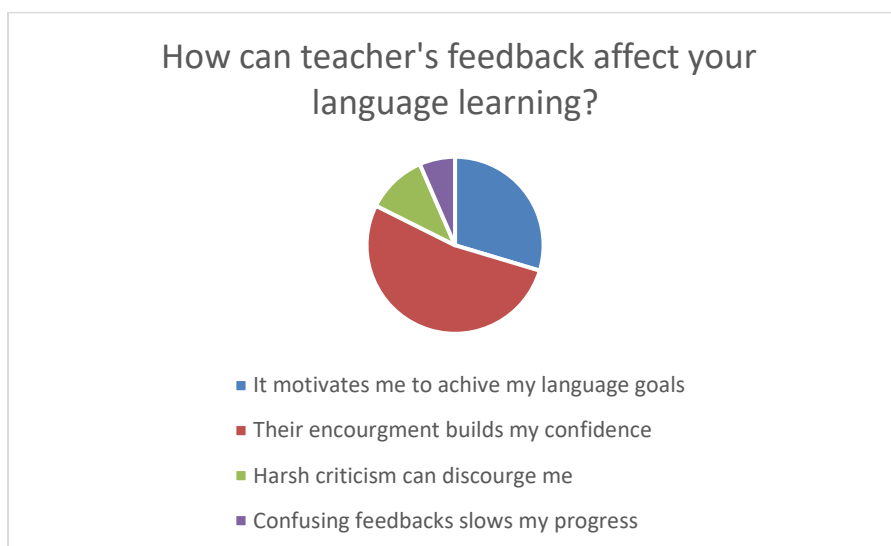


Figure 9. Learner's perception of teachers' feedback

Figure 9 shows how teacher's feedback impact learner's language learning. Teachers' influence on learning a language could be prominent. Among the 110 learners, 32 learners believe that the teacher's feedback can motivate them to achieve their language goals. Moreover, 57 learners think that the encouragement of the teacher can build their confidence. On the other hand, around 12 learners say that harsh criticism can discourage them, and finally, 7 learners mention that confusing feedbacks slow their progress. Overall, teachers' feedback can affect a lot on learner's progress.

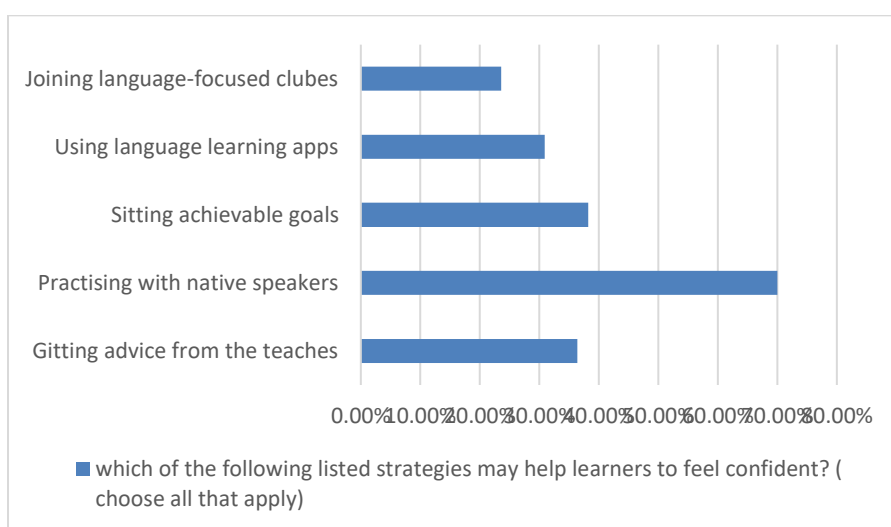


Figure 10. Strategies help learners feel more confident

Figure 10 is about learner's opinions about some strategies that may help them to gain more confidence while learning a language. For this purpose, we provided some strategies to help learners to feel more confident. Around 40 learners believe that getting advice from the teachers can help a lot to feel more confident in learning another language. On the other hand, 77 learners believe that practicing with a native speaker can make them progress faster and feel more confident through it. Moreover, 42 learners believe that if they set achievable goals, they can feel more confident in another language. While 34 learners mentioned that by practicing from language apps, they can gain more confidence. However, 26 learners believed that joining language-focused clubs makes them feel more confident.

5. Discussion:

The results of this study give us a better understanding of the challenges that Kurdish EFL learners face and what influences their language learning journey. We've identified key issues like pronunciation difficulties, speaking anxiety, and the fear of making mistakes that learners encounter when trying to learn a new language. While our research shares some similarities with past studies, particularly those focused on EFL learners, it stands out because it specifically looks at the challenges faced by Kurdish EFL learners.

The data shows that career opportunities are the biggest motivation for Kurdish learners to study English. However, many of them also struggle with speaking anxiety. Nearly half of the participants said they sometimes feel anxious when speaking a foreign language. Pronunciation difficulties and the fear of making mistakes also create significant obstacles for many learners. We found that a lack of confidence often comes from previous negative experiences, negative feedback, and not having enough practice opportunities.

When it comes to external feedback, learners had mixed opinions. Some felt it didn't have much impact on their learning, while others believed it could greatly affect their progress. However, most learners agreed that teacher feedback plays an important role in building their confidence.

The learners also identified some strategies that could help improve their language skills. Practicing with native speakers was the most popular choice because it provides real-world interaction, which they found valuable.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study highlights the various challenges Kurdish EFL learners face in their journey to achieve English language proficiency. Learning another language is important, especially for the career opportunities it offers. With 110 learners participating in this study, we identified three main challenges that students encounter when learning a foreign language:

- Language and speaking anxiety
- Difficulties with pronunciation
- Lack of vocabulary

To better support Kurdish EFL learners, it's recommended that teachers focus on creating a learning environment that reduces anxiety and encourages practice. Offering optional courses or language-focused clubs can also give learners more opportunities to build their skills and confidence. By putting these strategies into action, educators can help Kurdish learners overcome their challenges and achieve greater success in their language learning journey.

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