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ESL Learner and TESOL Practitioner Perceptions of Language Skill Difficulty

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Abstract

With the expectation that ESL learning will be optimized when teachers and students share the same perceptions of teaching and learning priorities and challenges, this study sought to identify perceptions of TESOL faculty and their ESL learners in terms of the relative difficulty of English language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and the associated areas of language development including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This study analyzed the quantitative and qualitative survey responses of 278 ESL learners and 52 TESOL practitioners. This research found stark differences between student and teacher perceptions of the relative difficulty of the language skills examined in this study. Overall, students viewed the included language skills to be slightly difficult, with relative equal difficulty across skills. However, the TESOL practitioners viewed each of the language skills to be much more difficult than the students considered them to be. Moreover, teachers perceived the most difficult skill to be writing followed by listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and speaking. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

TESOL, perceptions, language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation)

1 Introduction

Although the longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global student mobility may be uncertain, the U.S. continues to host more international students than any other nation. This includes nearly one million international students learning English as a second language (ESL) ([Open Doors, 2021](#)). Despite the popularity of the U.S. for English language study, many ESL students in the U.S. are not well supported in their need for ongoing language development ([Andrade & Hartshorn, 2019](#)).

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An inadequate understanding of the perceived needs of these learners may make it difficult for TESOL practitioners and program administrators to ensure that students succeed linguistically and academically.

One reason for this challenge may be the different perceptions practitioners and students have regarding their language learning experience. Such discrepancies are important to note because student attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and anxieties can greatly impact language learning (Brown, 2009; Dornyei, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Said & Weda, 2018). Previous research also has shown that student perceptions of the relative importance of various language skills may not be consistent with those of their teachers. For instance, while ESL students tend to perceive speaking as the most important language priority, TESOL educators and university professors in a variety of disciplines consider the most important language skills to be listening and reading (Hartshorn, Evans, Egbert, & Johnson, 2017; Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019).

If teachers lack understanding of student perceptions, teachers may not be able to provide the support their students need most. Thus, teachers should carefully consider student language learning priorities and challenges. Educators need to understand that student perceptions largely become students' reality. As such, if students feel that their needs are not met, they may disengage or their trust in the teacher may wane. A lack of confidence in teachers or doubt regarding the benefits of language learning experiences may undermine important aspects of the language learning process crucial to their success (Schulz, 1996, p. 349).

It is vital, then, to look more closely at ESL student perceptions and those of their teachers to better understand student learning needs. This includes identifying how ESL students perceive the relative difficulty of the various language skills they seek to master. Such an awareness can better equip teachers to understand and address student anxieties and apprehensions about their language learning experience. Following the work of Hartshorn, Hart, and McMurry (2019), the notion of language skills in this paper will refer to the traditionally categorized areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in addition to associated areas of language development such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Though we recognize obvious overlap and differences among these aspects of language development, for simplicity, we use the term skill broadly to represent all these dimensions of language development. Previous research has provided insights regarding the challenges that students face in learning and applying these language skills as well as some of the underlying causes of these challenges. However, no single study of which we are aware has simultaneously examined student and teacher perceptions of the relative difficulty of these seven language skill areas. Therefore, this study intends to help fill this gap in the literature by identifying important insights that can inform practitioners as they seek to optimize the ESL student learning experience.

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study was conducted within a humanistic perspective of language learning that values student agency, self-regulation, and self-awareness (e.g., Benson & Voller, 2014; Oxford, 2016; Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2016). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that language learning is complex and may be impacted by a variety of factors such as student motivation, self-confidence, affective issues, and anxiety (Berry & Williams, 2004; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Ortega, 2013). A key supposition of this study is the assertion that teaching and learning will not be optimized unless teachers and students share the same learning priorities (e.g., Macalister & Nation, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to identify the degree to which TESOL practitioners and their students share the same perceptions of the language learning experience with the expectation that it will provide vital insight to inform TESOL practice.

2.2 Discrete language skills

Numerous publications over the course of decades have addressed many topics associated with the importance and development of the discrete language skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and the associated areas of language development including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Often, treatment of a skill in isolation addresses general struggles along with possible causes and solutions for these challenges. We briefly address some of the most salient issues and ways in which each may be challenging for ESL learners.

2.2.1 Listening

Along with reading, the receptive skill of listening is arguably one of the most important for second language learners beginning university study (Hartshorn, Evans, Egbert, & Johnson, 2017). Moreover, some scholars have suggested it is the most challenging of the language skills (e.g., Graham, 2003). Many scholars concur that although listening may be one of the most important skills, one reason it is so challenging is that it may be the most neglected skill in second language pedagogy and curricula (e.g., Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019). Vandergrift and Goh (2012), observed that “the development of listening receives the least systematic attention from teachers and instructional materials” (p. 4), leaving some practitioners feeling less prepared to teach listening compared to other skills (Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019). Rather than simply repackage the reading curriculum for listening contexts, Flowerdew and Miller (2005) make the case that pedagogical approaches should be specific to listening because of the stark difference between written text and speech. For example, speech includes more fragments, pauses, false starts, imperatives, questions, and decontextualized content. It also may include reductions and pacing beyond the control of the listener.

There are a number of additional considerations for practitioners as they plan pedagogy. Rost (2016) notes many levels of processing that may affect listening comprehension. These include neurological processing, processing associated with speech perceptions and syntactic parsing, semantic processing, and pragmatic processing. Since all of these operate simultaneously, effective pedagogy should account for and utilize each of these. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) emphasize that learners need to effectively utilize metacognition in their listening practice to raise learning awareness and to help learners to successfully manage their language development. They also encourage teachers to address anxiety, promote self-efficacy, and foster motivation by helping learners to effectively utilize relevant strategies as they develop their listening skills. Without adequate attention to these considerations, listening may continue to be perceived as difficult to both students and practitioners.

2.2.2 Reading

Like listening, reading is an essential skill for nonnative students beginning study at an English-medium university (Hartshorn, Evans, Egbert, & Johnson, 2017). Reading comprehension is dependent on lower-level processing needed to recognize vocabulary, parse syntax, and encode text. It also uses higher-level processing associated with identifying the meaning of texts, allocating attentional control, and identifying what can be determined or inferred from the text (Grabe, 2009, p. 21). Some of the most important influences on reading comprehension include vocabulary development, understanding of morphology, activating background knowledge, using effective strategies, and enhancing working memory.

Reading comprehension will continue to be difficult without adequate vocabulary development. Ideally, reading material would limit unknown vocabulary to approximately 2 to 5% of the text (e.g., Nation, 2006; Schmitt, Grabe, & Jiang, 2011). Similarly, students need to develop morphological awareness to parse text in ways that help them generate meaning (e.g., Kuo & Anderson, 2006;

Zhang, 2013). In addition, readers enhance their understanding as they activate their prior knowledge of topics they read about (e.g., Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Van Den Broek & Kendeou, 2008). Reading comprehension can also improve with the application of effective reading strategies (e.g., Ghahari, & Basanjideh, 2016; Jafari, 2012; Wang, 2016) and with increases in the working memory of the readers (e.g., Erçetin, 2015; Grabe, 2009). Without adequate attention to these areas, students are likely to struggle with reading.

2.2.3 Writing

Research has shown that though writing may not be perceived to be quite as important as the receptive skills of listening and reading for those beginning university study, writing is still viewed as a critical skill by university professors and considered more important than speaking in an English-medium university context (Hartshorn, Evans, Egbert, & Johnson, 2017). Nevertheless, many scholars consider writing to be the most challenging language skill to develop (e.g., Adas & Bakir, 2013; Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). While some professors in disciplines such as psychology value writing as a skill that should be developed for its own merit, many disciplines tend to have a utilitarian view of writing seen primarily as a means of demonstrating knowledge, synthesizing scholarship, or reinforcing learning (Hartshorn & Evans, 2019). Findlay (2018) has observed that little writing is done by students in their undergraduate courses and that composition classes may not effectively prepare multilingual students “for the writing demands of courses across the curriculum or classes in their majors” (p. 4).

Unlike other skills that can be acquired naturally in L1 and in some L2 contexts, writing can be uniquely challenging because it requires focused instruction and practice, especially academic writing. University-level writing utilizes specialized constructions and vocabulary that are not likely to be developed from colloquial exchanges, informal writing, or even cursory reading of academic texts. Moreover, discipline-specific writing can vary across fields, complicating writing development for ESL learners new to a particular genre. This reality is exemplified by the need for specialized texts such as *The Writers Guide to Psychology* (Kaufman, 2010), *Writing Like an Engineer* (Winsor, 2013), and *Write Like a Chemist* (Robinson, Stoller, Costanza-Robinson, & Jones, 2008). Thus, ESL learners in university settings not only grapple with basic English grammar and vocabulary—they struggle to learn to write (alongside their L1 peers) in ways that are appropriate to academia and their disciplines.

2.2.4 Speaking

Though evidence suggests that student L2 speaking skills are perceived as less important to university professors across a variety of disciplines when compared to listening, reading, and writing, the students themselves may perceive speaking as the most important skill (Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019). In many ESL contexts, students are immersed in opportunities to speak to others in English outside of class as well as within the classroom. These abundant opportunities to speak English may disproportionately raise student awareness of their speaking and motivate them to prioritize their need to communicate effectively. In EFL contexts, where chances to practice English may be limited, students may be even more conscientious and preoccupied by their speaking compared to other skills that may not require interlocution with others in real time.

2.2.5 Pronunciation

An integral part of speaking is pronunciation. Though still perceived as important, pronunciation may

be seen by TESOL practitioners as less important compared to the other skills of listening, reading, writing, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary (Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that students tend to prioritize their speaking and pronunciation skills much more than their language teachers or their professors within the various disciplines (Hartshorn, 2013; Hartshorn, Hart, & McMurry, 2019). Pronunciation development may be affected by a wide variety of factors. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), for example, suggest that motivation, exposure, attitude, instruction, age, personality, and L1 influence are some of the most salient factors that influence pronunciation. Many students tend to be preoccupied by developing native-like pronunciation while teachers may focus on production that is adequately intelligible. Such discrepancies among teachers and students regarding the actual instructional target of pronunciation teaching and learning could affect perceptions of its importance and difficulty.

2.2.6 Grammar

The importance of learning the syntactic patterns of a second or foreign language has been emphasized for centuries in practices such as the grammar translation method in language instruction. However, in more recent decades, emphasis has moved beyond what the student knows to what the student can actually do with the language through abundant practice leading to proceduralization and automatization advocated by notions such as skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2007). Regarding difficulty, Housen and Simoens (2016) describe it in terms of its relative cost or demand on “a given language learner in a given learning context, particularly in terms of the mental resources allocated and cognitive mechanisms deployed in processing and internalizing the feature” (p. 166). Though grammar can be perceived as difficult in and of itself, grammar has also been reported as a cause of difficulty in other language skills (e.g., Berry & Williams, 2004). One reason for this is that, like vocabulary, grammar is inseparable from so many aspects of language development. In reading, for instance, some students have indicated that difficulty understanding grammar leads to reading challenges (Imtiaz, 2004). While some students seem to love their study of grammar, others seem to despise it. It is possible that such varied evaluations of grammar may be associated with different perceptions of its relative utility and difficulty.

2.2.7 Vocabulary

Inadequate vocabulary development is another area that may be strongly associated with difficulty in other language skills. For example, Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, and Wahid (2012) found a strong correlation between vocabulary difficulties and L1 interference in writing. In addition to other studies suggesting a link between underdeveloped vocabulary and writing challenges (e.g., Becket, Benander, & Kumar, 2007; Correa, 2010), difficulties with vocabulary have been implicated in challenges in other skills such as speaking (Gan, 2012), listening (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), and reading. August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) affirm that

[English language learners] who experience slow vocabulary development are less able to comprehend text at grade level than their [English-only] peers, and they may be at risk of being diagnosed as learning disabled, when in fact their limitation is due to limited English vocabulary and poor comprehension (p. 50).

Without substantial knowledge of the words in a language, student understanding and language production will be minimal at best.

2.2.8 Integrated skills

Most of the studies cited above focus on student difficulties in several individual skill areas. Nevertheless, Newton et al. (2018) has reminded us that “The skills inter-relate in many ways in language-classroom settings” such that “speaking rarely occurs without listening, writing is typically connected to reading, and listening...is usually linked to reading and writing” (p. 1). Berry and Williams (2004) examined difficulties across language skills. The most problematic area was listening (35%), followed by speaking (23%), writing (17%), vocabulary (17%), and reading (8%). The authors reported that the root of students’ linguistic difficulties varied. The rate of natural speech and pronunciation, for example, were two factors leading to listening problems. The predominant cause of listening struggles was described as general listening problems. Similarly, general speaking and reading problems were blamed for speaking and reading difficulties. This research of Berry and Williams (2004) is highly relevant to the current study because language skills were examined concurrently. However, the literature lacks a rich description of the relative difficulty of language skills needed to better inform teaching and learning. We need greater understanding regarding teacher and student perceptions of the relative difficulty of these skills. Therefore, this study was designed to add to the literature by providing this needed insight.

2.2.9 Research questions

The following research questions guided this study in terms of reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

1. Which of the seven skill areas, if any, do ESL students consider to be the most difficult, and how do these perceptions of relative difficulty differ between students and their teachers?
2. What are the most salient reasons for ESL student and TESOL practitioner perceptions of language skill difficulty?

3 Methods

This section describes the methods used in this study, including information about data elicitation and those who provided data.

3.1 Data elicitation

To help inform curriculum development decisions, data used in this study were collected by an intensive English program (IEP) attached to a large university in the western United States. Permission was given by the Institutional Review Board to analyze the preexisting data. Subsequently, the IEP provided researchers with data that had been stripped of any personally identifying information. The IEP used an electronically distributed survey to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Following Hartshorn et al. (2019), the skills included on the survey were reading, writing, listening, speaking, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Participants responded to the quantitative section for each skill area by completing Likert scale items to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about the difficulty of the various language skills: *Very strongly agree* (8), *Strongly agree* (7), *Agree* (6), *Somewhat agree* (5), *Somewhat disagree* (4), *Disagree* (3), *Strongly disagree* (2), and *Very strongly disagree* (1).

For the qualitative section, participants were invited to respond to an open-ended question about which skill area they perceived to be the most difficult, and why it was difficult for them. Participants typed their responses into a provided text box (see survey in the appendix).

3.2 Participants

This study examined the input of 52 TESOL practitioners who were teaching or who had taught at the IEP along with the responses of 278 ESL learners enrolled in the same IEP. Student ages ranged from 18 to 61, with a mean age of 28.23 years ($SD=8.11$) at the time of the study. According to proficiency guidelines from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012), student proficiency levels ranged from novice high to advanced high as illustrated in Table 1. Student participants included both males and females and came from a wide variety of L1 backgrounds as shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Proficiency Levels of Participants

Proficiency	<i>N</i>	%
Novice High	10	3.82%
Intermediate Low	27	10.31%
Intermediate Mid	83	31.68%
Intermediate High	51	19.47%
Advanced Low	48	18.32%
Advanced Mid	23	8.78%
Advanced High	20	7.63%
Total	262	100.00%

Table 2

L1 and Sex of Students of Participants

L1	Male	Female	Total
Arabic	0	1	1
Chinese	9	19	28
Creole	1	3	4
French	3	1	4
Italian	2	2	4
Japanese	7	11	18
Korean	7	5	12
Malagasy	1	0	1
Mongolian	1	2	3
Persian	0	1	1
Portuguese	21	17	38
Russian	0	3	3
Spanish	68	82	150
Swedish	0	1	1
Thai	0	2	2
Total	120	150	270

3.3 Data analysis

To answer the research questions, we used analysis of variance for quantitative survey data. For qualitative data, we used a phenomenological approach that sought to understand the lived experiences of the language learners in terms of their overall perceptions of the difficulty of the language skills examined in this study. The qualitative data analysis was based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2017) but borrowed concepts from Spradley's (1980) domain and taxonomic analyses. Given that the language skills of interest had already been decided, we conducted a domain analysis with both the teacher and student data using the pre-determined domains—listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

After identifying each response associated with one or more language skill, we used open coding to identify reasons the participants indicated that one skill was more difficult than another. We articulated codes made up of the single words or phrases from the participants that described or labeled a reason a language skill was perceived as difficult. In the grounded theory approach, axial coding followed open coding. Axial coding aims to process previously generated codes to relate them to one another as appropriate. While analyzing the data in this way, we were able to create new codes that represented broader and more salient themes.

For example, if one response indicated that paragraph organization makes writing more difficult while another mentioned that connecting supporting sentences to topic sentence is the primary reason for difficulty, in our axial coding, these would be grouped together as writing conventions. This is consistent with Spradley's (1980) taxonomic analysis. While there are several ways to taxonomize, we organized data by type or part. For example, both paragraph organization and writing supporting sentences were part of writing conventions. Working back to the domain analysis, we further taxonomized the data by reasons or explanations—writing conventions are a reason why writing is more difficult. With this approach, we were able to connect salient reasons participants used to identify which language skill was the most difficult for them.

In order to establish trustworthiness in the data, a qualitative analysis was conducted independently by two of the researchers. The identified themes were compared and while some were named differently, both researchers came to similar conclusions resulting in the themes presented in the results section. Given the detailed process we followed, we are confident that the analysis is confirmable (that it would yield similar results for additional researchers) and dependable (that the process could be replicated by other researchers).

4 Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the analyses used in this study designed to answer the research questions.

4.1 Perceptions of language skill difficulty—quantitative results

The first research question asked *Which of the seven skill areas, if any, do ESL students consider to be the most difficult, and how do these perceptions of relative difficulty differ between students and their teachers?* To help answer this question, the survey presented students with the seven language skill areas and the statement *This English language skill is difficult for me*, where the response options spanned the eight-point scale of agreement described previously. Based on the scale, mean student responses were somewhat ambivalent, ranging between *somewhat disagree* and *somewhat agree* for all seven language skills. A repeated measures analysis of variance for student perceptions

of relative skill difficulty was used with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction to adjust for a lack of sphericity. Although the results were statistically significant for the students, $F(5.107,1671.840) = 19.238, p < .001$, the effect size was negligible (partial $\eta^2 = .019$). This suggests that while students perceived the different skills as only slightly difficult on average, they did not perceive one skill to be meaningfully more difficult than another.

A repeated measures analysis of variance was also conducted for teacher perceptions of the relative difficulty of each of the seven language skills for their students (i.e., *This English language skill is difficult for my students*). Again, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was needed to adjust for a lack of sphericity. Teacher responses ranged from *agree* to a little beyond *strongly agree*. These results were statistically significant, $F(4.768,265.882) = 8.172, p < .001$, and produced an effect size near the border between moderate and large (partial $\eta^2 = .125$). These results also show that teachers perceived that writing was more difficult for their students compared to the other skills including listening ($p = .064, d = .556$), reading ($p = .014, d = .517$), vocabulary ($p = .001, d = .696$), grammar ($p < .001, d = .837$), pronunciation ($p < .001, d = .847$), and speaking ($p < .001, d = 1.09$). Table 3 summarizes means and standard deviations for perceived difficulty from students and teachers. It also shows that mean teacher responses were much higher on the scale than was observed for the students, suggesting that teachers perceived each of the language skills to be much more difficult for the students than the students themselves perceived them to be.

Table 3

Perceptions of Language Skill Difficulty to Students and Teachers

Skill	Students		Teachers		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Writing	4.85	1.858	7.02	0.85	76.096	1,316	<.001	1.502
Listening	4.44	2.007	6.48	1.08	54.756	1,316	<.001	1.266
Reading	4.57	1.886	6.45	1.31	50.761	1,316	<.001	1.158
Vocabulary	4.86	1.852	6.36	1.04	37.219	1,316	<.001	.999
Grammar	4.76	1.867	6.26	0.97	35.240	1,316	<.001	1.008
Pronunciation	4.76	1.881	6.10	1.28	28.423	1,316	<.001	.833
Speaking	4.71	1.941	6.00	1.01	23.885	1,316	<.001	.834

Note: 8 = Very strongly agree, 7 = Strongly agree, 6 = Agree, 5 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Disagree, 2 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Very strongly disagree

4.2 Perceptions of language skill difficulty—qualitative results

4.2.1 Students

In the survey, students provided responses to an open-ended question regarding the language skill that seemed the most difficult for them. Unfortunately, a few student responses did not clearly indicate a particular language skill. Consequently, these responses were not included in our analysis. However, the remaining 271 responses identified specific language skills that were perceived as the most challenging for the respondents. Raw numbers and percentages for each language skill are presented in Table 4 followed by summary observations from student comments.

As illustrated in Table 4, more than a quarter of the students described speaking as the most difficult language skill for them. The most common reason that participants reported for selecting speaking as

the most difficult language skill was a lack of adequate vocabulary. Affective factors such as nervousness about speaking to others and concerns about their pronunciation also played a role in students' perception of speaking difficulty.

Students indicated that reading was their second most difficult language skill. There were two commonly reported reasons for this perception. Again, vocabulary was the most frequently identified cause of reading difficulty. Students also reported that they experienced a lack of focus when they read, causing challenges in comprehension and reading in general.

Fifty-one students selected listening as the most difficult skill area. Once more, students reported that vocabulary was the greatest cause of these challenges. Additionally, students reported that two variables outside of their control contributed to listening problems— speech rate and accent.

Table 4

Student Qualitative Responses by Skill

Skill	N
Speaking	70 (25.83%)
Reading	52 (19.19%)
Listening	51 (18.82%)
Writing	40 (14.76%)
Grammar	39 (14.39%)
Pronunciation	12 (4.43%)
Vocabulary	7 (2.58%)
Total	271(100%)

Writing was the fourth most selected skill area. Students reported that writing conventions were the greatest stumbling block when it came to writing. Grammar was the second cause, followed by L1 interference.

Thirty-nine participants selected grammar as the most difficult skill area. As with writing, students indicated that L1 interference played a role in the difficulty of grammar. Also mentioned was the notion that students simply need more practice with grammar. However, the most common reason for grammar being the most difficult skill area was the fact that there are too many rules to remember.

Fewer students selected either pronunciation or vocabulary as the most difficult skill area. Twelve students selected pronunciation, listing accent as the common troublesome factor. Seven students chose vocabulary, and there was no consistent response in terms of why they considered vocabulary to be difficult.

4.2.2 Teachers

From a total of 52 teacher responses, the majority ($n=23$) indicated that writing was the most difficult language skill for their students in stark contrast to student perceptions emphasizing the difficulty of speaking and pronunciation. Other skills identified by teachers included reading ($n=11$), listening ($n=11$), vocabulary ($n=3$), grammar ($n=2$), and speaking ($n=2$). No teachers selected pronunciation as the most difficult skill. As in the student analysis, in cases where teachers indicated multiple areas of difficulty, the skill that seemed of primary concern was counted as the most difficult area chosen by that participant. Some representative teacher responses are included in Table 5.

Table 5

Summary of Qualitative Teacher Responses

Skill	N	Representative Comments
Writing	23 (44.23%)	<p>“Writing is the most difficult skill for my students. It requires the use of grammar and vocabulary as well as good organizational skills.”</p> <p>“Writing is most difficult because it demands the simultaneous synthesis of composition and paragraph organization, grammar, word choice (or vocabulary), spelling, punctuation, and typing or handwriting, etc.”</p>
Reading	11 (21.15%)	<p>“I think that academic reading is the most difficult because this is never explicitly taught and not discussed even in casual conversation.”</p> <p>“Reading is difficult because they are not used to reading so much at one time, but they need this ability for university classes. It's not so much the individual vocabulary words as it is putting them all together and discovering the meaning of the passage.”</p>
Listening	11 (21.15%)	<p>“I think listening is the most difficult because what they hear in or outside of class isn't scripted and sometimes they have a difficult time understanding unfamiliar vocabulary or they may have learned different pronunciation of a word so they don't understand it.”</p> <p>“they haven't had the practice of listening to native speakers before.”</p>
Vocabulary	3 (5.77%)	<p>“I think vocabulary is most difficult because many students think they need to know every word.”</p> <p>“So, which is the most difficult? Whichever one they need to develop at the moment. With that said....vocabulary is the foundation of language.”</p>
Grammar	2 (3.85%)	<p>“it influences both positively and negatively all the other skill areas”</p> <p>“it is quite different from their own language structures.”</p>
Speaking	2 (3.85%)	<p>“When I taught in an ESL environment, I think listening was the most difficult because students were often unprepared to deal with a variety of accents and also were not taught to listen strategically.”</p> <p>“Speaking, because many things from their first languages transfer over and some things get reversed or used improperly.”</p>
Total	52 (100%)	

Many teachers explained that their reason for considering writing the most difficult skill was due to challenges with English writing conventions, grammar, and vocabulary. These reasons are well aligned with reported student perceptions, which indicated that writing conventions, grammar, and L1 interference were leading causes in writing difficulty. Teachers each provided unique reasons for choosing reading, listening, vocabulary, grammar, or speaking as the most difficult skill area. As such, there was a wide range of factors to which teachers attributed skill difficulty. Table 5 summarizes teacher responses along with representative commentary.

5 Discussion

5.1 Discussion of findings

In this study, we collected survey responses from 278 students studying English as a second language and 52 teachers at an IEP in the United States. Results indicated that students perceive the most

difficult skill area to be speaking, followed by reading, listening, writing, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Unlike their students, however, teachers ranked writing as the most difficult skill. Such findings are consistent with some scholars (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016), but they are at odds with others who concluded that listening was the most difficult language skill (Graham, 2003; Berry & Williams, 2004). Following writing, teachers perceived the most difficult language skills to be reading, listening, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking, with no teacher selecting pronunciation as the most difficult. Further research may be needed to clarify studies with conflicting results.

Though a few participants in this study listed vocabulary as the most difficult skill area in and of itself (student $n=7$, teacher $n=3$), vocabulary was the leading cause for students who chose listening, speaking, and reading as the most difficult skill. Teachers also mentioned that inadequate vocabulary development was the leading cause of difficulty in writing. These results support findings of previous studies, which have indicated that insufficient vocabulary development is a leading cause of difficulties in learning a second language (e.g., August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Becket, Benander, & Kumar, 2007; Correa, 2010; Gan, 2012; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Though students and teachers diverged in how difficult they perceived writing to be, both identified writing conventions as the most salient difficulty within writing. Fortunately, this alignment seems to indicate that teachers may have a general awareness of what students need in writing instruction. However, is it possible that some of the difficulty perceived by teachers might be associated with their own challenges and insecurities in teaching this skill? Moran (2013) has lamented that in many writing programs, there is “little empirical evidence” guiding “the content and curricular goals” (p. 1). Others have described approaches to university writing programs as not being appropriately “coherent” or “systematic” (Garbati, et al., 2015, p. 4).

Another challenge is that writing conventions tend to differ from one language to another, but they also differ across genres within a given language. Persuasive essays, for instance, may involve different writing conventions compared to expository reports, narratives, or creative writing. Students need to be taught writing conventions within specific contexts. This may be particularly important in academic writing within discipline-specific contexts (Hartshorn & Evans, 2019; Hartshorn, Evans, Egbert, & Johnson, 2022).

Additionally, affect influenced student perceptions of skill area difficulty. This was especially prominent in speaking, with students commenting that they were nervous or afraid to speak in English, supporting Berry and Williams’s (2004) finding that students experience affective distress in addition to mere linguistic challenges. As outlined earlier, affective factors affect motivation. The students who experience distress, anxiety, or other negative emotions are less likely to experience strong motivation, leading to decreased success in the language learning process. Similarly, students reported that reading was difficult due to an inability to focus.

Interference from the first language (L1) has also shown to influence student perceptions of grammar and writing. Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, and Wahid (2012) also found that such interference influences writing abilities. Furthermore, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) suggest that accent and L1 influence affect pronunciation in the L2; student participants noted that they struggled with pronunciation because of their nonnative accents, though this was not a major concern for the TESOL practitioners.

The second leading cause of listening problems was rate of speech, again lending support to Berry and Williams’s (2004) findings. However, we expounded on their conclusions which described the cause as “general listening problems,” to identify three leading causes including inadequate vocabulary. The students who selected grammar as the most difficult area reported that challenges in remembering the rules was a contributing factor to its difficulty. Interestingly, however, grammar was only listed as a cause of difficulty for writing. Teachers in this study also listed grammar as a contributing factor in writing difficulty. This supports Berry and Williams’s (2004) and Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, and Wahid’s (2012) conclusions that grammar is an important contributing factor in writing challenges.

Though additional research may be needed to further contextualize the results of this study, here we present some of the most salient findings and recommendations for practitioners and program administrators.

1. Students may perceive that the different language skills are easier for them than they actually are, possibly fostering a misplaced confidence in their abilities. While continuing to promote student confidence in a positive learning environment, it may be useful for teachers to help their students recognize the specific ways they can improve in particular language skills.

Because teacher feedback can positively impact learner confidence (Koenka et al. 2019; Lou & Noels, 2020), how teachers respond to areas for improvement and strengths can help students align their perceived ability with their measured ability. Lou and Noels (2020) have suggested that improvement-oriented feedback may appropriately foster confidence in language learners. Therefore, teachers should strive to give feedback that indicates that students actually can make meaningful improvement. Doing so should foster confidence in addition to helping students better self-assess their ability in specific skills.

Consider, for example, students who feel confident in their writing yet are not as proficient as they might think they are. Instead of only marking student article use errors, for instance, the teacher might add some written feedback such as:

Great work! You may notice I marked the articles in your writing that were used incorrectly. However, I also highlighted the articles that were used appropriately. If you look at the articles you used correctly and compare them with those you used inappropriately, I think you will continue to improve in this area. You are a good writer and are learning quickly.

Though feedback like this may be time consuming, it may positively impact student confidence while helping them recognize areas for improvement.

2. Students may be preoccupied with their speaking and pronunciation, which could divert attention from the development of other more challenging skills such as writing. Teachers can help students accurately perceive their strengths and weaknesses with specific guidance on the best investments of their time and energy.

While creating and maintaining a positive learning environment, teachers should be open and frank with students regarding strengths and weaknesses. Teachers may bolster confidence, for example, by explaining and demonstrating through personal interlocution with students that intelligibility is a much more important goal than an elusive pursuit of “native-like” pronunciation (e.g., Levis, 2020). Teachers can also take time to demystify for students why the teacher sees a particular skill, such as writing, as being more difficult. This could include explicit examples of the specific challenges the teacher notices from research or classroom observation, as well as recommendations for overcoming those challenges.

3. Teachers should gather information about the perceptions of their students and engage with their students in explicit discussions about those perceptions in ways that allow the teacher to add insights that may help shape and inform student perspectives.

Teachers could gather important information about student perceptions at the beginning of a course as well as at strategic times throughout the course. Though this process could be fairly elaborate with the help of an electronic survey tool or a carefully designed printed survey, teachers can also gain important insights by having students use email or even a blank piece of paper to respond to several targeted questions. Teachers can use student responses to guide explicit classroom discussions that can help students and teachers be more aligned and unified in their perceptions, expectations, and aspirations.

4. Students may benefit from teachers who incorporate a robust but level-appropriate regimen of

vocabulary development in their courses whether the main skill of focus is reading, writing, listening, or speaking.

The vital importance of vocabulary acquisition on overall language development is very well documented (e.g., Grabe, 2009; Folse, 2004) for both language comprehension and production. Barclay and Schmitt (2019) have described vocabulary acquisition as “among the most important tasks of the language learner” (p. 800). Nevertheless, the importance of vocabulary continues to be overlooked in many if not most EFL and ESL teaching and learning contexts. In many cases, teachers simply focus on vocabulary as it appears in their language materials, if they emphasize it at all.

However, such a casual approach may not be adequate for learners in great need of vocabulary development. Nations (2006) has recommended starting with the 1,000 most frequent word families in English, and Barclay and Schmitt (2019) have noted that this should be coupled with the most relevant vocabulary for a student’s specific learning or working context. Nevertheless, Dang and Webb (2014) have pointed out that over 4,000 of the most frequent word families are needed for accessing academic English. Since the task is substantial and time is of the essence for the English language learner, vocabulary development should be a greater priority than it often is in many contexts.

Teachers should facilitate vocabulary development in their students through multiple means. This includes incidental learning that might come through extensive reading as well as intentional learning through systematic and repetitive study of curated lists based on frequency or relevant themes (Barclay & Schmitt, 2019). Students can also be encouraged to be strategic about their own vocabulary development. This might include their own use of notebooks and flashcards for words they encounter that seem useful in their learning or working contexts. As teachers emphasize vocabulary development in and outside of the classroom, students will be in the best possible position to optimize their language development.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Though this study provides a number of important insights, results should be considered in the light of the limitations of this work. First, the data analyzed in this study was self-reported. Though certainly appropriate for a study of student and teacher perceptions (Brown, 2009), this kind of self-reported data is difficult to verify with external metrics. This study was strengthened by including quantitative and qualitative analyses, but qualitative data was limited to comments gathered from a single survey. Adding interviews or focus group data over time in future research might yield additional insight.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine ESL student and teacher perceptions of the relative difficulty of reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This work was motivated by the belief that teaching and learning can be optimized when student and teacher perceptions are well aligned. This research found stark differences between student and teacher perceptions of the relative difficulty of the language skills examined in this study, and that teachers viewed each of the language skills to be much more difficult than the students perceived them to be. Teachers who are aware of these findings can engage with their students in explicit discussions about teaching and learning challenges. They will be in the best position to foster a learning environment that aligns student and teacher expectations and optimizes student success.

Appendix

Student Survey

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements for each language skill included below:

This skill is important for ESL students who want to study at a university in English.

	Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Very strongly disagree
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pronunciation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grammar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vocabulary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This English language skill is difficult for me.

	Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Very strongly disagree
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pronunciation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grammar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vocabulary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Which language skill is the most difficult for you and why is it difficult?

Thanks for completing this survey. Please select "Submit" below.

Submit

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