

## A STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTER (ELC) STUDENTS AT THE ARAB AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF JENIN

Mosaddaq Yahya

EIC- AAUJ / ACCESS Program- Amid- East  
Palestinian Ministry of Education,  
PALESTINE.  
[mosaddaq\\_y@yahoo.com](mailto:mosaddaq_y@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

*In this study, the researcher investigated the language difficulties of the English language center students at the Arab American University of Jenin(AAUJ). A valid questionnaire was designed and administered to a convenient sample of students, which represented approximately 2.5% of the population of the study from The English language center to collect data which was treated statistically using the SPSS program. The results of the five domains of the questionnaire (academic, instructional, personal, linguistic and socio cultural) showed that the academic and instructional factors have the highest means (3.32, 3.32) respectively, while the personal factors have the lowest mean (2.75). The study also showed no significant differences for gender and type of school on the five domains. The paper concluded with a number of suggestions to reduce the difficulties students face in English.*

**Keywords:** difficulties, ELC, placement exam, academic, instructional, linguistic, socio cultural

### INTRODUCTION

During the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries English language has become the most widely spoken language in the world, and has more second-language speakers than any other language. It's considered as a universal language. Most of the universities worldwide include English as one of their major subjects or the language of instruction. Hence, we are forced to meet global standards as we are living in the world of globalization. English is the first and foremost criteria when someone is applying for a job or he is seeking admission in a reputed college, university, or institution. Companies welcome those candidates who are fluent in English and have the relevant qualification and skill set. However, candidates with the relevant qualification without having proper knowledge of English are being rejected. According to Hasman (2000, p.2), over 1.4 billion people live in countries where English has official status. Over 70% of the world's scientists read English, over 85% of the world's mail is written in English and 90% of information in the world's electronic retrieval system is stored in English. Hasman suggests that by 2010, speakers of English as a second or foreign language (SL/FL) will exceed the number of native speakers. English has become a key factor in the development of the nation's globally. The information technology revolution has shortened the distance between nations, and its services ignore geographical borders. Information technology has penetrated not only the industrial borders but also the Third and Developed worlds, thanks to telecommunications and English language. Computers and the Internet have both served nations and have become mediators for human communication in which English language is the main medium.

Interest in the teaching of English as a global language has been growing throughout the Arab World. Arab countries make special efforts to facilitate the use of English language among their citizens in the present globalized era (Al-Khatib, 2000). Most Arab countries began to introduce the teaching of English as compulsory subject into the school curriculum. As far as English at tertiary level in the Arab world is concerned, (Zughoul, 2003; Sultana, 2001) point out that teaching through the medium of English obvious in the field of higher education.

In Palestine, English is neither a national nor an official language but it's the most widely taught foreign language. Palestinian learners start learning English from an early age –primary school (1<sup>st</sup> grade) or even pre-school- yet the problem is that most are far from reaching the desired level of proficiency either in comprehensive or productive skills or even in both, although those learners are exposed to English instruction for a long time at different stages. Results in general exams show that Palestinian students have a major problem in English. Parents complain from the disability of their children in expressing themselves in English. Even most students find English as the toughest subject.

At the Arab American University of Jenin (AAUJ) English is the medium of instruction in all faculties and departments, except the faculty of law and the department of Arabic and Media. Students in all departments have to take English. The score of the entry Placement Test decides which of the three basic levels the student will be placed in, (Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced). Although the (AAUJ) seeks to provide the best level of English instruction in the region through its choice of faculty as well as the use of current pedagogical methods and modern technology in language instruction, employing national and international faculty members with practical experience in language teaching.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The medium of instruction at the Arab American University Jenin (AAUJ) is the English language. As a result, English Language Center (ELC) conducts a Placement English Exam for all newly enrolled students to determine their level of proficiency. To facilitate English proficiency for academic study at AAU, ELC offers an Entry language program comprising three different levels: Beginning English, Intermediate English and Advanced English. Beginning English requires five class-hours per week. This level, however, is a non-credited course. Intermediate and Advanced English levels require three class-hours per week. While Intermediate level earns two credit hours, the Advanced course earns three credit hours. In addition to regular class hours, which focus on teaching English with four basic skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, the program offers two language-Lab hours per week to each level of English. ELC employs flexible methods in pedagogy and is geared by native and non-native faculty members.

English instructors usually complain about the level of their students' participation and interaction in the English class. They expect their students to take part in class discussions, speak audibly, ask and answer questions and read. Put they discover that their students face several language, personal, internal, external, instructional, academic, sociocultural, linguistic and many other difficulties.

A number of studies have been conducted in different countries to investigate issues related to language teaching and the difficulties students face.

Crowe (1992) illustrated that Asian students experienced language problems in writing English. The major findings indicated that Asian students had the most difficulty integrating sources from research and developing transition, unity, and cohesion. Asian students tended to reproduce the formulas and patterns as a result that they had difficulty in processing a research. Plagiarism is also another problem which seemed to be related to Asian students' educational system because it emphasized memorization and there is an incapability to paraphrase.

Thongsongsee (1998) investigated linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered by Thai student graduates from American universities. The study revealed that factors such as a good understanding of western cultural norms, the ability to adapt oneself to a different style of learning, and personal problems played a crucial role in the overall achievement of the students.

Hasan (2000) conducted a study about listening problems encountered by EFL learners at Damascus University, Syria. Besides listening problems, Hasan investigated learners' strategies, characteristics of the speaker, features of the listening text, attitudes of the listener, etc. The study concluded that EFL learners at Damascus University experience a range of listening problems.

Songsangkaew (2003) studied the language function difficulties experienced by Thai students in real situations in America. The findings reveal that there are many students who experience problems with culture, the different learning styles and linguistics. Despite, those students access the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as an indicator of proficiency level. It is a significant problem to achieve an academic learning.

Wong (2004) used interviews with international students. He found that many international students, accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centred environment with less classroom conversation, found it difficult in Australia to make the transition from passive learning. At the same time, his study found that the students acknowledged that their lack of English language proficiency in the classroom, exacerbated by cultural barriers, was a principal source of learning difficulties.

MunaThaher (2005) investigated the factors which lead to communication apprehension (CA) in the EFL classroom. The relative importance of a number of sources (psychological, instructional, and socio-cultural) has been investigated by means of a questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that most students had either fear, or uneasiness about their learning experience which has hindered the language learning process.

Stowe (2005) aimed to identify the nature of the English language problems faced by domestic and international students and to assess the academic achievement of different origin and language groups. An examination of first year students at UBC, York, McGill, and Dalhousie indicates that domestic students who spoke English in the home while growing up have the fewest difficulties with English. Differences between this group and English speaking international students are slight. By comparison, domestic ESL students, and particularly international ESL students, report considerable difficulty with English.

Pawapatcharandom. (2007) investigated the English language problems and learning strategies. The results of this study revealed that the most serious problem of Thai students in English language learning is writing skills while the barrier to intercultural communication is the least problem. Another big problem involved being unable to write an essay within a limited time.

Rieger (2009) investigated not only gender effect, but also the differences in learners' beliefs based on their target language. The results of the study are discussed in terms of the principal components that were established, which deal with attitude towards authentic materials, motivation, language aptitude, language difficulty and language learning approaches. These results show a number of significant differences based on the gender and target language of respondents.

Khader and Shaat (2010) investigated the reasons behind Palestinian university students' achievement gap in their English language skills in the Gaza Strip from the students' perspectives. The results revealed that personal reasons are not considered to be a serious factor in case where weak grades were awarded. External reasons related to the English language syllabus, the university discipline, the evaluation process, the instructors of English and the linguistics factors of English were awarded good grades according to the students' perspectives. In addition, results revealed that there were no differences in the reasons behind Palestinian university students' achievement gap in English language skills in the Gaza Strip from the students' perspectives due to their gender.

Ghenghesh, Hamedand Abdelfattah (2011) conducted a research to investigate the perceptions of English language needs of undergraduate business students and their business faculty at the British University in Egypt. Data were drawn from four sources: a student questionnaire; a teacher questionnaire; a round of semi-structured interviews for students and a round of semi-structured interviews for teachers. The findings have shown that there are a number of curriculum components for each language skill that should be incorporated in the syllabus for each English module that students would find interesting and relevant to their needs.

Jdetawy (2011) studied the problems encountered by Arab EFL learners focusing on the many problems in English language learning and the reasons that lie behind these problems. The study concludes that Arab EFL learners encounter many serious problems in the four language skills. It also concludes that the reasons that lie behind these problems are many such as: English is not the mother tongue of the Arab EFL learners, the lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers, the Arab EFL learners' preference for using Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in their language teaching context, the lack of the Arab EFL learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the current study aims to investigate and clarify the difficulties of the ELC students at the AAUJ related to English language. As such, this study will attempt to answer the following three questions:

### **Research Question I**

What are the language difficulties of the ELC students at the AAUJ?

### **Research Question II**

Are there any differences at ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) in students' responses due to gender

### **Research Question III**

Are there any differences at ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) in students' responses due to the type of school?

## PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

### Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of all male and female students who study English at the ELC. The randomly chosen sample was 150 male and female students who study Intermediate and Advanced English. The sample was distributed according to two independent variables. Tables 1&2 show the distribution of the whole population according to two variables: gender and type of school respectively.

**Table 1. Sample Distribution According To Gender Variable**

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| Male   | 78        | 52      |
| Female | 72        | 48      |
| Total  | 150       | 100     |

**Table 2. Sample Distribution According To the Type of School Variable**

| Type of School | Frequency | percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Private        | 54        | 36      |
| Public         | 96        | 64      |
| Total          | 150       | 100     |

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The summaries of the results obtained from the statistical analysis are introduced and the main results of the three study questions will be highlighted. To analyze the findings, the researcher used the following ranks for analysis according to the means:

3.5 And above high / 2.5-3.4 moderate / less than 2.5 low

### First Question Results: What are the language difficulties of the ELC students at the AAUJ?

To answer this question, the researcher used the Means, Standard Deviations, percentages and ranks for each domain and the items within each domain.

#### A: Academic Factors Domain Results

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations, percentages and ranks of the students' responses for the items under academic factors domain.

The results show that the students' responses in Academic Factors Domain are moderate with a mean of (3.30) and a percentage of (66.4%).

The students' responses are high on items (8, 2, 3, 7). They are moderate on items (4, 9, 10, 5, 6, and 1).

**Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages and Ranks of the Academic Factors**

| No                             | Item  | No. in Questionnaire | Means       | SD         | Percentages | Ranks           |
|--------------------------------|---|----------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1                              | Learning English helps me in my academic study of other courses                         | 8                    | 4.11        | 1.15       | 82.2        | High            |
| 2                              | The academic system in the ELC is different from academic system at school.             | 2                    | 3.69        | 1.21       | 73.8        | High            |
| 3                              | Lectures are helpful to solve my academic difficulties.                                 | 3                    | 3.64        | 1.06       | 72.8        | High            |
| 4                              | Instructors meet students' academic success.  | 7                    | 3.53        | .93        | 70.6        | High            |
| 5                              | Academic difficulties are affecting my achievement.                                     | 4                    | 3.39        | 1.29       | 67.8        | Moderate        |
| 6                              | The lessons taught in the ELC are suitable for my needs in learning English.            | 9                    | 3.30        | 1.08       | 66          | Moderate        |
| 7                              | The lessons taught in the ELC are suitable for my needs in learning English.            | 10                   | 3.25        | 1.19       | 65          | Moderate        |
| 8                              | Academic advising in the ELC is inadequate.   | 5                    | 2.94        | 1.25       | 58.8        | Moderate        |
| 9                              | I face academic difficulties in meeting academic demands (assignments, papers projects. | 6                    | 2.77        | 1.31       | 55.4        | Moderate        |
| 10                             | I face academic difficulties in the ELC   | 1                    | 2.65        | 1.38       | 53          | Moderate        |
| <b>Academic Factors Domain</b> |   |                      | <b>3.32</b> | <b>.48</b> | <b>66.4</b> | <b>Moderate</b> |

**B: Instructional Factors Domain Results**

Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations, percentages and ranks of the students' responses for the items and instructional factors domain.

**Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages and Ranks of the Instructional Factors**

| No | Item  | No. in Questionnaire | Mean | SD   | Percentages | Ranks    |
|----|---|----------------------|------|------|-------------|----------|
| 11 | My instructor encourages me to participate.                   | 17                   | 4.35 | 3.44 | 87          | High     |
| 12 | There are grades for classroom participation.                 | 18                   | 3.90 | .94  | 78          | High     |
| 13 | My instructor encourages me towards self-learning in English. | 13                   | 3.57 | 1.05 | 71.4        | High     |
| 14 | The language laboratory helps me to speak English.            | 12                   | 3.56 | 1.48 | 71.2        | High     |
| 15 | English student-student classroom activities are neglected.   | 19                   | 3.39 | 1.22 | 67.8        | Moderate |
| 16 | Methodology of teaching in                                    | 11                   | 3.24 | 1.33 | 64.8        | Moderate |

|    |   |    |             |            |             |                 |
|----|---|----|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
|    | the ELC is different from what I'm used to.                                 |    |             |            |             |                 |
| 17 | My instructor doesn't allow me to speak Arabic in the English class.        | 16 | 3.15        | 1.40       | 63          | Moderate        |
| 18 | Three hours of learning English per week is not enough.                     | 20 | 2.97        | 1.57       | 59.4        | Moderate        |
| 19 | The tools and equipment (teaching aids) used in the ELC are not motivating. | 14 | 2.75        | 1.31       | 55          | Moderate        |
| 20 | Pair and group work is not encouraged in the ELC.                           | 15 | 2.35        | 1.27       | 47          | Low             |
|    | <b>Instructional Factors Domain</b>   |    | <b>3.32</b> | <b>.57</b> | <b>66.4</b> | <b>Moderate</b> |

The results show that the students' responses in Instructional Factors Domain are moderate with a mean of (3.32) and a percentage of (66.4%). The students' responses are high on item (17, 18, 13, and 12). They are moderate on items (11, 16, 20, 14, and 15). However, the responses are low on item (15).

### C: Personal Factors Domain Results

Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations, percentages and ranks of the students' responses for the items and instructional factors domain.

**Table 5. Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages and Ranks of the Personal Factors**

| No. | Item  | No. in Questionnaire | Mean        | SD         | Percentage | Rank            |
|-----|---|----------------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------------|
| 21  | If I use English my status is raised.                               | 25                   | 3.65        | 1.23       | 73         | High            |
| 22  | My attitudes to the English language affect learning the language.  | 30                   | 3.10        | 1.29       | 62         | Moderate        |
| 23  | My English vocabulary is limited.                                   | 29                   | 3.09        | 1.36       | 61.8       | Moderate        |
| 24  | The English syllabuses I learn do not suit my needs.                | 28                   | 2.91        | 1.29       | 58.2       | Moderate        |
| 25  | I feel uneasy and lack confidence when I speak English.             | 27                   | 2.83        | 1.29       | 56.6       | Moderate        |
| 26  | I am forced to learn English by the people around me.               | 26                   | 2.71        | 1.35       | 54.2       | Moderate        |
| 27  | I'm careless in learning English.                                   | 22                   | 2.65        | 1.23       | 53         | Moderate        |
| 28  | My past level in English holds me back.                             | 23                   | 2.49        | 1.35       | 49.8       | Low             |
| 29  | I will not need English in the future                               | 21                   | 2.17        | 1.22       | 43.4       | Low             |
| 30  | The economic situation of my family does not help me learn English. | 24                   | 1.95        | 1.07       | 39         | Low             |
|     | <b>Personal factors domain</b>                                      |                      | <b>2.75</b> | <b>.59</b> | <b>55</b>  | <b>Moderate</b> |

The results show that the students' responses in Personal Factors Domain are moderate with a mean of (2.75) and a percentage of (55%).

The students' responses are high on item (25). They are moderate on items (30, 29, 28, 27, 26, and 22). However, the responses are low on item (23, 21, and 24).

### D: Linguistic Factors Domain Results

Table 6 shows the means, standard deviations, percentages and ranks of the students' responses for the items and instructional factors domain

**Table 6. Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages and Ranks of the Linguistic Factors**

| No                               | Item  | No .in<br>Questionnaire | Mean        | SD         | Percentage  | Rank            |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 31                               | English language listening skill is a challenge for me. | 31                      | 3.22        | 1.26       | 64.4        | Moderate        |
| 32                               | Grammatical errors are a serious problem for me.        | 37                      | 3.20        | 1.33       | 64          | Moderate        |
| 33                               | English speaking skill is a difficult for me.           | 32                      | 2.89        | 1.33       | 57.8        | Moderate        |
| 34                               | Mother tongue interference (Arabic) makes me confused.  | 35                      | 2.86        | 1.29       | 57.2        | Moderate        |
| 35                               | Writing is a major problem for me.                      | 34                      | 2.83        | 1.47       | 56.6        | Moderate        |
| 36                               | Pronunciation of words in English is difficult.         | 36                      | 2.79        | 1.22       | 55.8        | Moderate        |
| 37                               | Reading and understanding English texts are not easy.   | 33                      | 2.37        | 1.28       | 47.4        | Low             |
| <b>Linguistic Factors Domain</b> |   |                         | <b>2.87</b> | <b>.71</b> | <b>57.4</b> | <b>Moderate</b> |

The results show that the students' responses in Linguistic Factors Domain are moderate with a mean of (2.87) and a percentage of (57.4%).

The students' responses are moderate on all items (31, 37, 32, 35, 34, 36), except item (33) which is low.

### E: Socio Cultural Factors Results:

Table 7 shows the means, standard deviations, percentages and ranks of the students' responses for the items and instructional factors domain.

The results show that the students' response in Socio Cultural Factors Domains is moderate with a mean of (3.22) and a percentage of (66.4%).

The students' responses are high on item (43, 44, and 47). They are moderate on items (40, 39, 41, 46, and 42). However, the responses are low on items (45, 38).



**Table 7. Means, Standard Deviations, Percentages and Ranks of the Socio Cultural Factors**

| No.                                  | Item   | No. in Questionnaire | Mean        | SD         | Percentage  | Rank            |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 38                                   | My family encourages me to learn English.  | 43                   | 4.16        |            | 83.2        | High            |
| 39                                   | The English speaking society is more developed than my society.                        | 44                   | 3.65        |            | 73          | High            |
| 40                                   | I feel proud among my colleagues when I speak English.                                 | 47                   | 3.61        |            | 72.2        | High            |
| 41                                   | My religion influences me to learn the languages of other people.                      | 40                   | 3.45        |            | 69          | Moderate        |
| 42                                   | The curriculum used in the ELC does not focus on the Palestinian culture and identity. | 39                   | 3.45        |            | 69          | Moderate        |
| 43                                   | My culture encourages students to study and research.                                  | 41                   | 3.33        |            | 66          | Moderate        |
| 44                                   | My local community encourages me to study English.                                     | 46                   | 3.09        |            | 61.8        | Moderate        |
| 45                                   | I am fascinated by the American and English societies.                                 | 42                   | 3.08        |            | 61.6        | Moderate        |
| 46                                   | I will lose my identity if I speak English.  | 45                   | 2.25        |            | 45          | Low             |
| 47                                   | I have some negative attitudes towards English and its native speakers.                | 38                   | 2.23        |            | 44.6        | Low             |
| <b>Socio Cultural Factors Domain</b> |  |                      | <b>3.22</b> | <b>.67</b> | <b>64.4</b> | <b>Moderate</b> |

**Second Question Results: Are there any differences at (a=0.05) in students’ responses due to gender?**

To answer this question, independent T-Test has been used to analyze the data from the questionnaire. Table (8) shows the results for both male and female students.

**Table 8. T-Test Results for Differences in the Students’ Responses towards language difficulties according to Gender Variable**

| Variable      | N      | Mean | SD   | t   | df   | Sig | Level of Significance |
|---------------|--------|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----------------------|
| <b>Gender</b> | Male   | 78   | 3.13 | .39 | .050 | 148 | .59                   |
|               | Female | 72   | 3.09 | .33 |      |     |                       |

The table clearly shows that, the mean for the boys' responses was 3.13 and the mean for the girls' responses was 3.09. The table also shows that there was no statistical difference at Alpha 0.05 between boys and girls responses. When the total means were checked, it was found that, the significance was .59. As it was more than 0.05, this means that there was no significant difference in the responses of male and female students due to the gender variable.

**Third Question Results: Are there any differences at (a=0.05) in students responses due to the type of school?**

**Table (9): T-Test Results for Differences in the Students' Reponses towards language difficulties according to the Type of School Variable**

| Variable       | N       | Mean | SD   | t   | df   | Sig | Level of Significance |                 |
|----------------|---------|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Type of School | Private | 54   | 3.09 | .45 | .050 | 148 | .54                   | Not Significant |
|                | Public  | 96   | 3.13 | .31 |      |     |                       |                 |

The table clearly shows that, the mean for the private school students' responses was 3.09 and the mean for the public school students' responses was 3.13. The table also shows that there was no statistical difference at Alpha 0.05 between private and public students' responses. When the total means were checked, it was found that, the significance was .54. As it was more than 0.05, this means that there was no significant difference in the responses of students due to the type of school variable.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The major aim of this study is to investigate the academic, instructional, personal, linguistic and socio cultural factors of the ELC students at the AAUJ related to the English language. The results of the different domains show that the academic and instructional factors have the highest means (3.32, 3.32) respectively, while the personal factors have the lowest mean (2.75). It's found from the investigation that twelve items have high ranks, seven have low ranks and twenty-eight have moderate ranks. The highest rank is item (17) my instructor encourages me to participate. This may be due to the quality of instructors the ELC employs and the trust of students in their instructors. Item (43) my family encourages me to learn English; this may be due to the interest of the Palestinian family in Education. Item (8) learning English helps me in my academic study of other courses. This may be due to fact that English is the language of instruction at the university. On the other hand the lowest rank is item (24) the economic situation of my family does not help me learn English. This may be due to the influence of some items (items 43 and 8). The study also shows no significant differences for gender. It's true that students whether they are male or female still they are students, but in the case of Palestine as a conservative society, education is separated, male students have more freedom in going out which enables them to acquire more knowledge and experience. The study also shows no significant differences for the type of school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion and conclusion, the researcher would like to recommend the following:

First, Give more attention to language teaching at schools. This will produce students with good command of English. Training programs for teachers, workshops, increasing the number of periods for English per week will help in this regard.

Second, Give more attention to advising students on different issues related to the difficulties they face in English. Instructors should give more time to discuss students' problems either in their offices or inside the classroom.

Third, Encourage student-student interaction in order to give students more chances to communicate. Classes need to be more student-centered than teacher-centered in order to empower students with the necessary activities.

Fourth, Encourage instructors to vary their methods and use more teaching aids. Variety of methods will have much better impact on students.

Fifth, Design textbooks that give more attention to the Palestinian culture and identity. Such textbooks will have a better impact on students, as they interact with their culture better. Culture is something very important that when students are estranged from their culture, they will be at a loss and under such circumstances learning is so hard.

Sixth, Motivate and encourage students to work harder. Motivation is an influential factor in second language learning. Motivation plays a crucial role in language achievement. When students are not motivated in the class they disturb the classroom atmosphere and this may have negative impact on the learning of the motivated students.

Seventh, Encourage more research studies on the different factors that affect students levels in English and help in overcoming some of the difficulties encountered in language teaching.

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