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INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE-SKILL BARRIERS AND STRATEGY USE AMONG LOCAL EFL LEARNERS: INTEGRATING VISUAL TECHNIQUES INTO RECEPTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT:

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learners often face considerable challenges in developing both receptive and productive skills. These barriers not only hinder communicative competence but also affect academic achievement. To overcome such difficulties, learners employ a variety of strategies, among which visual techniques and technology-enhanced tools have recently attracted increasing attention.

This study investigates language-skill barriers and strategy use among local EFL learners, with a particular focus on integrating visual techniques into the development of reading and writing as representative receptive and productive skills. A quantitative method was employed, involving 122 first-year English-major students from three regions of Uzbekistan, surveyed through an online questionnaire. Besides three demographic questions, the instrument contained 15 main items designed to: (a) identify language-skill barriers, (b) explore individual strategies used by learners, and (c) evaluate the potential role of visualization-based techniques in overcoming these difficulties.

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Keywords: Skill-related challenges, learning strategies, productive skills, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, GOs (graphic organizers), visual techniques, receptive skills, visual application, pictorial memory, pedagogical support, vocabulary limitations, confusing a question type, model essay analysis, pre-writing

АННОТАЦИЯ:

В области изучения английского языка как иностранного (EFL) обучающиеся нередко сталкиваются с серьезными трудностями при развитии как рецептивных, так и продуктивных навыков. Эти барьеры не только препятствуют формированию коммуникативной компетенции, но и оказывают влияние на академическую успеваемость. Для преодоления подобных трудностей обучающиеся используют различные стратегии, среди которых в последнее время особое внимание привлекают визуальные техники и технологии, основанные на использовании цифровых инструментов.

В данном исследовании рассматриваются языковые барьеры и использование стратегий у местных изучающих английский язык как иностранный, с особым акцентом на интеграцию визуальных техник в развитие чтения и письма как репрезентативных рецептивных и продуктивных навыков. Был применён количественный метод, в рамках которого проведён опрос 122 студентов первого курса, обучающихся по специальности «Английская филология», из трёх регионов Узбекистана. Анкета, размещённая в онлайн-формате, содержала три демографических вопроса и 15 основных пунктов, направленных на: (а) выявление языковых барьеров, (б) исследование индивидуальных стратегий, используемых обучающимися, и (с) оценку потенциальной роли техник, основанных на визуализации, в преодолении данных трудностей.

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Ключевые слова: трудности, связанные с навыками; стратегии обучения; продуктивные навыки; изучающие английский язык как иностранный (EFL); графические организаторы (GOs); визуальные техники; рецептивные навыки; визуальные приложения; образная память; педагогическая поддержка; ограничения словарного запаса; затруднения при понимании типов заданий; анализ модельного эссе; предписание к письму.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent periods, foreign language acquisition is becoming a central aim in the development of different countries' modern educational systems, especially in non-English contexts.

Despite the widespread emphasis on integrated language learning, many students continue to encounter substantial challenges across all four major language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing. These difficulties typically include limited vocabulary range, low confidence in oral production, weak comprehension strategies, and poor organization in written output. Such issues often hinder learners' ability to process and produce language effectively, especially in academic or test-oriented contexts.

Recent research suggests that visualization-based techniques—such as image-supported reading, audio-visual input, and graphic organizers—can play a significant role in reducing these barriers and enhancing learners' language performance, particularly in receptive skills like reading and listening.

In the sphere of higher education, students are continuously expected to develop strong competence in all four language skills - reading, listening, speaking, and writing - to accommodate both educational and occupational demands. Particularly, students preparing for international proficiency exams such as IELTS or CEFR-referenced assessments encounter pressure to achieve good results in each skill.

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Though many students, those from non-metropolitan regions, pointed out persistent challenges in mastering these skills. Factors such as lack of exposure to authentic materials and technology, weak learning strategies, and limited instructional support contribute to low progress in language acquisition.

In recent years, visualization techniques—such as image-supported vocabulary learning, visual storytelling, and multimodal content—have revealed promising outcomes aiding language comprehension and retention. Such methods are utmost helpful in strengthening receptive skills and may also develop learners' strategic competence in productive skills.

This study aims to identify the most common language skill-related difficulties faced by first-year English department students from different regions in Uzbekistan and to explore their preferred strategies for improving speaking and writing skills. Furthermore, the research investigates students' attitudes toward the use of visualization-based mobile applications for developing reading and listening skills. In line with this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the current specific challenges students face in each of the four language skills?

What strategies do students implement to enhance their competencies in productive skills (speaking and writing)?

To what extent are students aware of and willing to use visualization-based tools and graphic organizers to improve their receptive skills (reading and listening)?

2. Related literature overview.

2.1. Skill-Based Problems in the Language Learning Process

Listening challenges

Listening is one of the most important skills to establish effective communication in EFL, yet it remains one of the most challenging aspects of language to acquire. Several scientific findings reveal that the most frequent issues in listening skills

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are caused by fast speech of authentic recordings, insufficient task instructions by trainers, and a low degree of familiarity with the target language vocabulary. A recent quantitative study by Alqahtani (2024) [1] at King Faisal University confirmed these trends, revealing that EFL learners—particularly female students—struggle with native-speaker accents, lack of exposure to diverse listening materials, and minimal instructional support in strategy use. In line with this, Staehr (2009) [6] emphasized that limited vocabulary knowledge significantly hampers learners' ability to comprehend spoken input, reinforcing the idea that listening difficulties are multifaceted and often rooted in lexical gaps as well as instructional shortcomings. These complex issues suggest the growing need for pedagogical approaches that respond more directly to the diverse difficulties learners encounter in developing listening proficiency.

Reading difficulties

While listening involves real-time decoding of spoken input, reading poses its own set of challenges related to visual processing and text comprehension. Reading is a difficult skill as a receptive component of a foreign language, since a fundamental base of vocabulary knowledge is needed to enhance adequate comprehension of reading texts in a non-native context. As Nation (2009) [5] highlights, a fundamental component of reading comprehension is the ability to recognize known words and decipher unfamiliar ones, which underscores the critical role of vocabulary knowledge in reading proficiency. Similarly, research has shown that one of the most prevalent challenges faced by EFL learners is their struggle to understand reading passages due to limited vocabulary knowledge and difficulties in recognizing words (Hezam et al., 2022) [3]. These findings point to the necessity of instructional interventions that not only build vocabulary depth but also strengthen word recognition and decoding skills.

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Speaking difficulties

In contrast to receptive skills, speaking as a productive skill requires learners to actively construct and express language in real time. Speaking is widely regarded as a core component of communicative competence in any foreign language. However, EFL learners frequently encounter a range of challenges in developing this productive skill. Among these, shyness is reported as one of the most pervasive psychological barriers. Learners who experience shyness often fail to express their thoughts effectively and avoid oral participation, which negatively impacts their speaking proficiency (Baldwin, 2011; Robby, 2010; Bowen, 2005, as cited in Tambunan et al., 2018) [7]. Furthermore, as with other language skills, grammatical and lexical limitations are central barriers to developing oral proficiency. This was confirmed by the findings of Tambunan et al. (2018), who observed that students in an English department program commonly struggled with vocabulary retrieval and sentence construction during speaking tasks. These observations underscore the importance of developing learner confidence and linguistic readiness to enable more effective oral communication.

Writing difficulties

Writing is an essential productive skill that typically requires more time and cognitive effort to develop than other language skills. Alongside speaking, many EFL learners struggle with grammatical accuracy and idea generation. This issue was explored in a study by Tovar Viera et al. (2024) [8], who found that students at the Technical University of Cotopaxi faced significant challenges in organizing ideas and applying grammar rules correctly in essay writing. Similarly, a recent study by Aulia and Rizal (2024) [2] revealed that EFL students commonly face difficulties related to grammar, limited vocabulary, and lack of coherence in academic writing. The authors emphasized that poor planning, writing-related anxiety, and insufficient teacher feedback further exacerbate these problems,

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highlighting the growing demand for improved writing instruction and targeted pedagogical support.

2.2. Strategic approaches to enhance productive skills.

2.2.1. Definition for learning strategies

Learning strategies is a widely used term currently in the sphere of applied linguistics. It refers to all the ways and methods that language learners employ to provide an effective learning process (Tsinghong Ma, 2009) .

2.2.2. Language-area-based strategy classification

The second scheme of strategy classification that is consistently implemented at present (Chen Xiao- Tang & Zheng Min, as cited in Tsinghong Ma, 2009) is the division according to language areas and skills, they are strategies for learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and strategies for developing reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. Within this classification, it is also worth noting the theoretical underpinnings of strategies for reading and writing, as these skills, though not the central focus of the present study, are addressed in part of the questionnaire.

3. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative method was used to collect data organizing an online survey among individuals. The online questionnaire contains 15 items which aimed to investigate major language skill barriers in SLL. The research employed purposive sampling, in which the participants accounted for total 122 first-year students from English departments in 3 universities from different regions in Uzbekistan, namely Surkhandarya, Kashkadarya, and Syrdarya. The experiment was carried out during the second semester of study.

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Procedure

Two groups from each university were selected (Termiz State university in Surkhandarya, Karshi State University in Kashkadarya and Gulistan State University in Syrdarya) and shared a link to the questionnaire. It took participants approximately 10 minutes to answer all questions in the online form. Since the survey contained both closed-ended and open-ended items, students had to write their own opinions to some inquiries.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1. Repeatedly Mentioned Skills (Based on Open Responses)

LANGUAGE SKILLS	TIMES MENTIONED	PERCENTAGES
SPEAKING	44	33,85%
WRITING	38	29,23%
READING	30	23,08%
LISTENING	18	13,85%
TOTAL	130	100%

Question 1. Which skills do you mostly find challenging?

The open-ended responses were examined to identify the frequency with which each language skill was reported as difficult. As participants were allowed to mention more than one skill, the total number of mentions (N=130) exceeds the number of respondents (N=122), indicating overlapping challenges.

According to the outcomes from question 1, Speaking (33.85%) and Writing (29.23%) were cited most frequently among other skills, highlighting persistent difficulties in productive language use. In particular, Writing was reported as

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challenging due to issues such as lack of ideas, limited vocabulary, and difficulties in maintaining coherence and grammar. Reading (23.08%) and Listening (13.85%) followed, suggesting that receptive skills, while problematic, were less frequently mentioned.

These findings underline the need for targeted support in developing learners' expressive capacities, with emphasis on both spoken and written output, especially in regions where practice-based learning opportunities may be limited.

Question2: Do you experience any difficulties in acquiring the “Reading” skill? While many respondents indicated little to no difficulty, approximately 35% reported moderate struggles with reading. The most common issues mentioned were:

- limited vocabulary,
- misunderstanding of academic terms,
- and difficulty interpreting headings.

Examples of student responses:

- “Vocabulary is not strong enough.”
- “Reading is difficult because some academic words are hard to grasp.”
- “I can’t understand all words in reading.”
- “Headings are a bit confusing.”

These findings suggest that although reading is not universally perceived as difficult, lexical and academic reading proficiency remains a challenge for a notable number of students. This may reflect gaps in instructional focus or access to supportive resources in certain regions.

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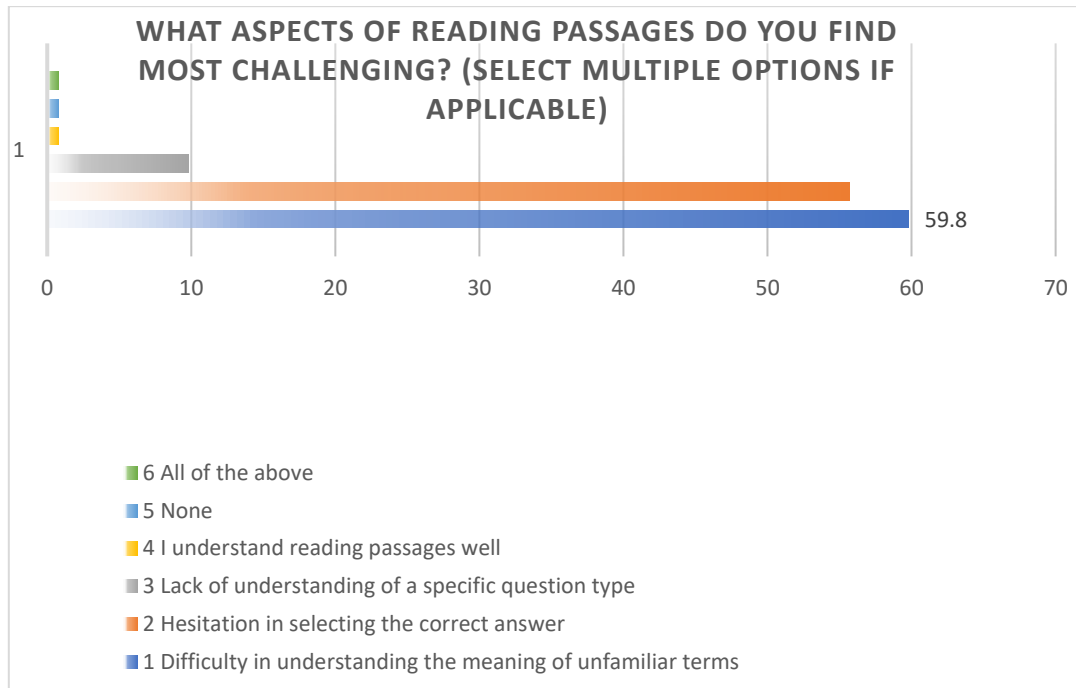


Figure 2. Major difficulties students face in reading passages

As the third challenging skill reported in figure 1, reading requires special concentration and a strategic approach to acquire. As figure 2 showed, the most considerable percentage (59,8%) of students came across the problem of unfamiliar vocabulary, especially scientific terms. 56% of learners had difficulties in being confused in choosing the right answer, and almost 10 % of students struggled in distinguishing a certain question type. The collected data showed that problems offered in question 3 had been reported in over half of the students.

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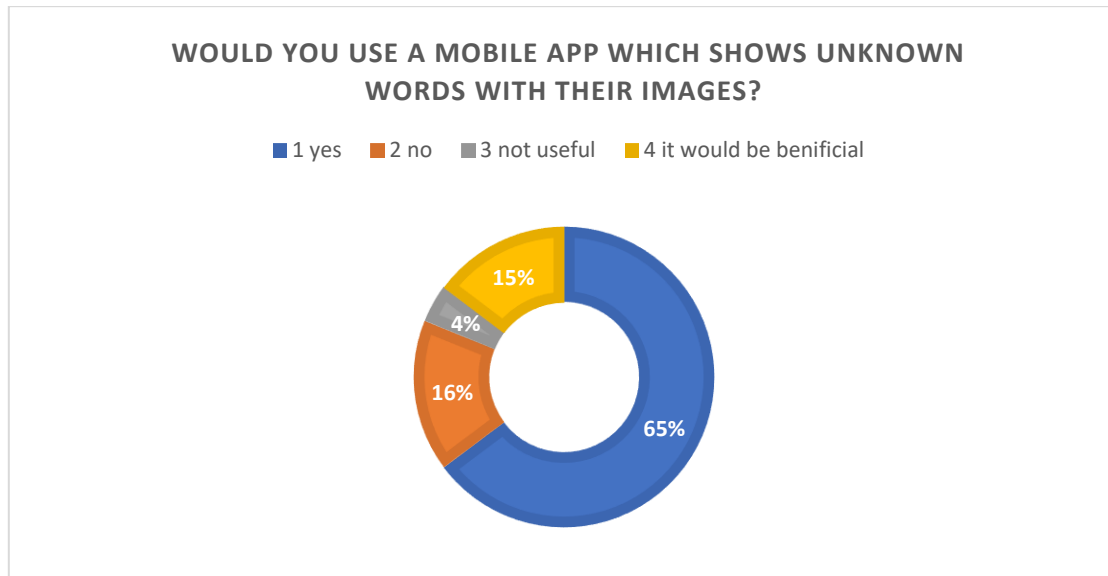


Figure 3. Students' opinions about the possible usage of visual mobile app.

Question 4 aimed to suggest a visual app as a solution to the problems mentioned in the question 3. The pie chart illustrated students' willingness on the potential future usage of the visual application. The statistics showed that most respondents answered positively (Yes=65%, Beneficial=15%) which indicated a necessity of visual tools in teaching reading skill.

Question 5:

Do you experience any difficulties in acquiring the "Listening" skill? If yes, in what ways?

Since question 5 was open-ended question, participants answered both with short YES, NO answers and with long descriptions of their apparent problems. However, the number of existing challenges was minor which indicated a noticeable percentage of listeners rarely encountered barriers in listening comprehension.

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However, recurring difficulties included:

- **Fast audio pace** (e.g., “Audio is too fast to follow at times.”)
- **Pronunciation confusion** (e.g., “Sometimes I can’t recognize similar-sounding words.”)
- **Vocabulary limitations** (e.g., “I struggle when unfamiliar words appear.”)
- **Concentration loss** (e.g., “If I lose focus, I miss the answers.”)

These responses suggest that while listening is generally considered more manageable, certain learners still struggle with typical features of spoken academic English. Therefore, enhancing note-taking strategies and exposure to diverse accents and speech rates could support better comprehension.

Do you think that visual note-taking of familiar and easily recognizable words while listening helps you identify the correct answers more effectively?

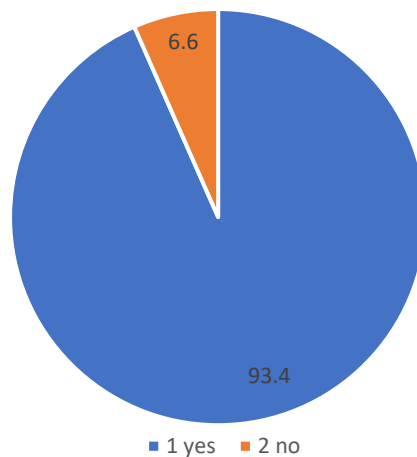


Figure 4. Students’ perceptions of the visual note-taking technique for improving listening skill.

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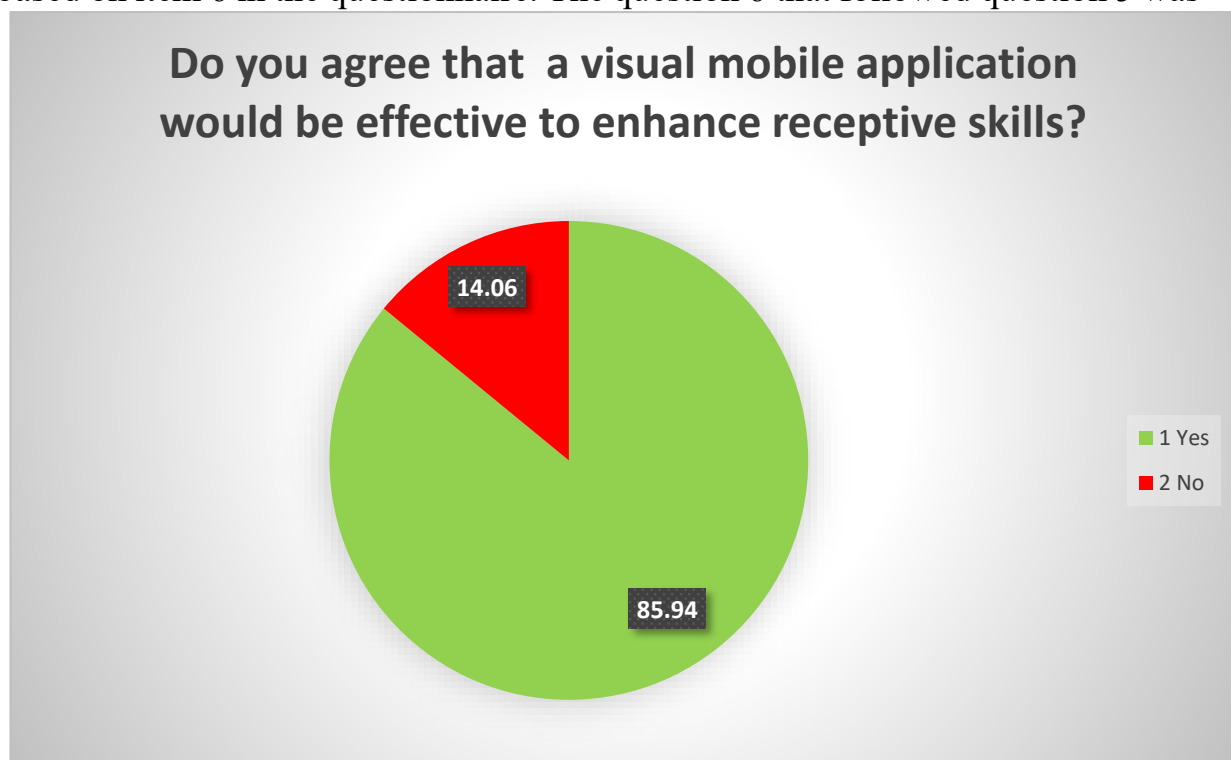
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The pie chart illustrated positive and negative viewpoints of students about the technique of visual note-taking to overcome existing challenges in listening skill based on item 6 in the questionnaire. The question 6 that followed question 5 was



given as a “treatment” to listening problems in students. In terms of statistics from the pie chart, the majority of students (93,4%) supported the idea that the note-taking technique would be helpful to find the answers in listening exercises. Less than 10 percent of respondents answered “NO”.

Figure 5. Students’ Willingness to Use Mobile Apps for Developing Receptive Skills.

Item 7 in the questionnaire was a general inquiry to collect students’ overall opinions on the mobile app, which was inquired about in several questions above. The degree (approx. 85%) of positive responses to query 7 further supported the effectiveness of the mobile application.

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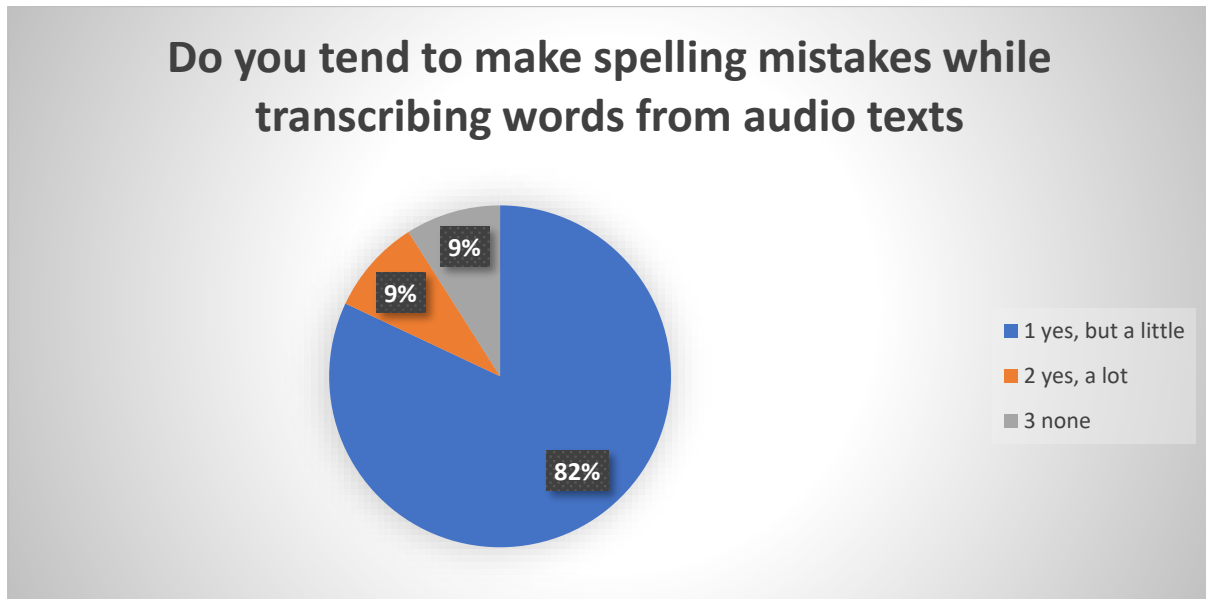


Figure 6. The frequency of spelling mistakes by students.

Item 8 also asked a specific challenge related to listening comprehension. Regarding with gathered results, under 10 % of students reported that they often faced difficulty in the correct spelling of audio texts, while most of them stated that the right spelling was hardly problematic.

Survey **Item 9** aimed to examine learners' attitudes toward the use of visual aids, particularly image-based representations, in understanding unfamiliar terminology during reading tasks.

The question: Do you think a mobile application that presents unfamiliar reading terms in visual (pictorial) form would be helpful to you? If yes, please explain why. A substantial portion of respondents provided **positive responses**, highlighting the **benefits of pictorial memory, ease of understanding abstract or borrowed terms, and enhanced retention**. For example, students noted:

- "Because when I see a picture, I remember the word better."
- "It helps form a mental image, especially when there is no direct translation."

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- "Pictures make it easier to guess or remember meanings."
Meanwhile, a **smaller group** expressed **neutral or negative views**, arguing that such tools might not always be effective, or that traditional dictionaries provide a more accurate understanding.
- "Not always useful — better to read and understand the context."
- "Some terms are too abstract to represent visually."

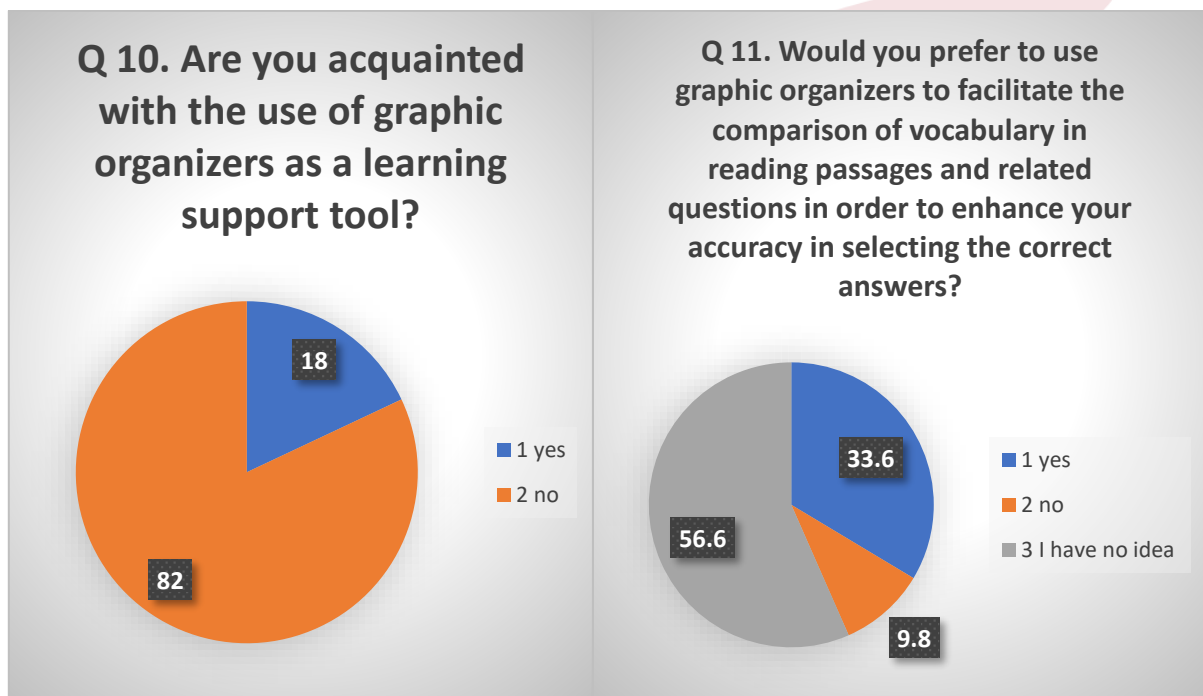


Figure 7. Opinions about the knowledge and facilities of GOs by students.

Data from the first (the option “NO”, 82%) and the second pie (the option “I HAVE NO IDEA, 56,6%”) charts showed that a significant number of students were not familiar with graphic organizers. Meanwhile, under 40% of students gave positive opinions about effective usage of GOs in the improvement of reading skill, while just below 10 % demonstrated negative views (“NO”) in item

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11. 18% of participants mentioned that they knew about GOs as an educational supportive tool in item 10.

Figure 8. Categorization of Writing Difficulties Based on Open-Ended Responses

No	Difficulty Category	Sample Responses (shortened)	Number of Instances	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of Ideas	"No ideas come", "Hard to generate ideas", "Shallow ideas"	34	40.5%
2	Grammatical Errors	"Grammar mistakes", "Tenses", "Complex sentence issues"	21	25.0%
3	Limited Vocabulary	"Lack of vocabulary", "Can't find synonyms", "Basic words"	13	15.5%
4	Text Structuring	"Disorganized sentences", "Paragraph structure", "Essay format confusion"	10	11.9%
5	Other/General Issues	"Translation issues", "Unclear problems"	6	7.1%

Item 12. Do you experience difficulties in writing skills? If yes, what kind of problems do you face? Please describe in detail.

This open-ended question aimed to identify specific barriers learners face while developing writing skills in English. The focus was on diagnosing particular components (such as grammar, idea generation, vocabulary, structure) that learners perceive as obstacles during writing tasks, especially in academic or test-oriented contexts.

Note: This table presents the categorization of 84 reported difficulties related to writing skills. Percentages are based on the total number of distinct difficulties, not on total respondents (N = 122), as some participants mentioned more than one issue.

A portion of the respondents (approximately 30%) either reported no difficulty in writing or provided answers such as "No", "Not really", or used symbols (e.g., "-

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”) — indicating absence of difficulty. These were excluded from the classification, but are noted here to reflect the overall trend.

This distribution helps to better understand which writing-related problems are most common and can inform focused pedagogical interventions.

Item 13. Have you ever used any strategies or techniques to improve your writing skills? If yes, which ones?

The question aimed to explore students' awareness and application of strategies to improve their writing performance, particularly in academic and IELTS-style contexts. Thematic coding of responses revealed eight main strategy types, which are summarized below with their frequency and percentage of total valid responses (N=84):

Note: Although the total number of survey participants was 122, only 84 students (68.8%) provided analyzable responses to open-ended question 13. The remaining responses were either left blank or contained no relevant information for analysis.

Findings:

Model Essay Analysis – 33 students (39.3%)

A large number of participants reported reading and analyzing sample essays—particularly high-scoring or native-like writings—to learn structure, coherence, and vocabulary usage.

Example: “I analyze 8-band essays,” “I read model answers.”

Practice Writing – 27 students (32.1%)

Students emphasized writing frequently, such as daily practice or rewriting essays for improvement.

Example: “I write one essay per day,” “I prefer practice.”

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Use of Templates/Structures – 24 students (28.6%)

Many learners relied on memorized templates or standard structures, particularly for IELTS Task 2.

Example: “I follow essay format,” “I use pre-learned structures.”

Vocabulary Building – 20 students (23.8%)

Strategies included memorizing synonyms, learning linking words, and using vocabulary-enhancing apps.

Example: “I use Wisdom app,” “I collect and practice topic vocabulary.”

Planning and Pre-Writing – 12 students (14.3%)

Students mentioned outlining or brainstorming before writing to improve organization and coherence.

Example: “I always plan before writing,” “Planning helps structure my ideas.”

Learning from Teachers/Media – 11 students (13.1%)

Respondents reported watching writing tutorials, listening to podcasts, or applying teacher guidance.

Example: “I follow my teacher’s strategies,” “YouTube lessons helped me.”

Use of Technology (e.g., ChatGPT) – 6 students (7.1%)

A few mentioned using AI tools such as ChatGPT to generate ideas or check their writing.

Example: “ChatGPT helps me plan and improve essays.”

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Self-Reflection and Revision – 8 students (9.5%)

Some learners engaged in checking, rewriting, or comparing different versions of their own writing.

Example: “I write, then review and improve,” “I compare my essays to samples.”

Non-Use of Strategies:

23 out of 122 total students (18.9%) explicitly stated that they had not used any strategies or were still exploring how to improve their writing.

Example: “No, I haven’t used any,” “I just follow textbook examples,” “Not yet, I’m still learning.”

Summary for the data

The data reveal that a substantial majority (approximately 72.6% of respondents) are actively using strategies to enhance their writing, with model essay analysis (39.3%) and frequent writing practice (32.1%) being the most common. However, nearly one-fifth of participants reported no strategy use, suggesting a need for more structured instruction in writing methodology. These findings support the integration of explicit, strategic writing training—especially for learners transitioning into academic or standardized writing formats.

Question 14: What difficulties do you face in speaking?

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Limited vocabulary	30	35.7%
Lack of ideas / content	24	28.6%
Fluency issues (pauses, hesitation)	14	16.7%
Pronunciation problems	8	9.5%
Grammar-related issues	4	4.8%
Psychological factors (anxiety, fear, low confidence)	2	2.4%
No difficulty / unclear response	2	2.4%

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The most prevalent challenge reported was a limited vocabulary, affecting over one-third of the participants. This indicates that many learners struggle to retrieve appropriate words during speech. A lack of ideas or content to speak about came next, suggesting underdeveloped critical thinking or topic familiarity. Fluency and hesitation issues highlight difficulties in maintaining coherent and uninterrupted speech. While pronunciation and grammar were noted, they were comparatively less frequent. Only a small minority denied any difficulty, suggesting high levels of metacognitive awareness or, conversely, underreporting.

Note: Around 2 participants (2.4%) explicitly stated that they face no difficulty or gave vague/ambiguous responses such as "ok", "nothing", or left symbolic marks. These were classified as “no difficulty or negative response”.

Question 15: What strategies do you use to improve your speaking?

Strategy Type	Frequency	Percentage
Conversational practice (with peers, etc.)	26	30.9%
Listening (music, podcasts, movies)	22	26.2%
Shadowing technique	16	19.0%
Self-practice (mirror, self-talk)	9	10.7%
Using mobile apps/tools	8	9.5%
Recording and reviewing oneself	5	6.0%
No strategy / unclear response	3	3.6%

Peer interaction and listening exposure were the most popular strategies, suggesting learners value immersive or communicative input methods. The shadowing technique was also quite common, showing increasing awareness of this method among students. Fewer students engaged in active self-correction methods such as recording themselves or using mobile apps. A small number of students did not use any strategy or could not clearly describe what they do — this may indicate a lack of guidance or strategic training in speaking development.

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Note: 3 participants (3.6%) gave unclear, symbolic, or “I don’t use anything” type responses — categorized as no strategy used or negative response.

General Reflections & Pedagogical Implications:

The fact that some students reported no difficulty or no strategy implies either unawareness of their weaknesses or a lack of metacognitive reflection. A strong reliance on vocabulary and idea-generation skills suggests that pre-speaking planning, brainstorming, and lexical resource training should be emphasized in classroom instruction. More structured exposure to self-monitoring techniques (e.g., recording oneself, feedback-based tasks) could help bridge the gap between input and productive skills. Emotional and psychological barriers (though less frequent) should not be overlooked, as even a few students mentioned nervousness or fear in speaking — instructors can address this through safe speaking environments and low-stakes practice.

5. CONCLUSION

Mastery of core language skills is essential for successful communication in a foreign language. For this reason, contemporary education increasingly prioritizes foreign language instruction, aiming to create effective, natural, and comprehensible communication among speakers of different nations, thereby supporting broader social and economic relations.

This study has emphasized identifying common skill-related barriers faced by EFL learners, documenting students’ preferred strategies, and highlighting the pedagogical potential of visual techniques. The findings indicate that while learners employ diverse strategies—such as model essay analysis, frequent practice, and conversational activities—there remains a considerable gap in systematic strategy training, particularly in non-metropolitan regions. Moreover, students’ overwhelmingly positive responses to visualization-based tools suggest that integrating mobile applications, graphic organizers, and image-based

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techniques into instruction could significantly enhance receptive and productive skill development.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of visualization strategies on different learner populations and explore ways to combine traditional instruction with technology-enhanced learning tools.

Limitations

- The study sample was limited to 122 first-year English philology students from three regions of Uzbekistan, which restricts the generalizability of the findings.
- The survey relied solely on self-reported data collected online, which may involve subjectivity and response bias.
- The study mainly focused on reading and writing skills, leaving listening and speaking skills for future research.
- Not all 122 students answered every single question due to a lack of control in the online survey process.

Recommendations and suggestions

- Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample to improve generalizability across different regions and institutions.
- Both receptive and productive skills should be addressed equally, with special attention to listening and speaking alongside reading and writing.
- Mixed-methods approaches (quantitative and qualitative) are recommended to provide deeper insights into learners' strategies and challenges.
- Classroom observations and teacher perspectives should be incorporated to complement self-reported survey data.
- Technology-based visualization tools should be further explored and systematically integrated into EFL teaching practices.
- More controlled data collection procedures should be established to ensure that all participants complete the survey in full.

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