

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education is a complex process that involves linguistic, pedagogical, technological, institutional, and sociocultural challenges. University English teachers are expected to develop students' communicative competence, academic language skills, critical thinking, and confidence while working within different educational contexts and institutional constraints. The present study investigates the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in higher education. The study focuses particularly on challenges related to students' diverse proficiency levels, motivation, classroom size, limited teaching resources, technology, assessment, time constraints, curriculum requirements, teacher workload, and institutional support. A quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design is proposed. Data are conceptualized as being collected from higher-education EFL teachers through a structured questionnaire designed to identify the frequency and severity of different teaching challenges. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, are used to analyze the data, while comparative and correlational analyses may be employed to examine patterns among the identified challenges. The illustrative findings indicate that heterogeneous student proficiency, low student motivation, large classes, limited instructional resources, insufficient technological facilities, heavy workload, and restricted instructional time represent important challenges for university English teachers. The study concludes that improving EFL teaching in higher education requires more than individual teacher effort. Universities need to provide appropriate professional development, adequate teaching resources, manageable workloads, technological support, realistic curricula, and institutional policies that enable teachers to respond effectively to students' diverse learning needs. Strengthening teacher support systems can contribute to improved teaching quality and better English language learning outcomes.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language, higher education, EFL teachers, teaching challenges, teacher workload, student motivation, large classes, language teaching, professional development, instructional resources.*

INTRODUCTION

English has become an increasingly important language in higher education, international communication, academic research, employment, science, technology, and global mobility. In many countries where English is not the first language, universities offer English language courses to prepare students for academic study and professional life. Students may need English to read research articles, write assignments, participate in presentations, communicate with international colleagues, access online information, and compete in increasingly international employment markets. Imran, M., & Almusharraf, N. (2024) revealed that. Consequently, English language teaching has become an important component of higher education in many educational systems. Despite the increasing importance of English, teaching the language at university level is not an easy task. EFL teachers work within classrooms where students may differ substantially in their language proficiency, educational background, learning goals, motivation, and attitudes toward English. Some students may have studied English for many years before entering university, while others may have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom. This diversity creates difficulties for teachers who must design lessons that are appropriate for learners with different levels of knowledge and ability. One of the most significant challenges is heterogeneous student proficiency.

In many university classrooms, students who have received different types of previous English education are placed in the same class. A teacher may therefore have highly proficient students sitting alongside students who struggle with basic grammar, vocabulary, reading, or speaking. If instruction is designed for advanced learners, weaker students may become confused and discouraged. Gordon-Strachan, G. M., Parker, S. Y., Harewood, H. C., Méndez-Lázaro, P. A., Saketa, S. T., Parchment, K. F., ... & Romanello, M. (2025). Explains that If instruction is designed primarily for weaker students, stronger learners may become bored or feel that their needs are not being addressed. Differentiating instruction in such circumstances requires additional preparation, creativity, time, and teaching expertise. Student motivation is another major challenge. Although many university students recognize the importance of English, they may not always be intrinsically interested in learning it. Some students study English primarily because it is a compulsory university subject or because they need to pass an examination. Others may consider English unrelated to their major field of study. Low motivation can result in limited classroom participation, incomplete assignments, reluctance to speak English, and reduced engagement with learning activities. Teachers must therefore continually find ways to make English learning meaningful and relevant to students' academic, professional, and personal goals.

However, implementing innovative teaching methods may be difficult when teachers have large classes, limited resources, strict curricula, or insufficient preparation time. Large class size represents another important challenge in higher education EFL classrooms. In a large class, it becomes difficult for teachers to provide individual feedback, monitor students' pronunciation, assess speaking activities, organize group work, and ensure that every student participates. Speaking and listening activities can be particularly difficult because language learning requires opportunities for students to use the language rather than simply listen to lectures. When a teacher has a very large number of students, each learner may receive limited opportunities for individual interaction. Teaching resources and facilities can also affect EFL instruction. Effective language teaching may require textbooks, audio and video materials, projectors, computers, language laboratories, internet access, online platforms, and other resources. However, not all higher education institutions have equal access to these facilities. Teachers may therefore have to adapt lessons to whatever resources are available. In contexts where technological infrastructure is unreliable, teachers may experience difficulties implementing technology-supported or blended learning activities.

The increasing use of digital technology has created both opportunities and challenges for EFL teachers. Digital tools can provide students with authentic English materials, online dictionaries, videos, interactive exercises, language-learning applications, and opportunities for communication with speakers of English. At the same time, teachers need technological knowledge and training to integrate these tools effectively. Simply providing technology does not guarantee better learning. Teachers must know how to select appropriate tools, evaluate online materials, protect students' privacy, manage digital classrooms, and integrate technology with pedagogical objectives. Assessment is another important challenge. English teachers need to evaluate multiple dimensions of language ability, including grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, speaking, pronunciation, and communicative competence. However, institutional examinations may emphasize easily measurable areas such as grammar and reading while providing limited opportunities to assess speaking or

authentic communication. Teachers may therefore experience tension between communicative approaches to language teaching and examination-oriented assessment systems. Alzubi, A. A. F., & Alelaiwi, A. S. (2025). Explained that Curriculum requirements can create additional pressure. University English courses may have extensive syllabi that teachers are expected to complete within a limited number of weeks. When the curriculum is overloaded, teachers may have insufficient time for communicative activities, individualized support, revision, and formative assessment. Teachers may feel compelled to prioritize completing the syllabus over responding to students' specific needs. Teacher workload is another significant issue. University English teachers may have responsibilities extending beyond classroom teaching, including lesson preparation, grading, assessment development, administrative work, meetings, research, student advising, and professional development. When teaching loads are heavy, teachers may have less time to prepare innovative lessons or provide detailed feedback. Excessive workload can also affect teachers' job satisfaction and professional well-being.

Professional development is particularly important because EFL teaching continues to change. New teaching approaches, digital technologies, assessment practices, and theories of language acquisition require teachers to update their knowledge and skills. However, professional development opportunities may be limited, irregular, expensive, or disconnected from teachers' actual classroom needs. Effective professional development should therefore be continuous, practical, context-sensitive, and connected to teachers' professional goals. The challenges faced by EFL teachers are also influenced by broader sociocultural and institutional factors. Teachers may work in contexts where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. In some environments, English may be viewed primarily as an examination subject rather than a tool for communication. Alzubi, A. A. F., & Alelaiwi, A. S. (2025). Students may consequently prioritize memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary rather than developing communicative competence. Teachers who attempt to introduce communicative activities may face resistance from students who are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction. The role of the teacher has also changed considerably. Modern approaches to language education increasingly position teachers as facilitators, organizers, mentors, and designers of learning experiences rather than simply providers of information. This shift requires teachers to understand learners' needs and employ a variety of instructional approaches.

However, teachers cannot easily implement learner-centered teaching without institutional conditions that support it. Research into EFL teacher challenges is therefore important because teachers are central to the implementation of language education policies and curricula. Understanding the difficulties they encounter can help universities design better support systems and professional development programs. It can also help policymakers develop realistic curricula and assessment systems. This study focuses on the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in higher education. It examines challenges related to students, teaching practices, resources, technology, assessment, curriculum, workload, and institutional support. By identifying the most significant challenges, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for improving the teaching environment and supporting university EFL teachers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language in higher education.
2. To examine the extent to which student-related, institutional, pedagogical, technological, and resource-related factors affect EFL teachers' teaching practices.
3. To suggest strategies and institutional measures for reducing the challenges faced by higher-education EFL teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. The study seeks to answer the following three research questions:
2. What are the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language in higher education?
3. To what extent do student-related, pedagogical, institutional, technological, and resource-related factors affect EFL teachers' teaching practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English language teaching in higher education is increasingly associated with students' academic and professional development. University students often need English not simply as a subject but as a means of accessing disciplinary knowledge and participating in global academic and professional communities. Attia, S., & Algazo, M. (2025). found that This has increased pressure on university English teachers to provide instruction that goes beyond traditional grammar and vocabulary teaching. In higher education, English teaching may involve General English, English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, communication courses, academic writing, presentation skills, or discipline-related language instruction. Each context creates different demands for teachers. An English teacher working with engineering students, for example, may need to incorporate technical vocabulary and discipline-specific communication, while a teacher working with humanities students may emphasize academic reading, writing, and critical discussion. The diversity of English teaching purposes means that teachers need flexibility in curriculum implementation. However, institutional curricula do not always provide sufficient flexibility. Teachers may have to follow prescribed textbooks, examination formats, and course objectives even when these do not completely match students' needs. One of the most frequently reported challenges in EFL classrooms is the presence of students with different proficiency levels.

University students' prior English education can vary substantially because they may come from different schools, regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational systems. Heterogeneous classes create difficulties for lesson planning and classroom management. Alzubi, A. A. F., & Alelaiwi, A. S. (2025). Explained that A single instructional activity may be too difficult for some students and too easy for others. Teachers therefore need to differentiate materials, tasks, questions, and assessment procedures. Differentiated instruction can be effective, but it increases teachers' preparation demands. Teachers may need to develop multiple versions of activities or provide additional support to lower-proficiency students while extending tasks for advanced students. In large university classes, this can be particularly difficult. Student motivation is closely connected to the success of language

learning. Motivated students are more likely to participate, practice, complete assignments, and persist when they experience difficulties. Low motivation, however, can make teaching considerably more difficult. Students' motivation may depend on their perception of the usefulness of English. If students believe that English is relevant to their future careers, they may be more willing to engage in learning activities. However, if English is viewed only as a compulsory course, students may focus on passing examinations rather than developing communicative competence. Teachers consequently need to make learning relevant. Hasan, J. R., Habibie, A., & Machmud, K. (2025). Explains that Authentic tasks involving workplace communication, academic presentations, interviews, discussions, and real-world problem solving may help students understand the practical value of English. Large classes are a major organizational challenge for language teachers. Language learning depends heavily on interaction, feedback, and practice. However, the opportunities for interaction decline as class size increases. In large classes, teachers may struggle to monitor group work, assess speaking activities, answer individual questions, and provide personalized feedback. Classroom management can also consume substantial instructional time.

Instructional resources can strongly influence teaching practices. Effective EFL instruction may benefit from audio recordings, videos, authentic texts, visual materials, computers, projectors, internet access, language laboratories, and digital learning platforms. Where resources are limited, teachers may have to rely heavily on textbooks and traditional teaching methods. Guo, D., Yang, D., Zhang, H., Song, J., Wang, P., Zhu, Q., ... & He, Y. (2025). revealed that This can reduce opportunities for authentic language exposure and interactive activities. Resource limitations are not simply a technological issue. Textbook availability, library resources, classroom furniture, photocopying facilities, and access to appropriate assessment materials can also influence teachers' ability to deliver effective lessons. Technology has become an increasingly important component of language education. Digital platforms allow teachers to provide multimedia resources, online exercises, electronic feedback, virtual communication, and individualized learning opportunities. However, technology can also create challenges. Teachers may lack training, institutions may have unreliable internet connections, or students may have unequal access to devices. Teachers must also invest time in selecting appropriate digital resources and learning how to use them effectively. Technology integration should therefore be understood as a pedagogical issue rather than simply a technical one. Teachers need to understand why and how technology supports particular learning objectives. Assessment is an essential component of English language teaching, but it can create significant difficulties for teachers. Ideally, assessment should measure students' actual ability to use English across multiple skills.

In practice, institutional assessment may focus heavily on written examinations. Speaking and listening are more difficult to assess in large classes because they require considerable time and appropriate scoring procedures. Alavijeh, F. A., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2025). Elaborated on Teachers may therefore find it difficult to provide balanced assessment across all four language skills. Wash back from examinations can also influence teaching. If students know that grammar and vocabulary are heavily weighted in examinations, they may prioritize these areas even when teachers want to develop communicative competence. Teachers frequently work within prescribed curricula. Curricular requirements can provide useful structure, but they may also restrict teacher autonomy. An overloaded syllabus may require teachers to cover a large number of topics within a short period. This can reduce the

time available for student-centered activities, revision, feedback, and individualized instruction. Curriculum relevance is another concern. English courses should ideally reflect students' academic and professional needs. When course content is disconnected from students' fields of study or future careers, motivation may decline. Ngoc Ngan, D. T., Hercz, M., Van Loi, N., Van Thong, N., Lan Anh, N. T., Thi, N. K., ... & Kocsis, Á. (2026). found that Teacher workload includes teaching hours, lesson preparation, assessment, administrative responsibilities, research, meetings, advising, and professional development. University teachers may experience pressure to perform successfully in several roles simultaneously. Heavy workload can affect instructional quality because teachers have less time for preparing innovative activities, marking assignments carefully, and providing individualized feedback. Workload can also influence teacher well-being. Persistent workload pressure may lead to stress, dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and professional exhaustion. Professional development is important for helping teachers respond to changing educational demands. EFL teachers may need training in communicative language teaching, task-based learning, assessment, digital technology, inclusive teaching, academic English, and classroom management. 1487However, professional development is most effective when it is relevant to teachers' real classroom problems

. One-off workshops may have limited impact if teachers do not receive follow-up support or opportunities to apply new practices. Sipe, M., & Segumpan, R. G. (2024). found that Universities should therefore consider professional development as an ongoing process involving workshops, peer observation, mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, action research, and communities of practice. Institutional support can significantly affect teachers' ability to overcome challenges. Teachers need adequate classrooms, technological resources, manageable class sizes, access to professional development, appropriate teaching materials, and reasonable workloads. When institutional expectations are unrealistic, individual teachers may have limited capacity to solve structural problems. Thuy, B. N. P. (2025). Explained that Therefore, improving EFL education requires attention to both teachers' professional skills and the institutional environment in which they work. The challenges can be understood through a teacher-context perspective in which teachers' classroom practices are shaped by interactions among individual, classroom, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Teachers may possess strong pedagogical knowledge but still experience difficulties if they work with extremely large classes or insufficient resources. This perspective suggests that teacher challenges should not be interpreted as evidence of teacher incompetence. Instead, teaching quality is partly dependent on the conditions in which teaching occurs.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative research approach. The quantitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to identify and measure the frequency and severity of challenges experienced by EFL teachers. A structured questionnaire can provide numerical information about teachers' perceptions of different challenges. The collected data can then be summarized using descriptive statistics and analyzed to identify the most significant challenges. The quantitative approach also allows the researcher to compare the relative importance of different categories of challenges, such as student-related, institutional, pedagogical, technological, and resource-related problems. The quantitative approach also provides an opportunity to identify relationships between teachers' characteristics and their

perceptions of teaching challenges. For example, teachers with different levels of experience may perceive classroom management differently. Similarly, teachers working in large classes may report greater difficulty providing individual feedback than teachers working with smaller groups. Teachers working in institutions with better technological facilities may report fewer technology-related challenges than teachers working in institutions where such facilities are limited. The main instrument proposed for this research is a structured questionnaire. A questionnaire is appropriate because it allows information to be collected from a number of teachers in a relatively efficient and standardized manner. The questionnaire can contain Likert-scale statements addressing different dimensions of EFL teaching challenges. Participants can indicate whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree with each statement.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive survey research design is proposed for this study. A survey design is appropriate because the study seeks to collect information directly from EFL teachers regarding their experiences. The design allows the researcher to obtain information from a relatively large number of participants in a systematic manner. The proposed population consists of university and college English teachers working in higher education. For an actual study, the researcher could select approximately 100–200 EFL teachers, depending on access and the size of the target population. Participants could be selected through convenience sampling, purposive sampling, or random sampling. Where possible, random or stratified sampling would provide stronger generalizability. The research design is cross-sectional because the data are collected from participants at one particular period. Teachers are asked to report their current experiences of teaching English as a foreign language. This design is practical for identifying the challenges that teachers currently face within their institutional and classroom environments. The target population consists of English language teachers working in higher education institutions.

Depending on the specific research context, the population may include teachers from universities, colleges, institutes, and other post-secondary institutions where English is taught as a foreign language. The researcher may select teachers who have direct responsibility for teaching English language courses. For an illustrative study, a sample of 150 EFL teachers could be selected from several higher education institutions. The final sample size should, however, be based on the actual population, institutional access, and the sampling strategy used by the researcher. Participants could be selected through purposive sampling, convenience sampling, stratified sampling, or simple random sampling. If the researcher has access to a complete list of EFL teachers, probability sampling would provide stronger opportunities for generalization.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data would first be entered into statistical software such as SPSS, Jacobi, JASP, or R. Descriptive statistics would be used to answer the first research question. Frequencies and percentages could identify how many teachers report experiencing particular challenges, while means and standard deviations could indicate the relative severity of different challenges. For example, challenges could be ranked according to their mean scores: For the

second research question, the researcher could calculate category-level mean scores and compare student-related, pedagogical, technological, and institutional challenges. If demographic information is available, inferential tests such as an independent-samples t-test or one-way ANOVA could be used to determine whether perceptions differ according to teaching experience, institution type, or class size. For example, the researcher could examine whether teachers with more than ten years of experience report significantly different levels of challenge from teachers with fewer than five years of experience. Correlation analysis could also be used to investigate relationships between workload, class size, and perceived teaching difficulty. Correlation analysis can also be conducted to investigate whether variables such as class size and workload are associated with perceived teaching difficulties. Pearson's correlation coefficient can be used when the relevant assumptions are satisfied. If the researcher wants to determine whether particular variables predict teachers' overall perception of teaching challenges, regression analysis can be used. For example, class size, teaching hours, and years of experience could be examined as predictors of overall teaching difficulty.

FINDINGS

The findings below are illustrative. They should be replaced with the results from your actual questionnaire data. The illustrative findings indicate that EFL teachers experience several interconnected challenges. The most prominent challenges are heterogeneous student proficiency, low student motivation, large class sizes, heavy workload, limited teaching resources, and insufficient technological facilities. The highest-ranked challenge is different levels of student English proficiency. Teachers report difficulty designing lessons that simultaneously meet the needs of weaker and stronger students. This finding suggests that differentiated instruction is particularly important in higher education EFL classrooms. The second major challenge is low student motivation. Teachers report that some students attend English classes mainly because English is compulsory. Such students may show limited participation and may be reluctant to engage in communicative activities. Large class size is another major challenge. Teachers indicate that large classes reduce their ability to provide individual feedback and create sufficient opportunities for students to practice speaking. Teachers also report difficulties implementing student-centered and communicative teaching methods. While communicative approaches may be pedagogically desirable, they can be difficult to implement when classes are large and instructional time is limited. Teachers may therefore rely on whole-class teaching, written exercises, and lecture-style instruction because these approaches are easier to manage with large groups.

Assessment is also identified as a challenge. Speaking and listening assessment requires considerable time and resources. Teachers may find it difficult to assess these skills fairly when they are responsible for large numbers of students. The illustrative findings indicate that insufficient teaching resources remain a significant concern. Teachers report difficulties accessing appropriate multimedia materials, technological equipment, and reliable internet facilities. Although technology can potentially improve EFL teaching, teachers need adequate institutional support to use it effectively. The absence of reliable facilities can prevent teachers from incorporating multimedia activities and online learning resources into their lessons.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language in higher education. The discussion demonstrates that university EFL teachers operate in complex educational environments in which teaching effectiveness is influenced by student characteristics, classroom conditions, institutional policies, resources, technology, assessment, curriculum, and workload. The illustrative findings indicate that heterogeneous student proficiency is one of the most significant challenges. Teachers may find it difficult to provide instruction that is simultaneously appropriate for students with low, intermediate, and advanced levels of English proficiency. Differentiated teaching strategies can help address this problem, but teachers require adequate preparation time and institutional support. Student motivation is another important challenge. Teachers may encounter students who regard English as merely a compulsory subject and consequently demonstrate limited participation. Connecting English learning with students' academic and professional goals can help improve engagement. Large class sizes also create considerable difficulties. Language learning requires opportunities for interaction and practice, but these opportunities become more difficult to provide when teachers are responsible for large numbers of students. Smaller classes, structured group activities, peer assessment, and appropriate technology can help address this problem.

Resource and technology limitations further affect teachers' practices. Modern EFL instruction can benefit from multimedia and digital resources, but teachers need reliable equipment, internet access, and professional training. Technology should therefore be supported through appropriate institutional investment. Teacher workload is another critical issue. Excessive teaching, grading, administrative, and research responsibilities can reduce the time available for lesson preparation and professional development. Institutions should therefore develop workload policies that allow teachers sufficient time to perform their instructional responsibilities effectively. Overall, the challenges faced by EFL teachers cannot be addressed solely by asking teachers to work harder or adopt new teaching methods. Many challenges are structural and require institutional solutions. Universities should provide adequate resources, manageable class sizes, professional development, technological support, appropriate assessment systems, and reasonable workloads. The study concludes that improving English language teaching in higher education requires a whole-system approach. Teachers need professional knowledge and skills, but they also need supportive institutional environments in which those skills can be effectively applied. Addressing the major challenges identified in this study can contribute to better teaching practices, stronger teacher satisfaction, greater student engagement, and improved English language learning outcomes.

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