

Examining the Evolution of EFL and ELL: Key Factors Shaping Learning and Implementation (2000-2024)

Abstract

For nearly a century, English language has unwaveringly remained a global phenomenon with a continued business relevance; the mandatory inclusion of English Language Learning (ELL) in Asian, African and other non-native English-speaking countries is proof of the same. Consequently, research about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has continued too. Despite ample empirical studies in the past that have examined the role of culture, linguistics, technology or digital tools in EFL, there are limited studies that holistically investigate and review the learning and successful implementation of EFL and its influencing factors. The current study is an attempt to systematically synthesize the findings from empirical studies undertaken between early 2000 and 2024 in the domains of EFL and ELL. The research also aims to draw a scientific relationship between the most relevant concepts surrounding ELL and EFL. To achieve this, the study conducted a systematic literature review coupled with Bibliometric mapping analysis. The study concluded that the upward surge of technological advancements and World Wide Web has transformed learning EFL. Cultural diversity, and technological or digital tools are key influencing factors and innovative teaching/learning pedagogies in EFL and ELL that can enhance the success rates in EFL and ELL in non-native English-speaking countries.

Keywords: English Language Learning; EFL; technology; culture; teaching pedagogies

Introduction

The growing globalization and accelerating technological advancements has made the globe a village. In these fast-changing terrains, knowing an international language can boost the educational and occupational prospects. English language, with its global business relevance across multiple continents, is a global phenomenon (Nguyen & Hoang, 2024; Wang, 2020; Sampson, 2019; Hyland, 2004). English language learning (ELL) is mandated from the junior grades through university programs in China, Japan and Korea (Kim, 2022; Wang, 2020; Kawamura, 2017). In Hong Kong, 95% of the population speaks Cantonese, which is regarded as the first language; nevertheless, English remains the official and pivotal language to remain competitive internationally (Hyland, 2004). China, one of the global superpowers, counts over 400 million people learning English as a foreign language (Wei & Su, 2012). Also Indonesia, Japan, India, Vietnam and Korea consider English as a 'Foreign'

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language even in the twenty-first century, despite the population learning English writing, reading and speaking skills for over five decades (Kim, 2022; Sampson, 2019). The demand for learning English as a Foreign language (EFL) remains steady with its growing need for better career prospects in the domains of STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), tourism and other careers (Supartini et al., 2024; Sampson, 2019; Kawamura, 2017). Apart from its considerable business relevance, the need for English language learning is unwavering in education—for exams such as TOEFL, IELTS (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009), English is the passport to higher education (Hyland, 2004).

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Learning a foreign language provides ample scope for constructing interculturality, as described in Kramsch's notion of third place (Kramsch, 1993). Also, culture influences language learning across the globe and it has a strong interconnectedness with linguistic diversity and technology in the context of language learning (Hossain, 2024; Kramsch, 2014). The dynamic nature of culture of any country is reflected through concrete elements such as literature, music, entertainment, language and food and also through abstract concepts such as beauty, justice, ideals with regard to societal norms, family values (Wang, 2019). To learn or teach EFL, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a prime determinant (Kim, 2022; Wang, 2020; Zheng et al., 2013).

Researchers Yen et al. (2015) emphasise the role of environmental factors in learning EFL and how the lack of interactive speaking environments can lead to foreign language anxiety. Large number of Asian students lack English-speaking competence; specifically the challenge lies in fluency, lexis, pronunciation, and content and it could be due to the unavailability of cultural and communicative contexts, lack of time and opportunities in English language learning classes and in the other social setups (Shadiev et al., 2023). A low self-efficacy about their English-speaking competence and a negative response towards public-speaking activities are common (Shadiev et al., 2023). Lin and Lin (2019) also explain vocabulary learning as a key challenge in ELL. Further, these challenges are attributed to the tools and pedagogies employed for English Language Teaching (ELT) (Zheng et al., 2013). The traditional EFL classes experience huge setbacks with regard to learner outcome (Shadiev et al., 2023). Most EFL teaching pedagogies encompass passive learning methods such as drill and practice, rote memorization, and exam-focused skills; it lacks task-based language instruction, creative reading and language knowledge (Kim, 2022).

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Another influencing factor in EFL and a growing concern among many is technological intervention (Alice Chen et al., 2021). Using chatbots in language classrooms, tools such as bulletin board, telegrams, email, 3D avatars, virtual spaces, memes, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR); Chat GPT are some of the popular technology tools studied in the recent years (Liu & Ma, 2024; Shadiev et al., 2023; Alice Chen et al., 2021; Golonka et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2013). Most studies have indicated that technology integration has positively transformed learners of English language even in non-native English speaking countries (Rintaningrum, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). These factors are multidimensional. The success of learning EFL comes with a holistic assessment of the various factors that influence or affect ELL.

Prior research indicates that the past few decades have witnessed a notable research in ELL and EFL with the ever-growing significance of English in non-native English speaking countries. As cited above, these studies have demonstrated diverse theorizing and conceptualizations of EFL—focusing on individual factors such as culture, technology among others. This necessitates the need for a comprehensive assessment of the various influencing factors and the scientific methods for successful implementation of teaching EFL in non-native English speaking countries. To address these gaps, this study conducted a systematic literature review taking into consideration a substantial number of empirical studies in this domain and with the aim to offer a holistic and evaluative overview of EFL and ELL in non-native English speaking countries. The study seeks to achieve two broad objectives:

- 1) To identify the themes or factors related to and affect “English language learning”
- 2) To assess the extent to which non-native English speaking countries have successfully taught “English as a foreign language”.

Further the research adopted bibliometric analysis as it conveys the relationship between key concepts relevant to the keywords through visual images (Arici et al., 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2019). The bibliometric mapping analysis that spanned empirical research conducted between 2000 and 2024 was drawn from Scopus database. The results can help policy makers, educators and course designers to augment the pedagogical factors to respond to the demands of EFL learners and teachers.

Methodology

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A systematic literature review (SLR) needs to be done for this study to systematically synthesize the findings from empirical studies undertaken from early 2000 until 2024 in the domains of EFL and ELL. SLR can enhance the understanding of the subjects, and present valuable insights to the stakeholders (Lin & Lin, 2019). Prior to the main review, a pilot literature search was conducted to refine the search strategy and identify relevant keywords (Hart, 2018). This preliminary search yielded approximately 300 articles, which informed the development of a more targeted search string.

Database, keywords and search string

The primary database used for this review was Scopus, chosen for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications from around the world. The search string was (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("english as a foreign language") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("cultur*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("english language learning") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Asia").

The main keywords used were:

- "English as a foreign language"
- "cultur*" (to capture variations like culture, cultural)
- "English language learning"
- "Asia"

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to ensure a balance between comprehensiveness and relevance.

Inclusion Criteria

Articles were selected based on the following criteria:

- a) Published in peer-reviewed journals
- b) Written in English
- c) Reported empirical research or content analysis
- d) Focused on English as a Foreign Language learning
- e) Assessed culture as a factor influencing language learning
- f) Assessed technology as a factor influencing culture and language learning
- g) Focused on Asian contexts

Figure 1 shows the process of conducting Systematic Literature Review with its implementation stages adopted for this study.

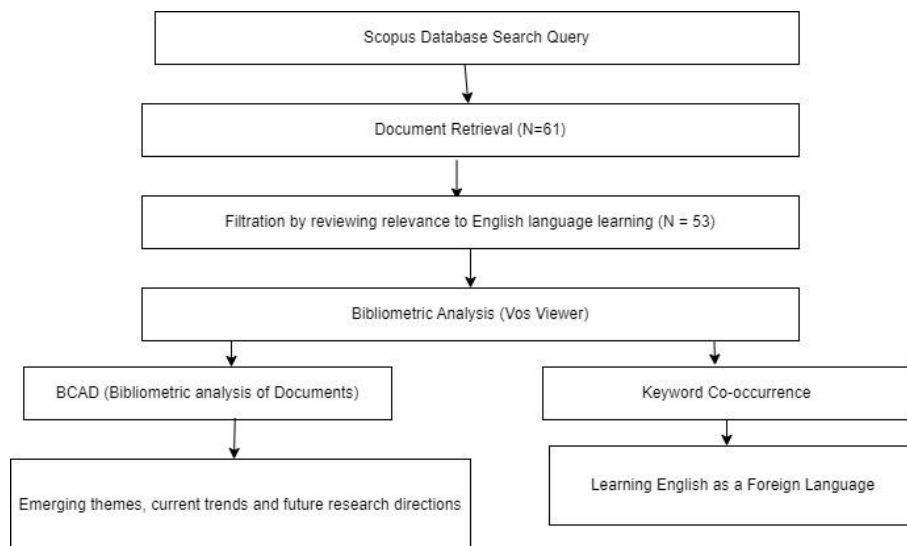


Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Flowchart

Screening Process

- Initial screening: Titles and abstracts were reviewed to eliminate articles not meeting the inclusion criteria.
- Full-text retrieval: Remaining articles were obtained for in-depth examination.
- Final selection: A thorough manual review of titles, abstracts, and full content was conducted to determine final inclusion.

Data Extraction

From the initial pool, 53 journal articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected for review. A standardized data extraction form was used to collect relevant information from each article, including:

- Bibliographic details (authors, year, journal)
- Study design and methodology
- Sample characteristics

- Key findings related to EFL/ELL, culture, and technology
- Implications for practice and future research

Bibliometric analysis serves as a powerful approach for exploring and interpreting vast amounts of scientific data, offering a window into the development and emerging trends within particular disciplines (Donthu et al., 2021). This method is particularly useful for:

- Identifying seminal works and foundational research
- Mapping geographical distribution of research output
- Recognizing influential authors and institutions
- Visualizing collaboration networks
- Tracking the evolution of key concepts over time

The integration of advanced software tools like VOSviewer further amplifies the ability to visualize and dissect bibliometric data, enabling a more profound understanding of scientific contributions and collaboration networks (Merigó et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

At the primary level, the authors familiarised themselves with the selected data by skimming through the content of the chosen articles. Next, a careful reading of each paper was performed with initial codes generated for each paper. Then, the final themes were identified and the researcher ensured that there was no overlapping between these themes. For identification of themes, both Bibliometric Coupling Analysis of Documents (BCAD) and keyword co-occurrence were performed (Ellegaard, 2018). We have used fractional counting as this approach has been shown to be preferable (Perianes-Rodriguez et al., 2016), and the association strength index as it has been shown to best normalize co-occurrence data (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

To map our results, we used Vos Viewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2011) which is freely available. This software allows both constructing and viewing distance-based maps, while paying specific attention to the graphical representation of bibliometric results. It can handle data efficiently without errors. This software uses an adapted form of Louvain algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) to help clusters and map networks. Our results are mapped in Figures 2 and 3.

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Figure 2. BCAD

In Figure 2, based on the normalized indices, the software assigns the units for documents to clusters. Each unit is assigned to exactly one cluster, represented by the nodes. Each cluster has a different colour in the maps and includes the closely related units, represented by the nodes. The size of the nodes is proportional to the number of citations of the documents. The thickness of the links between nodes is proportional to the bibliographic coupling indices in the BCAD map. The closer two nodes are in the BCAD map, the stronger the relationship between corresponding documents, based on the number of references these documents share. To allow an easier reading of this map, the documents with the greatest total link strength are displayed in the graph (Fig 2).

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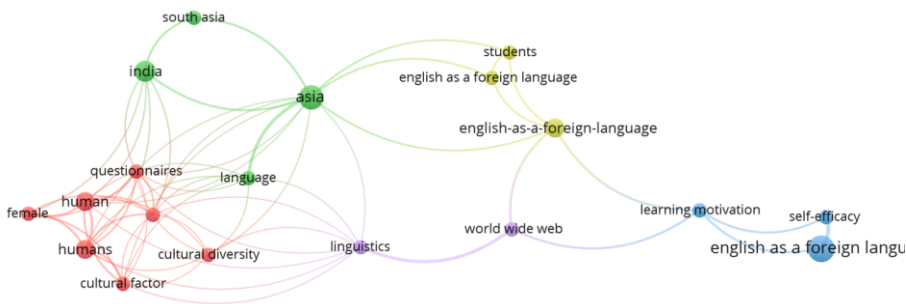


Figure 3. Co-occurrence of keywords

The graph (Figure 3) provided represents a network of keywords related to the topic, EFL in the context of South Asian students. The nodes in the graph represent individual keywords, and the edges connecting them indicate the frequency with which these keywords co-occur in the data analyzed. EFL is the central node, reflecting the primary focus of the analysis. Students, South Asia nodes form a cluster around EFL, suggesting that the analysis is primarily concerned with EFL learners in and the broader South Asian region. Language, Linguistics nodes indicate a focus on the linguistic aspects of EFL learning. Cultural Diversity, Cultural Factor nodes highlight the importance of cultural factors in EFL learning.

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World Wide Web node suggests that the analysis may have considered the role of online resources and digital technologies in EFL education.

Questionnaires, Human, Female nodes might indicate that the data used for the analysis was collected through questionnaires and may have involved human participants, potentially with a focus on female learners. The strong connections between EFL and the nodes related to students and South Asia emphasize the regional focus of the analysis. The connections between EFL and language, linguistics, and cultural factors suggest that these aspects are considered crucial for understanding EFL learning. The connection between EFL and World Wide Web indicates the potential influence of digital resources on EFL education.

Overall, the graph shows that the analysis of EFL in South Asia focuses on the experiences of students, the linguistic aspects of EFL learning, the role of cultural factors, and the potential impact of digital technologies. The connections between these keywords suggest that they are all interconnected and contribute to a complex understanding of EFL education in this region.

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The largest set of connections included 22 documents extracted in 6 different clusters as explained in Figure 2 and further showcased in Table 1. In Table 1, total link strength is the number of times a paper has been referred and cited by numerous authors for their research work. The author Chao (2013)'s paper, "A diary study of university EFL learners' intercultural learning through foreign films" has shown the highest link strength and this paper is also shown in the graph mentioned in Figure 2. The themes generated in Table 1 match with the keywords in Figure 3. This indicates that the themes/keywords generated by Vosviewer are the same as the themes/keywords that we have extracted by systematically and manually reading the papers. These themes and their importance have been discussed in the next section.

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Cluster number	Document	Citations	Total link strength	Theme
Cluster 1	Borijan (2010)	14	2	Innovative learning pedagogies
	Kim (2022)	2	2	
	Shadiev (2023)	2	3	
	Wang (2020)	5	4	

	Yen (2015)	75	2	
	Zheng (2010)	71	2	
Cluster 2	Benzehaf (2023)	14	4	Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)
	Chao (2013)	37	17	
	Hernandez (2021)	9	4	
	Luk (2012)	49	8	
	Nameni (2022)	2	7	
Cluster 3	Pechapanhammond (2020)	5	2	Cultural diversity and integration
	Rivers (2011)	30	6	
	Sherlock (2016)	13	8	
	Yamada (2011)	13	3	
Cluster 4	Azhar (2020)	4	7	Language as a cultural agency
	Brooks-lewis (2010)	3	2	
	Smith (2022)	2	6	
Cluster 5	Sa'd (2017)	2	7	Digital resources and english language learning
	Shen (2014)	18	3	
Cluster 6	Rothoni (2019)	2	1	Multimodal approaches
	Teo (2018)	8	8	

Table 1: BCAD clusters

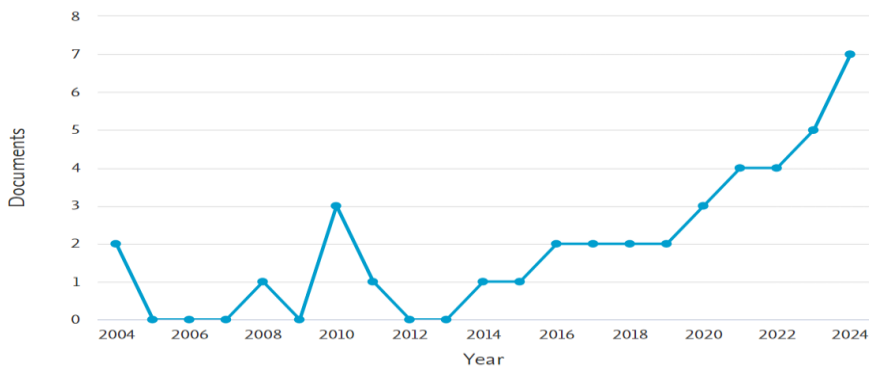


Figure 4. Documents by year

Figure 4 illustrates that the number of articles in the domain of ELL and EFL have increased over the years since 2004. These articles have considered the role of culture, diversity and digital technology in English language teaching.

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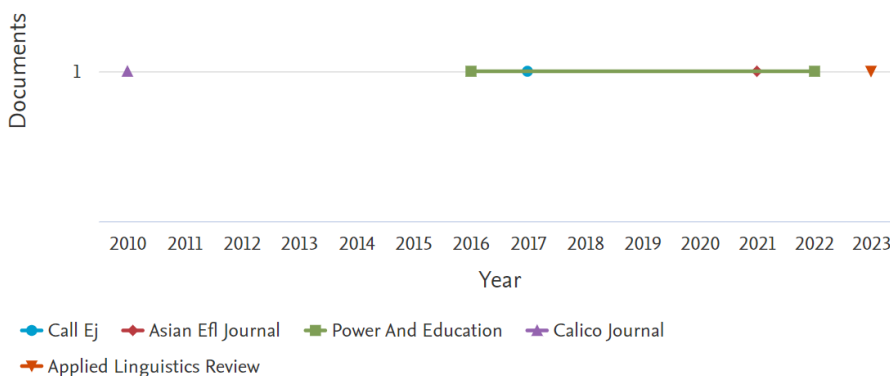


Figure 5. Documents per year by source

In figure 5, the x-axis represents the year, and the y-axis represents the number of documents. Each line represents a different journal. Power and Education has been the most consistent journal in terms of publishing documents over the years, with a relatively steady output. Calico Journal and Asian EFL Journal both experienced a peak in publications around the years 2016-2017, followed by a decline. Applied Linguistics Review and Call EJ have published fewer documents overall, with a more sporadic pattern.

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Discussion

Emerging themes in the literature

Based on the clusters produced, six overarching themes related to ELL and EFL have been identified as explained in Table 1. They include (1) innovative learning pedagogies; (2) intercultural communicative competence (ICC); (3) cultural diversity and integration; (4) language as a cultural agency; (5) digital resources and english language learning; (6) multimodal approaches.

Innovative Learning Pedagogies

English as a foreign language has remained a foreign language in most non-native English speaking countries (Kim, 2022) and pedagogies opted for speaking, reading or writing the foreign language continue to remain a concern in most of these countries, especially the Asian countries (Shadievz et al., 2023). EFL has been taught using traditional methods; recently they have been replaced by innovative methods that holistically consider the learner's motivation and self-efficacy, and include culture, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity and technology as pedagogical tools too.

Further technology has been another pedagogical tool that has been studied extensively. Zheng et al., (2013) assessed the affective factors in learning EFL in a 3D game-like virtual world and established the potential of improved self-efficacy with the use of new learning methods. Technological intervention and the internet or the World Wide Web play a pivotal role in enhancing English-speaking competence (Smith, 2022; Shen et al., 2015), especially through use of mobile-assisted applications. Also, other tools such as reading global illustrative texts and participating in critical discussions about the text also enhance language learning by means of cultivating a critical understanding of and appreciation of the foreign culture (Kim, 2022). Interestingly, in cluster 1, Yen (2015) and Zheng (2010) have been the most cited documents. This could indicate the growing interest in innovative teaching pedagogies such as using Facebook and Skype as learning tools (Yen, 2015) and learning ELL in a 3D game-like virtual world (Zheng et al., 2013).

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Learners' intercultural competence plays a key role in communication with people from different cultures. Several studies have extensively identified cultural diversity and cultural factors played a key role in EFL learning and teaching (Kirillina et al, 2021; Azhar, 2020; Shen et al., 2015; Chao, 2013; Brooks-Lewis, 2010). Another aspect that marks the

cultural diversity as reflected in most of these papers is the multi-linguistic landscape in the South Asian countries that makes learning EFL challenging (Chao, 2013). Learning EFL constructs not only cultural diversity but interculturality when studied with positive attitudes towards the target culture (Benzehaf, 2021; Nameni, 2021; Luk, 2012). Further, studies have investigated teachers' perceptions and practices in relation to integrating cultural factors with English learning (Luk, 2012). One way of enhancing ICC would be by adopting foreign films as an instructional tool for teaching or learning EFL. These forms of cultural framework can enhance the learning process. In cluster 2, Luk (2012) and Chao (2013) are highly cited documents which could indicate the need for inclusion of cultural diversity in teaching pedagogies (Luk, 2012) and the prospect of better EFF through intercultural learning via foreign films (Chao, 2013)

Cultural Diversity and Integration

English is taught as a foreign language in most countries of the world. Several studies have discussed the need for cultural integration which includes amalgamating the local culture with the target culture (Sherlock, 2016; Yamada, 2011). These amalgamations are seen in the utilization of lexical borrowing, or so-called loanwords employed to describe cultural elements which are typically Thai, and for which no English equivalents exist (Pechapan-Hammond, 2020). It also discusses how certain cultural nuances such as ethnicity, racial groups are not described in the Japan's English language textbooks (Yamada, 2011) Many other studies also supported the need for dimension of culturality, authenticity in speaking EFL (Shadiev et al., 2023; Kirillina et al., 2021). In this cluster, Rivers (2011) analyzed the function and promotion of Japanese national identification and its impact on English language learning processes. Figure 3 also suggests the strong correlation between language, cultural factors and cultural diversity.

Language as a Cultural Agency

Language is not only meant for business communication, but it opens the door for learning the culture of that country. Brooks-Lewis (2010) emphasises that language learning must include learning about history in as it benefits the learning experience. Meanwhile there are also studies that have initiated concerns over the privileging of dominant languages, and their cultures through online education (Smith, 2022). Smith (2022), Azhar (2020), Brooks-Lewis (2010), and many other studies examine culture as an integral agency of language learning. Learning about history in an EFL class is adult learner need (Brooks-Lewis, 2010).

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Digital Resources and English Language Learning

Technology and World Wide Web are taking center stage in most learning domains, including language learning. Figure 3 also supports this as it showcases the strong correlation between World Wide Web and EFL. Studies in cluster 5 support this idea that digital tools shape learning experiences of English language learners. The highest cited study in cluster 5, Shen et al., (2015) highlighted that while agencies of World Wide Web such as websites and digital resources enhanced ELL, this medium was preferred by EFL teachers and learners when the website carried authentic language, examination-oriented English learning materials and tasks, and Eastern/non-Anglophone topics in the websites.

Multimodal Approaches

English language textbooks become more relevant and impactful when cultural elements are embedded in the textbooks in the form of images, and such visual elements. Studies by Teo and Zhu (2018) and Rotheri and Mitsikopoulou (2019) indicate that multimodal teaching approaches help to shape learners' perceptions and increase engagement too. Peer-to-peer and self-correction behaviors (Yen et al., 2015), reading global illustrative texts and discussion-based learning (Kim, 2022), mobile-assisted learning (Shadiev et al., 2023), learning on the world-wide web using Facebook, Skype (Yen et al., 2015), computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Smith, 2022), online learning (Shen et al., 2015) among the many other methods of learning EFL.

Conclusions

This study has provided a bird's eye view about the various influencing factors of EFL. While learning pedagogies has been discussed since the inception of EFL and ELL, the technology as an influential pedagogy has been increasingly discussed in the last decade. Globalization and the augmentation of the World-wide web has opened the learning channels including 3-D games, films, Facebook, Skype that also aids in improving the ICC. With regard to the success of non-native English speaking countries teaching/learning EFL, the SLR and BCAD have inferred that previous empirical research has contributed significantly to understand and analyse the implementation of teaching/learning EFL. With this study, future researchers can capitalize on the significant themes assessed through this research for more effective and meaningful research.

Future Scope of Research

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This qualitative study has identified and highlighted a few keywords or themes that are deemed pivotal in English language learning. The noteworthy fact is that any qualitative finding is contextual (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); thus making it challenging for broader generalizations. Also, the studies drawn for this research although empirical are subject to potential researcher bias through data collection, analysis and drawing inferences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Owing to this potential bias, there arises a need for more robust quantitative or mixed-method approaches. Quantitative and mixed-method approaches allows generalizable insights, higher reliability or validity for inferences and an optimal advancement in the relevant research domain while complementing the depth of the current qualitative inquiry.

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