Lending Ears to EFL Learners: Language Difficulties

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This study investigates the main English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning difficulties Jordanian English-major undergraduates encounter from their perspective. For this purpose a questionnaire was developed and administered to 270 (50 male and 220 female) participants. The study addressed the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The independent variables included gender, grade point average (GPA), and academic major. Ordered according to their difficulty, the skills were speaking, reading, writing and listening respectively. Some specific language learning problems are also discussed. Appropriate conclusions and recommendations are provided accordingly.

Keywords: EFL learning difficulty, English language skills, Arab learners

Due to the worldwide dominance of English, learning English has become a staple in different walks of life for almost every individual, and this demands a minimum level of English communicative competence. After rigorous theoretical and empirical research, applied linguists and educators alike have become more convinced that communicatively competent language users need not only knowledge of the language but also active use and evident ability to put this knowledge into practice in authentic communicative events (Chung & Huang, 2009). The language user’s communicative ability, according to Bachman and Palmer (1996), is influenced by several language user traits that include general characteristics, topical knowledge, affective schemata and language ability. Crucial among these is language ability, which consists broadly of strategic competence and language knowledge. Language knowledge comprises two complementary components; namely, organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. The organisational component is associated with command of grammatical and textual knowledge. Whereas grammatical knowledge is concerned with knowledge of elements such as vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology, textual knowledge concerns command over the conventions of forming a cohesive text out of sentences (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007).

Following Huang’s (2005) distinction between difficulties and constraints, the term ‘difficulty’ as used in this study denotes problems that are related to learning the language itself, rather than challenges or constraints imposed by sociopsychological
factors. These difficulties are encountered by normal, rather than disabled, university students, with focus on the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Despite the acknowledgment of these difficulties, few studies have found their way into publications about English as a foreign language (EFL) learner difficulties (Huang, 2005) in general and almost none about Jordanian learners in particular, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge. This study builds on the findings of relevant studies conducted in various EFL contexts.

To begin with, Underwood (1989) documents that EFL students encounter difficulty in listening comprehension due to limited vocabulary, lack of control over the speaker’s speed, an inability to get things repeated and failure to recognise pauses. They also have difficulty in interpretation, concentration and developing learning habits.

Following an exploration of Taiwanese EFL students’ difficulties pertinent to acquiring listening comprehension strategies during a training program, Chen (2005) reported that their comprehension failure can be attributed to inability to develop listening habits or to enhance the capacity to process information. Low English proficiency, which may result from limited vocabulary and/or poor grammar, and misconceptions about listening activities are additional factors (Graham, 2006). Some other difficulties in listening comprehension may arise because of the type of listening material adopted.

Speaking also might be intimidating to EFL learners. Arab students find it difficult to engage in authentic communication due to the poor vocabulary reservoir they have (Rababah, 2003). Mukattash (1983) also points out that Arab learners of English are unable to use appropriate, correct English outside or inside the classroom. These problems seem to be persistent. It is the researchers’ observation that a good number of Jordanian EFL-major undergraduates continue to hesitate to speak English even during class time, which is possibly attributed to lack of communicative competence that concerns the way language is used for achieving goals in a given communicative context (Bachman, 1990).

In reading as well, EFL learners have a substantial problem comprehending the material they read in the course of their study, which is attributable to several factors such as failure to recognise the main idea, inability to guess meaning from context and failure to find the right meaning related to the general context of the material. More specifically, Arab students, according to Mourtaga (2006), encounter reading problems that are related to misconceptions about the reading process, low language competence, interlanguage differences and lack of correspondence between the orthographic and the phonemic systems. Arab students, therefore, find reading not only time-consuming and effortful, but also difficult; only students planning to study in English-speaking countries may read without questioning the direct, immediate benefits of reading in their lives.

Despite the fact that EFL learners’ academic evaluation is often based on their written work, they find it problematic to produce high-quality texts characterised by cohesion, coherence and smooth logical flow (Granger & Tyson, 1996; Hinkel, 2001, 2002). And even though they are required to write papers, fill out applications and develop theses (Liu & Braine, 2005), EFL learners ‘are confused with word usage, sentence structure, and are constrained by a shortage of vocabulary, alternative expressions and cultural knowledge’ (Chen, 2002, p. 59). They also shift attention from the main topic and overuse some words (Elkhattib, 1984). EFL writers, as Chen (2002) claims, find it difficult to generate ideas, use words appropriately, avoid serious grammatical mistakes and apply the organisational structure of effective academic writing; they are limited at almost all levels, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and social-cultural. Summarising the problems Arab learners of
English encounter, Jdetawy (2011) concludes that those learners have plethora of serious problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

**Setting**

The current wide belief that learning English can bring economic, educational, and sociocultural benefits (McKay, 2008, cited in Kelch, 2010) has influenced the Jordanian society at large and the educational system in particular. Many Jordanians have become more motivated to develop English communicative skills. Others are more enthusiastic to have English as their academic specialty. In response to the increasing demand on learning English, the educational system in Jordan has recently adopted new EFL learning policies. The Ministry of Education has recently mandated teaching English since the first, instead of, fifth grade. Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has recently required university postgraduates to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to ensure their high competency in English (Alkhawaldeh, 2010). Whereas passing the TOEFL was a condition for the completion of a graduate program, it has become a condition for admission into any graduate program since the beginning of 2011. This innovation in the educational policy at the school level, as well as at the postgraduate level, seems not to have been mirrored at the level of undergraduate programs in the English departments in terms of both the admission policy and the study plan.

The admission policy for undergraduate programs in Jordan follows a centralised system that is based solely on students’ grades on the Secondary School Exit Exam (called Tawjihi), an achievement exam students sit by the end of each semester in their 12th grade. Students are eligible to apply for admission into public universities if their average score on the Tawjihi is 65% or higher. In the application form the students fill out for this purpose, they are required to rank-order their preferences for the university and study program in which they would like to enrol. Especially given the social and economic conditions of parents, it is likely that a student may need to sacrifice the study program of preference in favour of obtaining an admission into a nearer university.

As a result of the adoption of such centralised policy of admission, university English departments inherit some challenges. First, a student might be enrolled at the English department although his/her grade in English is not high enough to qualify him/her to study English. Additionally, the nature of English as a language that requires not only knowledge of, but also competence in the language seems to be disguised. That is, since the Tawjihi is an achievement rather than proficiency test then a student’s grade might fail to reflect his/her proficiency level. This challenge is magnified due to the absence of a screening test in the English department for those planning to take English as their major.

Additionally, it should be noted that at the university where this study was carried out, students wishing to study English yet admitted into other study programs were allowed to transfer to the English department during the course of their study if they met one of two conditions: (a) if their average score on the Tawjihi was higher than the lowest score of admission in the year during which they attempt to transfer and (b) if they study four courses assigned by the English department and maintain a score of no lower than B in each. The researchers’ teaching experience in the English department indicates that the first condition is hard for students to meet. However, some students have already benefited from the second condition. Those transfer students, coming from other departments, have shown that they are no less competent than average students admitted
from the start to the English department. This condition, which was a gateway for students’ transfer to English, has unfortunately been cancelled since the beginning of 2011.

One more challenging question English departments need to revisit relates to the number of literature courses and language courses students are required to take in their study program towards the completion of the requirements for a bachelor degree in English language and literature. The current status seems to suggest that students need more courses in the language courses so that they would be capable of handling literature courses with more ease and benefit. A student who struggles with understanding or writing a compound complex sentence, for instance, is not likely to be capable of appreciating a piece of literature.

Notwithstanding the challenges English departments face and the difficulties students encounter, understanding students’ difficulties has rarely ‘originated from enquiries into learners’ own beliefs, expectations, attitudes and concerns’ (Huang, 2005, p. 1). Understanding these beliefs and taking them into consideration in the educational policies and instructional practices have been shown to affect students’ learning (Savignon & Wang, 2003, p. 239). At another level, if undergraduate programs are to be effective in providing students with the learning opportunities that would enable them to communicate with speakers of English in an era of globalisation, the English departments should be not only fully aware of their responsibilities in understanding these students’ encountered difficulties and needs but also respondent to them. Thus, it is the purpose of this study to explore English-major undergraduates’ difficulties from the students’ own perspective. Following are the two questions steering the current study:

1. What linguistic problems do English-major undergraduates at the Hashemite University encounter?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference (alpha = .05) in English-major EFL students’ perceived linguistic difficulties attributed to gender, area of specialty (English Language and Literature/Cultural Studies), academic level (freshman/sophomore/junior/senior), or GPA (pass/good/very good/excellent)?

Method

PARTICIPANTS
A total of 270 (50 male and 220 female) English-major undergraduates were selected from courses offered for English-major undergraduates. Participants were enrolled in the English Department, majoring in English Language and Literature and Literature and Cultural Studies at a Jordanian public university. The sample comprised 70 students representing each of the four academic levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). According to the University Catalogue, freshmen are those who had earned fewer than 25 semester credit hours, sophomores 25–54, juniors 55–88 and seniors 89 or more semester hours. The data was collected during the second semester of 2010.

INSTRUMENT
This study used the Language Learning Difficulty Questionnaire, an instrument that was carefully developed by the researchers for the purpose of this study. A preliminary form of the questionnaire was developed based on a review of the extant literature and submitted to a panel of four experts with expertise in the English language and EFL instructional methodology. The panel was asked to evaluate the survey in terms of relevance to the
study purpose, linguistic clarity and comprehensiveness of the items under each of the four language skills. Following receipt of their feedback, the researchers reworked the questionnaire and submitted it to the same panel for final approval.

To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was distributed twice to a freshman ‘Writing’ class of 35 students that was later excluded from the study. The calculated Cronbach’s alpha was .83, which indicated that the instrument was reliable. In its final form, the questionnaire comprised 40 items (10 representing each language skill). Students’ perceptions were elicited on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Undetermined; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree (see the Appendix for Language Learning Difficulty Questionnaire).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was administered during class time in courses selected purposively to ensure comprehensive coverage of the four academic levels. Participation was on a voluntary basis. Prior to survey administration, each participant signed an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study and received a confidentiality agreement, as well as the researchers’ contact information. Data analyses, carried out using SPSS Software, included descriptive statistics (primarily mean and standard deviation values), t tests, and Analyses of Variance (ANOVA).

Results

A GENERAL LOOK AT STUDENTS’ PERCEIVED LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Students’ responses were viewed both as a cluster representing each of the four skills as well as at the level of individual items.

When the mean value for clustered skills was calculated, the highest difficulty level reported was associated with speaking ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .72$), followed by reading ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .54$), writing ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .63$), and finally listening ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .54$). That is, students struggled most with speaking, while listening was the least problematic.

When viewing the items individually, the results (Table 1) indicated that the following 23 items (ordered according to descending mean values) were associated with a relatively higher level of difficulty, with a mean value higher than 3. ($Skill$: L = listening; S = Speaking; R = Reading; W = Writing).

Noticeably, the items representing higher level of difficulty are pertinent to oral skills. Five of the first eight are associated with speaking. These included speaking English fluently as native speakers do, pronouncing words correctly, speaking English with an English or British accent, using idiomatic expressions properly, determining the stressed syllable in a word, using intonation in pronouncing sentences and speaking grammatically correct language.

Reading also is not divorced of students’ reported difficulty. Most difficult was to understand an English text unless read more than once. It was also difficult to infer information not explicitly stated in a text.

With relevance to writing, students reported difficulty in writing the first sentence in a text. They also found it difficult to find the appropriate word that fits the context. Writing grammatically correct sentences is an additional problem to them.
To explore the impact of gender on students’ perceptions of the difficulty posed by the four major skills, t tests were used. When students’ responses were clustered under each language skill, the results (Table 2) indicated that the two student groups varied significantly in the perceived level of difficulty associated with three of the four skills: listening ($t = 2.48, p = .01$), speaking ($t = 2.29, p = .02$), and writing ($t = 2.29, p = .02$).

The mean response of male students ($M = 2.62, SD = .52; M = 3.45, SD = .22; M = 3.05, SD = .51$, respectively) was consistently higher than females’ ($M = 2.43, SD = .53; M = 3.49, SD = .21; M = 2.94, SD = .55$, respectively), which indicates that male students’ perceived difficulty was consistently higher. This also extends to the fourth skill (reading) where, though the difference was not significant, the mean response of males ($M = 3.05, SD = .51$) was relatively higher than that of females ($M = 2.94, SD = .55$).

To answer the research question about the impact of gender on individual survey items, t tests were used. The results showed statistically significant differences pertinent to eight survey items. In all except one item related to reading, males reported significantly higher difficulty than females. Of these eight, three were related to listening: (a) familiarising oneself with the many words native speakers of English (NSEs) use ($t = 2.6.19, p = .012$); (b) distinguishing the English consonants that do not exist in the Arabic language ($t = 2.4.17, p = .018$); and (c) distinguishing the English vowels that are different to the Arabic vowels ($t = 2.91, p = .004$). Two items were related to speaking: (a) using idiomatic expressions properly.
grammatically correct language \((t = 2.33, p = .022)\); and (b) getting ideas through to the listeners \((t = 2.90, p = .004)\) and two other items were related to reading: (a) reading aloud \((t = 2.56, p = .013)\); and (b) silent reading \((t = -2.33, p = .021)\). The eighth item was related to writing: male students, as with most other items, encountered significantly higher difficulty in finding the appropriate word that fits the context \((t = 2.13, p = .043)\). The only item among the above eight that yielded a higher perception by female students was pertinent to the difficulty they felt in silent reading.

THE IMPACT OF SPECIALTY

To explore differences in students’ perceived difficulties attributed to the area of specialty (English Language and Literature or Cultural Studies), \(t\) tests were used. When students’ responses were clustered under each language skill, the results indicated there were no significant differences.

However, when each competency was viewed individually, \(t\) tests results revealed significant differences associated with three individual items. Cultural Studies majors reported significantly higher perceived difficulty \((t = -2.975, p = .005)\) in (a) distinguishing the English consonants that do not exist in Arabic as well as in (b) writing grammatically correct sentences \((t = -3.277, p = .002)\). Yet, they reported lower difficulty in using intonation when pronouncing sentences \((t = 2.109, p = .036)\).

THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC LEVEL

To address whether students’ perceived difficulties varied significantly according to their academic level/year, a one-way ANOVA was run twice: (a) with the competencies under each of the four skills clustered and (b) with individual items. When the items were clustered, the results showed that students differed significantly \((F = 4.69, p = .01)\) in the perceived difficulty associated with reading only.

To follow up the source of this difference, Tukey HSD revealed that the difference was between freshmen \((M = 3.16, SD = .52)\), on the one hand, and each group of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANOVA for Academic Level and Perceived Difficulty</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>Between Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>Speaking</td>
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<td>Between Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>

\*Significant at the .05 level
juniors (alpha = .05, p = .02) (M = 2.89, SD = .45) and seniors (alpha = .05, p = .01) (M = 2.87, SD = .61), on the other.

When ANOVA was used with split items, the analysis showed significant differences pertinent to four items. One was related to speaking, two to reading and the last to writing. Thus, students from different academic levels differed significantly in their perceived ability to get their ideas through to their listeners (F = 3.90, p = .01). Follow up of the source of this difference revealed that the mean response of freshmen (M = 3.53, SD = 1.12) was significantly (p = .004) higher than that of senior students (M = 3.09, SD = 1.09). That is, freshmen reported lower levels of confidence in their ability to express themselves to their listeners. Another difference was pertinent to students’ ability to determine the main ideas in a text (F = 5.20, p = .002). Posthoc analysis revealed that freshmen’s mean response was also significantly higher than that of senior students (p = .016) and juniors (p = .001).

The third difference was related to students’ perceived difficulty in determining the topic sentence in a given text (F = 5.88, p = .001). This difference, as posthoc analysis indicated, was significant between the mean response of freshmen and each of the groups of juniors (p = .008) and seniors (p = .001). Freshmen felt a higher level of difficulty in determining the topic sentence. Furthermore, there was significant variability (F = 3.36, p = .019) among students of different academic year-level in their perceived difficulty in generating and finding ideas relevant to the topics they are required to write about. Freshmen, as indicated by the results of posthoc analysis, reported a significantly higher level of difficulty compared to juniors (p = .015) and seniors (p = .046).

THE IMPACT OF GPA

To explore the impact of students’ variability in the GPA on their perceived difficulty of the four language skills (the items pertinent to each cluster), ANOVA was used. The results, as shown in Table 3, showed that students differed significantly with reference to reading only.

**TABLE 3**

Results of ANOVA for GPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2.877</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>2.467</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>106.532</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>109.410</td>
<td>277</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1.879</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>2.219</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>77.331</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>79.210</td>
<td>277</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2.511</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.837</td>
<td>2.889</td>
<td>.036*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>79.379</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>.290</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81.890</td>
<td>277</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>3.807</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.269</td>
<td>2.489</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>139.731</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>.510</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>143.539</td>
<td>277</td>
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Note: *Significant at the .05 level
When one-way ANOVA was carried out with split items, the results showed that more than any other factor, the GPA had a substantial influence on students’ reported difficulties. Differences were statistically significant in 11 survey items: three related to listening, three to speaking, three to reading and two were related to writing. The source of the significant difference was consistently between pass students, on the one hand, and the other groups with more frequency toward excellent students.

With regard to listening, there was variability in students’ reported ability to recognise the English vowels \( (F = 2.66, p = .04) \) and consonants \( (F = 3.63, p = .01) \) that do not exist in Arabic. Follow up the source of difference using posthoc comparisons revealed that the difference was between pass and excellent students — pass students reported higher perceptions. Moreover, students varied in their perceived ability to distinguish between an exclamation and a question \( (F = 2.76, p = .04) \). Pass and good students differed significantly, with higher perceptions held by pass students.

As far as speaking is concerned, the different student groups varied significantly in their perceptions associated with speaking English using grammatically correct utterances \( (F = 4.07, p = .008) \). This variability, as indicated by the results of posthoc comparisons, was between pass and good students \( (p = .007) \), with higher mean response by pass students. Additionally, students differed significantly in their perceived difficulty pertinent to speaking English at a reasonable speed \( (F = 3.32, p = .02) \). This difference was between pass and excellent students, with higher mean value for the pass group. An additional difference was revealed among students in their ability to invest the linguistic reservoir in the various contexts they encountered \( (F = 4.54, p = .004) \). The difference was between the mean response of pass students and all other groups, with higher perceptions of this problem by the pass students. Reading-related skills also yielded variable student responses. Thus, students differed in their ability to determine the main ideas of a text \( (F = 2.91, p = .03) \), to determine the topic sentence of a given text \( (F = 5.49, p = .001) \), as well as to infer information not stated explicitly in a text \( (F = 3.36, p = .01) \). These competencies, as shown by posthoc comparisons, yielded higher reported difficulty level by pass compared to excellent students. Another area of difference among students was in their ability to write grammatically correct sentences \( (F = 7.66, p = .000) \). In this area, pass students had significantly higher perceptions of this problem than any of each of the other three groups. Using punctuation marks properly also yielded significant differences \( (F = 3.05, p = .02) \) with higher level of difficulty reported by excellent and pass students with each group of good and very good students.

**Discussion**

EFL learners encounter some problems in their attempt to construct adequate communicative competence, yet these problems have rarely been investigated from a learner’s perspective, a premise on which this study is based. This study found that students reported speaking as the most difficult skill. This is in accordance with other research findings. For example, Huang (2005) reported Chinese students’ difficulty posed by speaking English through the construction and production of grammatically correct and meaningfully sound utterances with adequate fluency and full accuracy. This struggle with speaking is not unexpected given the EFL setting where students have relatively little exposure to the target language, on the one hand, and lower need to use that language in authentic daily-life communication (Jdetawy, 2011). Notably, the students themselves reported that their English language use is confined to the classroom.
Given this scenario, students feel the difficulty only when pushed for production, which takes place in both speaking and writing. This interpretation is supported by students’ reporting that writing was more problematic than reading. Moreover, as Lazaraton (2001) states, a speaker needs to (a) listen carefully and monitor the production of their interlocutor, (b) process it for comprehension, (c) prepare an appropriate response, (d) produce that response, (e) monitor the interlocutor’s response and (f) to respond within a limited time. Speaking itself, in brief, is a demanding skill. Additionally, it should be noted that students usually feel uncomfortable when committing grammatical or pronunciation errors in speaking compared to comparable errors in written discourse since, unlike spoken discourse in which the speaker gets immediate and disclosed correction, written discourse involves feedback that remains between the instructor and the students’ sheet of paper.

Participants reported that listening was the least difficult skill. It might also be true that students find listening easier since some aural material is accompanied by visual presentations that expose plenty of body language and contextual information that may facilitate their comprehension task. Bouziri (2007) has pointed out that listening is often neglected in EFL instruction because both teachers and students perceive it as less demanding than it actually is. It is viewed as easy and controllable. Thus, students might have been influenced by the relative neglect of listening to misconceive the problems they actually encounter in listening. Compared to reading, for example, both skills involve comprehension, but listening requires more effort since the learner needs to employ aural attention.

Concerning the impact of gender on students’ perceived difficulty, the general pattern seems to be that males struggle more with building their communicative competence. This accords with relevant literature indicating that, compared to males, females are more efficient language learners (Al-Shaboul, Asassfeh, & Alshboul, 2010; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Oxford, 1993; Politzer, 1983). Additionally, particularly in the context of this study, the majority of the English-majors are females, which entails having a wider space for socialisation and saving a stage for language practice. Females, as the department professors have noticed, are more hardworking and committed to the academic tasks assigned in the English courses offered in the department.

This study found that male students feel higher difficulty in familiarising themselves with the words NSEs use and distinguishing the English consonants and vowels that do not exist in the Arabic language. Males also reported higher difficulty levels in using grammatically correct language, getting ideas through to the listeners and practicing reading aloud. This is interpretable in light of research findings suggesting gender differences in language use (Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008) and learning pertinent to motivational and strategy-use aspects. Xin (2008), for example, reported that compared to male Chinese EFL learners, females had stronger internal motivation to learn English, were more interested in learning English and were less interrupted by external factors in their language learning experience. Females are also more strategic users of language (Hashemi, 2011; Sunderland, 1992). Willing (1988, cited in Sunderland 1992) found that although both male and female adult immigrants in Australia preferred to learn many new words by seeing them and talking to friends in English, females reported a significantly higher preference. Additionally, Sunderland (1992) cites works that have ‘showed sex differences in authentic language use and in searching for and communicating meaning’ (p. 88). Noticeably, the only area where
females reported encountering higher difficulty was associated with silent reading, which might be interpreted in light of females’ higher preference to authentic use of language.

As for the impact of area of specialty, the absence of significant differences between the English Language and Literature and Cultural Studies participants indicates that both had comparable perceptions. Nonetheless, the difference at the level of individual items could be attributed to the fact that English Language and Literature students score higher grades on the secondary school exit exam than do Cultural Studies students. This, by default, may lead us to expect a higher competency level on the part of English Language and Literature undergraduates.

When addressing whether students’ perceived difficulties differed according to their academic level, the participants in this study did vary in their perceived difficulty associated with reading only. In particular, this difference presented itself clearly between the first-year students, on the one hand, and the groups of the third- and the fourth-year students. Since first-year students reported higher difficulty in reading, this suggests the university experience has helped in reducing more advanced students’ problems associated with reading. First-year students’ reported difficulty associated with reading may be due to more than one reason. As explained by Mourtaga (2006), they might not be trained or told how to activate their schemata because the teachers who taught them may assume that meaning resides in the text more than in the reader’s mind. In his study in the Palestinian context, Mourtaga reported that the majority (two thirds) of the EFL teachers he studied limited reading to obtaining meaning from print; only a few expressed awareness of prereading and postreading questions, silent reading and illustrating difficult words. This lack of training is likely to complicate those students’ task through focusing on phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic textual clues simultaneously towards an interactive process of meaning reconstruction. Even when attempting to interact actively with the text, EFL learners’ inadequate linguistic competence may impede their ability to invest the textual clues they have at their disposal. Moreover, it is the researchers’ observation that the reading courses offered at the undergraduate level seem to adopt instructional textbooks that focus on the reading strategies more than on expanding students’ reservoir of new words. Given this impediment, it becomes understandable that those students are likely to struggle with the reading skill manifest in lower level of confidence and lower ability in determining the main idea and the topic sentence in a given text. Another possible explanation for these problems could be a gap between students’ actual linguistic competence level upon completion of high school exit exams, on the one hand, and that anticipated by the university faculty members who are responsible for assigning course textbooks.

The results showed that students with different GPAs differed significantly with reference to reading. This difference is understandable given the fact that the participants learn in an EFL context where English is confined to the classroom. Reading, therefore, becomes the major source of exposure Jordanian students have to English. That is, the little exposure to oral English communication outside the classroom should invite students to compensate for this loss through reading (Mourtaga, 2006). Notwithstanding this, the study participants themselves reported that they rarely read beyond the course requirements even in their mother tongue.

To put things in perspective, reading is not the only source of difficulty students encounter. In fact, pass students struggle even with such basic skills as producing grammatically correct utterances, speaking English at a reasonable speed and investing their linguistic reservoir in the various contexts they encounter. In reading also, they find
it hard to determine the main idea or understand the implied details of a text. In writing, these students are handicapped in such basic competencies as writing grammatically correct sentences or using punctuation marks properly.

To sum up, it seems true that the exposure of Jordanian English-major undergraduates to English is confined to the classroom. At the English department level, a female-dominated learning environment, females are at a greater advantage to use English, hence developing their communicative competence. University undergraduates seem to inherit the weaknesses they have at the school level. The results indicate that Cultural Studies students, who usually have scored lower on the General Secondary School Examination (referred to locally as Tawjihi) than English Language and Literature fellows, reported relatively higher perceived difficulty. Finally, it seems that every day a student spends at the university paves the road for the next day, evident in the elimination of the reported problems encountered as students proceed from one academic year to the next.

In light of the above, the study recommends that English departments live up to their responsibilities in securing rigorous program plans and rich, vibrant environments capable of immersing students in authentic learning experiences. To begin with, departments should reconsider their program plans to ensure that language skills receive the due attention under the motto, ‘Skills! Skills! Skills!’ For example, it is neither practical nor logical to allocate less than one seventh of the entire program weight for language skills at a time when the stated outcomes of the program are too ambitious to claim developing students’ ability to appreciate literature. To professors, the need is urgent to integrate the language skills in the course design and instructional practices where more scope is assigned for communicative activities. if they are to overcome the difficulties reported when investing more time is not an option for students. They should reflect in practice their awareness of the wisdom that ‘a horse can be led to the water, but it cannot be forced to drink’.

In terms of research, the current study recommends further research that addresses the difficulties English-major undergraduates encounter, with a focus on individual skills. Simultaneously, though seemingly contradictory, there is an urgent need for studies that transcend the focus on the difficulties associated with the four language skills towards investigating the extent to which EFL learners and English-majors in particular can integrate the skills they develop within a wider communicative language framework. Experimental studies that incorporate innovative interventions in the current EFL teaching context are also essential.

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References


Appendix A

LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTY QUESTIONNAIRE

Writing
I find it difficult to
1. use punctuation marks properly.
2. generate and find ideas relevant to the required topics.
3. plan for the writing process
4. determine the title for an essay.
5. distinguish between relevant and irrelevant ideas.
6. find the appropriate word that fits the context
7. write grammatically correct sentences
8. use the linking words in properly.
9. write the first sentence in a text.
10. use idiomatic expressions properly

Listening
I find it difficult to
1. distinguish the words I listen to
2. familiarise myself with the many words NSEs use
3. understand what the speakers say when they speak quickly
4. understand what the speakers say without looking at them
5. recognise the vowels that don’t exist in the Arabic language
6. distinguish the English consonants that don’t exist in the Arabic language
7. distinguish the English vowels which are different from the Arabic vowels.
8. distinguish the oral pause cues
9. understand what the speaker says without repetition.
10. distinguish between an exclamation and a question

Reading
I find it difficult to
1. read aloud
2. read silently
3. determine the main ideas in a text
4. determine the main ideas of a relatively long text
5. I need to read an English text more than once to understand its content.
6. use a monolingual (English-English) dictionary
7. invest context clues to guess the meaning of words
8. determine the answer for an indirect question.
9. infer information not stated explicitly in a text
10. determine the topic sentence

Speaking
I find it difficult to
1. pronounce words correctly.
2. speak using grammatically correct language
3. determine the stressed syllable in a word.
4. speak English fluently as native speakers do.
5. speak English at a reasonable speed.
6. speak English without hesitation
7. get my ideas through to my listeners
8. invest the linguistic reservoir in context.
9. speak English with an English or British accent.
10. use intonation in pronouncing sentences.