



# English Language Learners Barriers and Frustrations: Student Perceptions

Dr. Tina Allen-Abulhassan

American College of Education - Alumni

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the academic barriers and frustrations faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) as they transition into Western higher education. Using a basic qualitative research design, data were collected from eighteen adult ELLs enrolled in ESL programs at three adult learning centers and community colleges in Indiana, United States. Participants shared perceptions of challenges encountered prior to and during their higher education experiences. Findings revealed persistent language-related barriers, including pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, grammatical challenges, low confidence, inadequate instructional environments, limited opportunities for practice, and insufficient learning materials. The study also identified systemic shortcomings in English instruction within non-English-speaking countries that negatively affect long-term academic success. Additionally, challenges faced by non-native English-speaking instructors, such as instructional anxiety and reduced effectiveness, were noted. The findings highlight a gap in the literature regarding effective instructional strategies and materials to mitigate these barriers. Implications underscore the need for equitable resources, qualified instruction, and supportive learning environments to promote academic success for adult ELLs in higher education.

**Keywords:** English language learners, ESL, academic barriers, frustration, higher education, pronunciation, vocabulary

## INTRODUCTION

English language learners (ELLs) face significant academic challenges in higher education contexts. These emotional barriers can hinder their ability to succeed academically and persist in higher education. Limited English proficiency can negatively affect comprehension, academic performance, and classroom participation. These challenges often lead to frustration and decreased confidence among ELLs. These barriers and frustrations can lead to feelings of isolation and leave learners feeling left behind by their peers. ELLs may need strategies to cope with these challenges and overcome academic obstacles to reach their academic goals. Proper ESL support is crucial to promoting academic success and helping ELLs build their learning skills.

The problem addressed in this study is the persistent frustration experienced by ELLs transitioning into Western higher education due to insufficient English-language preparation in their home countries. This issue is critical because many ELLs do not complete their college studies due to language-related motivation barriers (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020) and doubts about their ability to succeed in higher education (Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022). The literature review examined ELLs' barriers and frustrations in learning English in academic settings. There is a need for recommended curriculum materials for ESL teachers to use in classrooms that explore effective ways to lessen the frustrations and barriers ELL students encounter in their learning environments (Soomro et al., 2023). The aim of this study was to explore how English Language Learners (ELLs) experience the transition into U.S. higher education, including their prior educational experiences, instructional quality, language development, and the ways they navigate academic barriers and related frustrations. The study also sought to identify the strategies ELLs use to achieve their academic goals despite language challenges. This focus aligned with the research questions by examining the types of barriers ELLs encounter, how they navigate these challenges, the emotional and motivational factors influencing their experiences, and the specific strategies, resources, and learning practices they employ to support their academic success.

## Research Questions

How do English language learners overcome academic barriers to reach their academic goals in higher education?

How do English language learners overcome frustrations to reach their academic goals in higher education?

What strategies are used by English language learners to overcome academic barriers and frustration in higher education?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English Language Barriers

This literature review examined the barriers and frustrations faced by teachers and students in second-language instruction across different countries. Andriani and Subekti (2023) note that English language barriers are especially common among non-native English speakers, younger teachers compared to their students, individuals with limited English vocabulary, and individuals with low speaking proficiency.

Murtada and Alsuhaibani (2023) reported that learning barriers faced by ELLs in adult education and college hinder their academic success. These barriers affect ELLs in higher education by limiting English instruction, hindering college achievement, and creating mental blocks (Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022). Therefore, educators should assist students by providing information about campus writing and tutoring centers as additional resources to reduce academic barriers that hinder student success in higher education, such as limited proficiency, intentional plagiarism, and difficulty expressing ideas (Lewis & Brown, 2021). Other barriers include issues with commitment, phonetics, and grammar that should not be overlooked (Sholihah et al., 2024).

According to Jawaid et al. (2025), 90% of Ein Pakistan experience fear of speaking English, as anxiety and fear of judgment are much greater barriers than mechanical fears, which were cited by 10%. Jawaid et al. (2025) also noted that emotional and psychological well-being, as well as speaking English, are key areas that require attention for students to improve their proficiency.

Teachers need to use a variety of strategies to engage students, such as public speaking, phonetic practice, and group activities, to tailor interventions that encourage classroom participation among ELLs and help them overcome their speaking fears (Jawaid et al., 2025). Frustration can lead to negative feelings when individuals are prevented from reaching their goals under unfavorable circumstances (Kuppens & Van Mechelen, 2007, as cited in Morris & King, 2018).

### English Learning Frustration

Sholihah et al. (2024) point out that other words associated with frustration in learning English include irritation, annoyance, anger, fury, rage, resentment, and indignation. Hashemi (2011) suggests that language learners should be provided with non-frustrating materials that foster satisfaction rather than frustration. According to Soriano and Ogarkova (2025), English frustration is a prototypical form of anger characterized by a high sense of power. Baxtiyarovich (2024) states that both negative and positive learning environments influence a student's attitude towards learning. A negative learning environment can result in frustration, demotivation, and student disengagement. Whereas positive learning environments promote enjoyment, enthusiasm, and self-efficacy (Baxtiyarovich, 2024).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Krashen's (1982) natural order theory of language acquisition and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. Krashen emphasized that people learn best through meaningful, real-life communication rather than just grammar memorization. Hafizah et al. (2020) suggest that natural, engaging communication allows the mother tongue (L1) to be acquired as a second language (L2). The ability to practice regularly in picking up an L2 is essential for overall speaking success.

Vygotsky claims that learning happens through social interaction, especially when learners engage with experienced speakers. O'Hara (2007, as cited in Chauhan, 2023) explains that Vygotsky's ideas align closely with Krashen's, as both emphasize the importance of communication and relationships in the language learning process. These theories indicate that interaction with native English speakers is crucial in helping learners acquire the language more effectively in real-world settings.

The natural order approach supports ELLs in developing communication skills in real-life, informal situations (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). Building communication skills is crucial for understanding vocabulary in context and generating more natural responses—rather than focusing solely on grammar rules, which can impede language development (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021; Stoneburgh, 2020). This method encourages learners to concentrate on using language meaningfully, fostering their academic growth early on, rather than emphasizing grammar mechanics, which can be learned later and is not necessary during the initial stages of second language acquisition (Hafizah et al., 2020). To teach effectively, educators must design the learning experience with a solid understanding of how second language acquisition occurs (Hafizah et al., 2020). Comprehensible input provides a clear, understandable message in which learners feel safe and supported in low-anxiety environments, enabling them to process the language naturally (Krashen, 1982).

## METHODOLOGY

This basic qualitative research study focused on understanding the perceptions of ELLs in adult learning centers and community colleges who face educational frustration and barriers in higher education systems in Western countries. This study aimed to explore these frustrations and barriers to identify potential solutions and help students overcome barriers to succeed in listening, speaking, writing, and reading (Siripipatthanakul et al., 2023).

### Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was used to explore ELLs' perceptions of academic barriers and frustrations in higher education. Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered to eighteen adult ELLs enrolled in ESL programs at adult learning centers and community colleges in Indiana. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants' written responses were reviewed multiple times to ensure accurate data. Open coding was conducted to identify recurring words, phrases, and concepts related to language barriers, learning frustrations, and academic preparedness. Themes were developed by grouping codes into categories that reflect shared experiences and aligned with the research questions. There were several themes that emerged; this paper discusses the theme of barriers and frustrations faced by language learners, using visual representations, including charts and figures, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ELLs' experiences.

### Participants

This study was conducted at three adult learning centers and community colleges in Indiana, where a total of 315 students were enrolled. From this population, a convenience sample of eighteen participants currently enrolled in ESL courses was selected. A questionnaire (See appendix) was administered to these participants after obtaining informed consent.

Eligible participants were 18 years or older, identified as L2 learners from various countries (Mexico, Honduras, China, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, USA, South Korea, Brazil, Jordan, and Russia), had previously studied English in their home countries, and were either currently enrolled or planning to enroll in a community college. Participants under eighteen or those who had not learned English in their home countries were excluded from the study.

### Instruments

The data collection tool for this study was a questionnaire (see Appendix). The reason for choosing this instrument was to gather responses that directly addressed the research question. Field testing with SMEs was conducted on the questionnaire to ensure all questions met the accuracy standards expected in this study. Some questions focused on the frustrations and barriers ELLs faced as ESL students that could hinder their college



success. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was newly designed for this study and administered at the beginning of data collection.

## Procedures

Three ESL sites in Indiana were used, providing a variety of perspectives from different countries. The target population was ELLs from three Indiana learning centers offering ESL education. After the ACE Institutional Review Board approved the study, participants were contacted by email to obtain informed consent. Bias is minimized in research to create fair experiences. If bias is not controlled, unfairness can limit certain groups' opportunities to participate in meaningful research (Qizi, 2023). Participants' email addresses were obtained through the chair or directors of the ESL programs. All invitations were sent to participants on the same day to provide equal response time. The focus was on ELLs enrolled in Indiana's three second-language learning centers that met the study's criteria.

## FINDINGS

Limited availability of qualified ESL teachers and improper teaching methods can greatly hinder students' progress toward higher learning goals by creating language barriers. Pronunciation issues and language barriers from students' home countries contributed to academic frustration during their transition to higher education. Different teaching and learning approaches can help improve learning outcomes.

The role of learning from native speakers was also highlighted as a significant benefit for L1 learners. Additionally, the study examined how teaching non-native adult learners in learning centers and college students in ESL courses can help them overcome language barriers and develop better language skills. Few studies identify effective learning materials to help ELLs prepare for college academics.

Limited research addresses the use of effective instructional materials that adequately prepare ELLs for college readiness. Participants in this study reported significant language barriers due to limited English instruction in their home countries, where exposure was often limited to one or two hours per week in non-private school settings—insufficient time to develop proficiency and adequate practice. Learning English in the United States was perceived as offering greater educational and employment opportunities, due to improved instructional quality and increased exposure to authentic language use. Supportive learning environments and access to adequate resources were identified as essential factors in helping non-native English speakers achieve academic and professional success.

ESL students prefer instruction from native English teachers to improve their English teaching and pronunciation skills and to prepare for college exams, although most strongly agree that their non-native English-speaking EFL teacher is confident in using English for communication (Punyaporn, 2025). This study confirms the barriers ESL students encounter when learning English in other countries and how they try to overcome them in U.S. higher education settings. The findings also expand knowledge in the field by exploring ways for both trained and untrained educators to effectively reduce the barriers ELLs face and enhance their language learning skills.

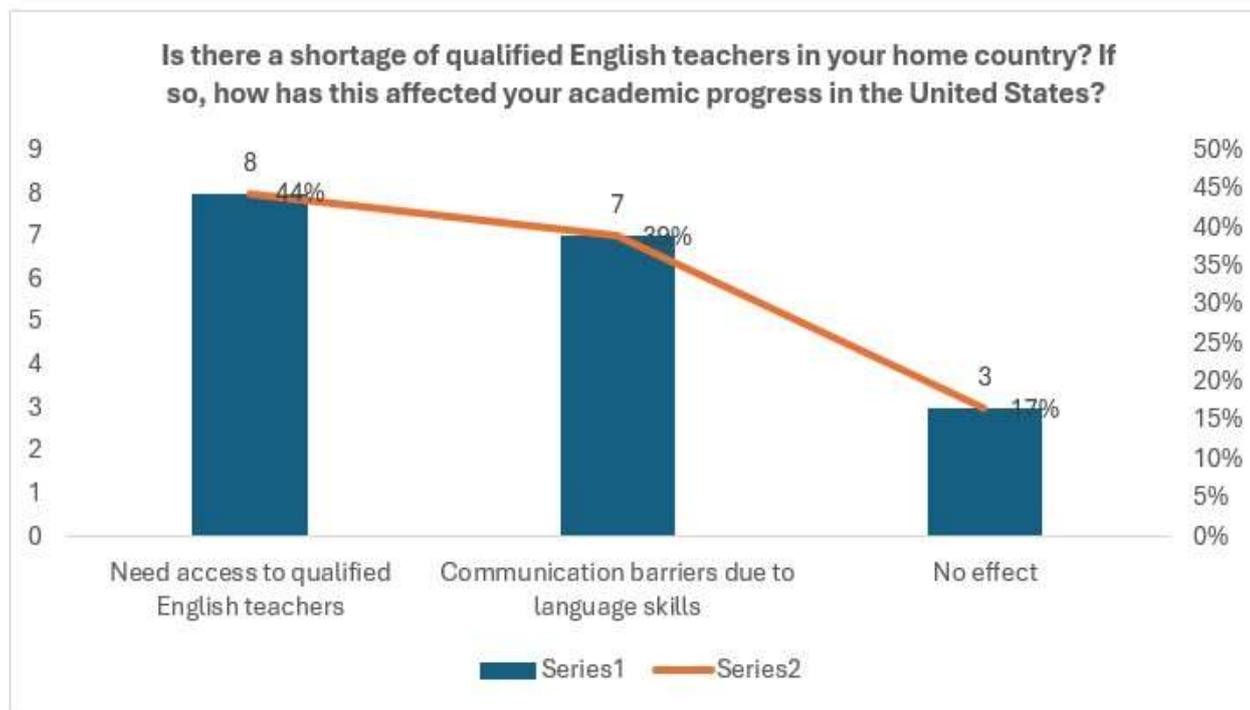
Consistent with prior research, participants expressed a preference for instruction from native English-speaking teachers to enhance pronunciation, communication skills, and preparation for college-level assessments. However, most participants also acknowledged that non-speaking instructors were confident and effective communicators (Punyaporn, 2025). These findings confirm previously identified barriers face by ESL students in their home countries and highlight the strategies they use to overcome those barriers in U.S. higher education contexts.

When language learners were asked to explain the language barriers they experienced while learning English in their home countries: Participant 1 responded, "No, there is not a shortage of qualified English teacher in my country (see figure 1), but studying English requires continuous practice. Otherwise, you may not progress." Participant 2 responded, "Yes, I couldn't speak English well when I came to the United States. Participant 4 responded, "I studied in public school, they are not really interested in you learning, they only teach the basics, so fluency and grammar are being difficult for me." Participant 11 replied, "Yes there is, it requires me more effort to learn and be able to understand, speak and communicate with American accents." Participant 14 responded, "I feel like yes, I think it was easy to mix up and get confused when faced with grammatical rules.

Participant 15 responded, “We spent a lot of time studying English, but we still don’t know it.” Participant 16 responded,

“Yes, all of Jordanian teachers are not qualified! After I came to the US for 5 months I decided to enroll in the University of Notre Dame. They didn’t accept me because of my bad English language. Now, after being in the US for one and a half years, two weeks ago, I had an interview with a director of the Global Health Master’s Program, and she gave me a waiver for the TOEFL test since my English is very good and I didn’t need to take the TOEFL. More, she told me to apply as soon as possible to the program, and I did.”

**Figure 1 Learning Barriers**



The 18 ELLs who faced language barriers and frustration in their home countries shared their perceptions of the difficulties they encountered with English, including a shortage of qualified native-speaking teachers. Forty-four percent (44%) of the ELLs reported a need for qualified English teachers, 39% reported communication barriers due to language skills, and 17% reported no effect of a shortage of English language teachers in their home countries (See figure 1). According to Krashen (1982 practice is crucial for acquiring fluency in English. Learning through natural order language, which involves everyday conversations and communication, helps adapt to the target language without grammatical interference (Febriani et al., 2021).

**Figure 2 Language Training**

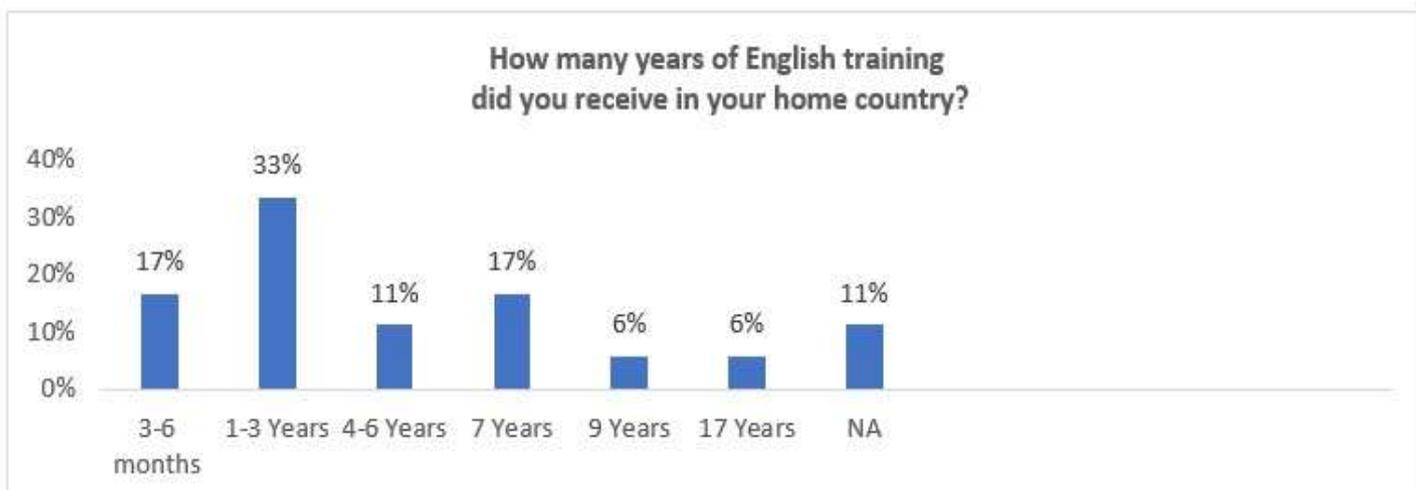




Figure 2 implied that years of English-language instruction in ELLs' home countries revealed learning barriers that contributed to academic frustration. Although the largest portion, 33%, was 1-3 years of English instruction, many described this as insufficient to meet their learning needs in higher education in Western academic contexts. In addition, 17% reported that only 3-6 months of English training highlighted the limited foundational preparation, given little training. The 7-year (17%), 4-6-year (11%), 9-year (6%), and 17-year (6%) groups still reported challenges with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This suggests that the amount of English instruction was insufficient for academic readiness in higher education.

To further explore the research question, ELLs reported fewer frustrations and barriers and more positive English learning experiences in the United States than in their home countries, citing higher-quality instruction, effective teaching methods, greater exposure to native English accents, and more opportunities to develop academic language skills. These factors were identified as critical for college preparedness and long-term academic success. Participants believed the United States offered higher-quality teaching and more effective methods to improve language skills. Additionally, learners had more opportunities to experience the American accent, improve their job prospects, and enhance their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. These academic factors are essential for college preparation and long-term success.

## DISCUSSION

The literature lacks research on the effectiveness of ESL teaching materials that reduce the barriers ELLs face in their learning environments. Little research discusses the effective academic materials these students use to prepare for college readiness. ELLs in Indiana encounter language barriers due to limited English resources in their home-country classrooms, often receiving only 1 or 2 hours per week in non-private schools. This limited time is not enough for English learners to reach proficiency.

Learning English in the U.S. improves educational outcomes and job opportunities for ELLs. Supportive environments and resources can help non-native English speakers achieve their academic and professional goals. Qualified ESL teachers who foster a friendly, social learning environment and use effective teaching methods to reduce barriers for ELLs can be an effective tool for promoting learning motivation. According to the research study's findings, many ELLs in Indiana faced significant challenges in their home countries due to a shortage of qualified English teachers and limited practice opportunities, leading to academic frustration. Recognizing the impact of prior learning experiences and current language proficiency may require additional steps to overcome English barriers and limitations.

Students who face language barriers often do not match their peers' learning levels and prefer native-speaking teachers to help build their confidence and improve reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Acheampong, 2023; Chu & Lou, 2021). To further address the research question, participants were asked whether there was a shortage of qualified English teachers in their home countries and, if so, how this affected their academic progress in the United States. ELLs reported they faced language barriers and frustration while learning English in their home countries.

This study emphasizes the importance of qualified ESL instructors who foster supportive social learning environments and employ effective teaching strategies. Many participants reported that limited access to qualified English teachers and insufficient practice opportunities in their home countries contributed to long-term academic frustration and created barriers to learning English. Addressing these challenges requires recognition of learners' prior educational experiences and current language proficiency levels to better support their academic transition.

Consistent with previous studies, learners who face language barriers often struggle to meet their peers' academic expectations and value instruction that strengthens reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Acheampong, 2023; Chu & Lou, 2021). Participants' responses regarding teacher shortages in their home countries further illustrate how inadequate instruction contributed to delayed language development and frustration. Despite these challenges, several participants reported significant improvement in English proficiency after extended exposure to immersive learning environments in the United States, reinforcing the importance of consistent practice and meaningful communication (Krashen, 1982; Febriani et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The perceptions of ELLs were examined to understand the barriers and challenges they face, as well as the influence of prior academic instruction in their home countries, across three community colleges in Indiana. The limitations of this study include its focus on the ESL student population within these three colleges in the same state. Future research should broaden to include other ELL populations in higher education community colleges across different states. This study investigated how effective ESL instruction impacts the academic success of ELLs in the U.S., highlighting the obstacles they encounter in their ESL education. Additionally, it explored how teaching non-native adult learners in learning centers and college ESL courses can help them overcome language barriers and improve their language skills. ESL educators must recognize potential obstacles that hinder adult learners' ability to reach their educational goals and be willing and prepared to find solutions (Soomro et al., 2023).

Findings addressing the first research question indicate that ELLs overcome academic barriers primarily through increased exposure to English and access to qualified ESL instruction. Participants reported that limited English instruction and insufficient practice opportunities in their home countries contributed to persistent challenges in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and academic communication. The barriers were gradually reduced through consistent language use and participation in ESL programs that emphasized significant communication. The second research question found that academic frustrations, such as anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making errors, were common among participants. These frustrations were alleviated in supportive, low-anxiety learning environments that encourage participation and allow for linguistic risk-taking, supporting Krashen's natural language order theory. The third research question identified several strategies for overcoming academic barriers and frustration, including frequent speaking practice, engagement with native English speakers, use of campus academic support services, and enrollment in ESL courses with effective instructional methods. These strategies contributed to improved language proficiency, greater confidence, and enhanced academic readiness.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that although many ELLs enter higher education with language-related barriers stemming from insufficient prior instruction, these challenges can be eased through effective ESL teaching practices, supportive learning environments, and access to appropriate resources. This study contributes to the literature by reinforcing the importance of instructional quality and practice opportunities in promoting academic success for adult ELLs in higher education. These solutions can be researched through ESL learning platforms such as [Education.com](#), [Intercambio ESL learning](#), [Ventures ESL learning](#), [Ventures Academy](#), [Study.com](#), [Burlington English](#), and private tutoring.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### Ethical statements

The ethical statement of this study is presented through informed consent, signed by all participants, and approved by the IRB of the American College of Education

### Declaration of conflicts of interest

This paper holds no conflict of interest.

### Data availability statement

The data from this study have been captured in an Excel sheet and are presented in the charts, quotes, and findings. The raw data is not available to protect the subjects.

### Funding statement

The author solely funds this paper.

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## APPENDIX

Thank you for being so willing to participate in this questionnaire. Please note that this questionnaire is entirely voluntary, and you are not obligated to answer any questions that you do not wish to. You agree to participate in this questionnaire by answering the questions. You may skip any question that does not pertain to your learning experience. Also, you are welcome to answer any questions in your native language.

### Demographics

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender  
 Male  
 Female  
 Other  
 Prefer not to answer
3. Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
4. Home Language \_\_\_\_\_
5. Country of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
6. Highest level of education  
 High School  
 Associate degree  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  
 PhD  
 EdD  
 I prefer not to say.

### Previous ESL Education outside the United States

7. Is English your first or second language?  
 Yes       No
8. What languages do you speak fluently?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Explain your confidence in the English language before coming to the United States.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Questionnaire

10. How many years of English training did you receive in your home country?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Was your English teacher in your home country a native or non-native English speaker?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. Describe experiences with instructors in ESL institutions in your home country who were not native language speakers.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. What books or materials did you use when learning English in your school in your country?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Current ESL Education in the United States

14. How long have you been studying in the United States?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
15. Describe any obstacles you may have experienced learning English in your home country.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
16. Is there a shortage of qualified English teachers in your home country? If so, how has this affected your academic progress in the United States?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
17. How do English learning experiences in the United States differ from your previous English language learning experiences in your home country?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
18. In what ways do you believe that your English language learning experiences in your home country and the United States contribute to your ability to succeed in your college degree program?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
19. Give an example of how improving your English proficiency has positively impacted your confidence in your English studies.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_