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The Experience of Learning a Second Language as an Adult: A Qualitative Exploration of Motivation and Challenges

Farzaneh. Mardani[1*], Nancy Parra. Vázquez[2], Jinashree. Rajendrakumar[3], Seyed Milad. Saadati[3]

[1] Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada
[2] Institute for the Future of Education, Tecnologico de Monterrey, Monterrey 64849, Mexico
[3] Department of Psychology, Christ (Deemed to beUniversity), Dharmaram College Post, Hosur Road,Bengaluru, Karnataka 560029, India
[4] Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathobiology (LMP), University of Toronto, Canada

*** Corresponding author email address**: farzanehmardani@kmanresce.ca

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This qualitative study aimed to explore the motivations and challenges faced by adults learning a second language. By delving into the personal experiences of adult learners, the study sought to uncover the factors that drive individuals to pursue language learning and the obstacles they encounter in this journey.

Methods and Materials: The study utilized a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews with 33 adult learners who had embarked on learning a second language. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, first language, second language being learned, and learning context. Theoretical saturation was achieved to ensure comprehensive coverage of the experiences and perspectives of adult language learners. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts to identify themes and subthemes related to motivation and challenges.

Findings: Two main themes emerged from the analysis: Motivation and Challenges. Under Motivation, five categories were identified: Personal Fulfillment, Professional Advancement, Cultural Connection, Social Interactions, and Cognitive and Health Benefits. Challenges were categorized into seven themes: Language Complexity, Time Constraints, Lack of Resources, Psychological Barriers, Environmental Factors, Learning Strategies, and Sociocultural Challenges. Each category was supported by several concepts, providing a detailed understanding of the factors influencing adult language learning.

Conclusion: The study reveals a complex landscape of motivations and challenges in adult second language acquisition. While motivations ranged from personal growth to professional needs, challenges encompassed both internal psychological barriers and external environmental factors. The findings highlight the importance of tailored support and resources for adult language learners, addressing both their diverse motivations and the multifaceted challenges they face.

Keywords: *Adult Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Motivation, Challenges, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis.*

1. Introduction

The process of acquiring a second language (L2) is a journey that spans across various stages of an individual's life, with each stage presenting unique challenges and opportunities influenced by cognitive, psychological, and social factors.

The distinction between second/foreign language acquisition in adults and children has been a pivotal area of research, shedding light on the cognitive and developmental differences influencing language learning outcomes (Arifin, 2020). Steinberg's research, as analyzed by Arifin (2020), emphasizes the variation in linguistic absorption capabilities, with children often exhibiting a more natural and intuitive learning process compared to the structured and effortful approach undertaken by adults. This foundational perspective sets the stage for examining the intricacies of adult language learning, underscoring the need for a tailored exploration into the motivational drives and impediments faced by this demographic (Arifin, 2020).

Incorporating a new language into the lexicon of an adult learner involves not just the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar but also induces incidental changes in orthographic processing in the native language (Borragan et al., 2020). Such findings illustrate the profound impact of late-life language learning on cognitive processes, suggesting that the endeavor of acquiring a second language in adulthood can have far-reaching implications beyond the target language itself (Borragan et al., 2020).

The role of emotional and social factors in language acquisition further complicates the adult learning landscape. Cheng and Zhou (2023) highlight the influence of parental emotional companionship on children's second language acquisition, suggesting a parallel need to explore the emotional and social support structures that facilitate or hinder adult language learning. Similarly, the advent of technological aids, such as adaptive robot discourse, has introduced new dimensions to adult language acquisition, offering personalized learning experiences that can adapt to the learner's progress and challenges (Cheng & Zhou, 2023).

Adult learning in the language classroom presents a unique set of motivational and attitudinal dynamics that are distinct from those observed in younger learners. Doyle (2018) and Engin (2009) both underscore the significance of motivation in adult language learning success, with Engin specifically pointing to the role of social behavior and personality in shaping the learning experience (Doyle, 2018; Engin, 2009). This aligns with Gardner and Smythe's (1975) earlier work, which laid the groundwork for understanding motivation in second language acquisition, proposing that adult learners bring a more complex set of personal, professional, and educational motivations to their language studies (Gardner & Smythe, 1975).

Technological and methodological advancements have also reshaped the landscape of adult second language acquisition. The integration of TESOL teaching perspectives offers insights into motivational strategies specifically tailored for adult learners, addressing the unique challenges and aspirations of this demographic (Fu et al., 2022). Furthermore, the cognitive mechanisms underpinning language learning, such as the interaction between child first language and adult second language learning systems (Hamrick et al., 2018), provide a comprehensive understanding of the neurological substrates supporting language acquisition across the lifespan.

Age of second language acquisition plays a critical role in shaping the neurocognitive architecture of multilingual individuals, with Kaiser et al. (2015) demonstrating that the timing of second language learning significantly affects gray matter volume in language-associated brain areas. This neuroplasticity underscores the adaptability of the adult brain to language learning, challenging the notion of a rigid critical period for language acquisition (Kaiser et al., 2015).

The experiential dimension of language learning, encompassing both phonological and referential familiarity, has been shown to influence word learning outcomes in adults with second-language experience (Kaushanskaya et al., 2013). This suggests that adults' previous linguistic experiences and the familiarity of language elements can modulate their ability to acquire new languages, a concept that is further explored in the context of grammatical gender learning by Kurinski and Sera (2010) (Kurinski & Sera, 2010).

Motivational and attitudinal orientations play a pivotal role in the language learning journey of adults, with studies highlighting the varied factors that fuel learners' engagement and persistence (Lang et al., 1996). Mayberry and Lock (2003) contribute to this discourse by examining the age constraints on first versus second language acquisition, providing evidence for the linguistic plasticity and epigenesis that characterize language learning throughout life.

Service learning and phonemic perception studies, such as those conducted by Medina and Gordon (2014), illustrate the interplay between learner motivation and the development of critical linguistic skills, emphasizing the

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importance of engaging and contextually rich learning environments for adult learners (Medina & Gordon, 2014). Meschyan and Hernández (2002) further explore the relationship between native-language decoding skills and second-language learning success, suggesting that foundational linguistic competencies can influence L2 acquisition (Meschyan & Hernández, 2002).

Adult second language learning, in particular, embodies a complex interplay of motivation, cognitive flexibility, and environmental influences, distinguished from the language acquisition experiences of children. This article aims to delve into the qualitative exploration of motivation and challenges encountered by adults in the realm of second language learning, expanding on the foundational research presented by notable studies in the field.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of adults learning a second language. We focused on understanding the motivations driving learners to undertake this challenge and the obstacles they encountered during their learning journey. The qualitative approach allowed us to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences, providing rich insights into the personal and contextual factors influencing language learning in adulthood.

Participants were adults aged 18 and above who had begun learning a second language at least six months prior to the commencement of this study. We aimed for a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, first language, the second language being learned, and learning context (formal classes, self-study, immersion, etc.). Recruitment was conducted through language learning forums, social media platforms, and language schools. Interested individuals were screened through an initial online survey to ensure they met the inclusion criteria.

The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation. We continued to recruit and interview participants until no new themes emerged from the data, indicating that saturation had been reached. This approach ensured that our study comprehensively covered the experiences and perspectives of adults learning a second language, without unnecessarily extending data collection beyond the point of new information generation.

Participants were informed about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to protect their privacy and data confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's preference and geographical location. The semi-structured format was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for the exploration of predetermined topics while also permitting participants to introduce new ideas and experiences relevant to their language learning journey. The interview guide covered a range of topics, including motivations for learning a second language, strategies employed, challenges faced, and perceived progress and outcomes.

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose and procedures and a consent form. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by assigning codes to participants and securely storing data.

2.3. Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then subjected to thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach. This involved an iterative process of coding the data in multiple rounds, initially generating open codes that captured discrete ideas and concepts, which were subsequently grouped into broader themes reflecting the overarching patterns and insights related to adult language learning experiences. The analysis was supported by qualitative data analysis software to manage and organize the data efficiently.

The research team engaged in regular discussions to compare findings, resolve discrepancies in theme identification, and ensure consistency in the interpretation of the data. Member checking was employed, where participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the findings derived from their interviews to enhance the credibility and accuracy of the analysis.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, we engaged with 33 participants who embarked on the journey of learning a second language as

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adults. The demographic profile of our participants was diverse, encompassing a broad age range from 18 to 65 years old, with the majority (45%) falling within the 25-34 age bracket, reflecting a significant representation of young adults. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 18 participants identifying as female (55%) and 15 as male (45%).

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Motivation	Personal Fulfillment	Self-improvement, sense of achievement, personal satisfaction, curiosity, lifelong learning, exploring new challenges, enriching life experiences
	Professional Advancement	Career opportunities, job requirements, professional networking, marketability, enhancing professional skill set, global work environments
	Cultural Connection	Heritage language, cultural immersion, travel, understanding cultural nuances, exploring ancestry, cultural festivals, literature
	Social Interactions	Making new friends, family communication, social inclusion, community involvement, online communities, intercultural exchange
	Cognitive and Health Benefits	Mental agility, memory improvement, delayed cognitive aging, mental health benefits, neuroplasticity, stress reduction, enhanced multitasking
	Educational Requirements	School or university requirements, language exams, academic research, scholarship opportunities, studying abroad, academic collaborations
Challenges	Language Complexity	Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, language exceptions, idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, script learning, syntax complexity
	Time Constraints	Balancing with work/school, lack of time, prioritization, consistent practice, scheduling conflicts, long-term commitment
	Lack of Resources	Quality learning materials, access to native speakers, financial constraints, technology access, specialized language programs, language practice opportunities
	Psychological Barriers	Fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, motivation dips, anxiety, self-doubt, perfectionism, comparison with others
	Environmental Factors	Lack of language immersion, minimal exposure to language, unsupportive environment, cultural isolation, limited real-world application
	Learning Strategies	Finding effective methods, adapting to learning style, self-discipline, setting realistic goals, memorization techniques, integrating language into daily life
	Sociocultural Challenges	Navigating cultural differences, understanding social norms, dealing with stereotypes, language power dynamics, indirect communication styles

Our study uncovered a multifaceted understanding of the motivations and challenges faced by adults learning a second language. These themes were divided into subcategories, with several underlying concepts identified for each.

3.1. Motivations for Learning a Second Language

Personal Fulfillment: Participants often spoke of their language learning journey as a path to self-improvement and personal satisfaction. Many were driven by a curiosity about new cultures and a desire for lifelong learning. One interviewee stated, "Learning a new language opened up a world I never knew existed. It's not just about the words, but the doors it opens in your life."

Professional Advancement: A significant number of learners pursued a second language to enhance their career opportunities and professional networking. "In today's global market, being bilingual is not just an asset; it's a necessity," explained a participant, highlighting the practical benefits of language skills in professional settings.

Cultural Connection: Many adults embarked on learning a second language to connect with their heritage or to deepen their understanding and appreciation of other cultures. As one learner mentioned, "It's about connecting with my roots and understanding where I come from."

Social Interactions: The social aspect of language learning was also a key motivator, with learners seeking to make new friends or improve communication with family members who speak a different language. "It's brought me closer to my partner's family," shared one participant, "and helped me feel more included in social settings."

Cognitive and Health Benefits: Participants were aware of the cognitive and mental health benefits of language learning, citing reasons such as mental agility and stress reduction. "It's like a workout for the brain," said a learner, emphasizing the mental health advantages.

Educational Requirements: For some, language learning was driven by academic goals, whether for school, university, or research purposes. "It's a stepping stone for my

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academic career," a participant noted, indicating the instrumental role of language skills in education.

3.2. Challenges in Learning a Second Language

Language Complexity: The complexity of language itself was a significant barrier, with learners struggling with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. "Every language has its quirks, and mastering them is a constant challenge," a participant observed.

Time Constraints: Finding the time for language study was a common challenge among adults balancing work, school, or family responsibilities. "There's never enough time in the day," lamented one learner.

Lack of Resources: Access to quality learning materials and opportunities for practice were frequently cited challenges. "Not having native speakers to practice with makes it so much harder," mentioned a participant.

Psychological Barriers: Fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence were major obstacles. "The fear of sounding foolish is always there," one interviewee confessed.

Environmental Factors: An unsupportive environment or lack of language immersion was another challenge. "It's hard when you have no one to practice with or when people around you don't understand why you're learning," a learner explained.

Learning Strategies: Identifying effective learning strategies and adapting them to personal styles posed difficulties. "What works for one person doesn't always work for another," said a participant, highlighting the need for personalized learning approaches.

Sociocultural Challenges: Navigating cultural differences and stereotypes also presented challenges. "Sometimes, it feels like you're not just learning a language but also battling stereotypes," a participant reflected.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative exploration of the experience of learning a second language as an adult revealed a multifaceted landscape shaped by a variety of motivations and challenges. The study identified key motivations including personal fulfillment, professional advancement, cultural connection, social interactions, cognitive and health benefits, and educational requirements. Conversely, the primary challenges faced by learners encompassed language complexity, time constraints, lack of resources, psychological barriers, environmental factors, learning strategies, and sociocultural challenges. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of adult language learning, underscoring the complex interplay between individual learner characteristics and their learning environment.

The qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with adult second language learners revealed two main themes: Motivation and Challenges. Each theme encompassed several categories, providing a structured insight into the experiences of the learners. Under Motivation, five categories were identified: Personal Fulfillment, Professional Advancement, Cultural Connection, Social Interactions, and Cognitive and Health Benefits. For Challenges, seven categories emerged: Language Complexity, Time Constraints, Lack of Resources, Psychological Barriers, Environmental Factors, Learning Strategies, and Sociocultural Challenges. These categories collectively capture the breadth of factors influencing adults engaged in learning a second language.

Within the theme of Motivation, the Personal Fulfillment category highlighted concepts such as self-improvement, curiosity, and personal satisfaction, indicating that many adults pursue language learning as a means of personal growth and exploration. Professional Advancement was characterized by concepts including career opportunities and professional networking, suggesting that career-oriented goals significantly motivate learners. Cultural Connection was defined by a desire to connect with heritage, cultural immersion, and understanding cultural nuances, reflecting the importance of language in bridging cultural divides. Social Interactions encompassed making new friends and enhancing family communication, underscoring the social dimension of language learning. Lastly, Cognitive and Health Benefits revealed concepts like mental agility and memory improvement, pointing to awareness of the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism or multilingualism.

The Challenges theme illustrated the hurdles faced by adult language learners. Language Complexity, with concepts such as grammar difficulties and vocabulary acquisition, was identified as a significant obstacle, highlighting the intrinsic challenges of language learning. Time Constraints, including balancing learning with work or family and finding consistent practice time, emphasized the practical challenges in dedicating time to language study. Lack of Resources, represented by concepts like access to quality materials and native speakers, pointed to external factors affecting learning progress. Psychological Barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence,

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depicted the internal emotional struggles learners face. Environmental Factors, including lack of immersion and minimal language exposure, highlighted the importance of a conducive learning environment. Learning Strategies, with concepts like finding effective methods and self-discipline, underscored the challenge of adopting and maintaining effective study habits. Finally, Sociocultural Challenges, involving navigating cultural differences and stereotypes, indicated the complex interplay between language learning and sociocultural dynamics.

The study identified diverse motivations for adult L2 learning, ranging from personal fulfillment to professional advancement. This aligns with Engin's (2009) assertion that motivation plays a crucial role in the success of second language learning (Engin, 2009), further supported by Gardner and Smythe (1975), who posited that motivation is a multifaceted construct influencing language acquisition (Gardner & Smythe, 1975). Moreover, the motivational strategies discussed by Fu, Li, & Zhao (2022) underscore the importance of tailoring approaches to adult learners, recognizing their unique goals and circumstances (Fu et al., 2022). The motivational spectrum observed in our study, encompassing cognitive and health benefits, educational requirements, and social interactions, illustrates the complex and varied drives behind adult language learning endeavors.

Our findings on the challenges faced by adult L2 learners—such as language complexity, time constraints, and lack of resources—mirror those identified in the broader literature. Arifin (2020) highlights the cognitive challenges adults face compared to children in language learning, emphasizing the effortful nature of adult language acquisition (Arifin, 2020). Similarly, Cumbal (2022) acknowledges technological advancements like adaptive robot discourse that aim to mitigate these challenges, suggesting the ongoing evolution of language learning aids tailored to adult needs (Cumbal, 2022). The psychological barriers identified, including fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence, echo Schumann's (1975) discussion on affective factors and the problem of age in second language acquisition, underscoring the significant impact of emotional and psychological factors on learning processes (Schumann, 1975).

The study's insights into the motivations and challenges of adult L2 learners have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they contribute to the ongoing discourse on adult language acquisition, supporting and expanding upon the findings of scholars like Hamrick, Lum, & Ullman (2018) regarding the general-purpose learning systems involved in language learning across the lifespan (Hamrick et al., 2018). Practically, understanding these motivations and challenges can inform the development of more effective and responsive language education strategies for adults, as suggested by the work of Kaiser et al. (2015), which connects the timing of language acquisition to neurocognitive outcomes (Kaiser et al., 2015).

Supporting adult L2 learners requires acknowledging the intricacies of their motivations and the breadth of challenges they face. The incorporation of adaptive learning technologies (Cumbal, 2022), alongside motivational strategies that address the specific needs of adults (Fu et al., 2022), represents a forward-thinking approach to language education. Furthermore, recognizing the role of psychological and emotional support, as highlighted by Cheng and Zhou (2023) in the context of children's language acquisition, suggests the need for a holistic support system that addresses the affective dimensions of adult learning (Cheng & Zhou, 2023).

The qualitative exploration of adult second language learning, as presented in this study, illuminates the complex interplay of motivations and challenges that define the adult learner's journey. By drawing parallels with existing research, this discussion not only reaffirms the multifaceted nature of adult language acquisition but also underscores the importance of personalized, supportive, and technologically integrated approaches to language education. The findings advocate for a nuanced understanding of adult language learners, suggesting that the path to proficiency is paved with tailored strategies that recognize the adult learner's unique motivations and challenges.

While this study provides valuable insights into adult second language acquisition, it is not without limitations. The reliance on semi-structured interviews, while beneficial for depth of understanding, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample size, though adequate for qualitative saturation, represents a specific demographic that may not encapsulate the full diversity of adult language learners worldwide. Additionally, the study's focus on motivational and challenging aspects, although comprehensive, might overlook other crucial factors influencing language learning success, such as individual learning styles or external support systems.

Future research should aim to expand the diversity of the participant pool to include a wider range of languages, cultural backgrounds, and learning contexts. Investigating the impact of different language learning technologies and methodologies on adult learners can provide valuable

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insights into effective educational practices. Longitudinal studies could offer a deeper understanding of how motivations and challenges evolve over time, further enriching our knowledge of the adult language learning process. Additionally, comparative studies between adult and child language learning could elucidate the unique cognitive and psychological dynamics at play.

The findings of this study have significant implications for language education practitioners. Educators and program designers are encouraged to consider the diverse motivations and challenges faced by adult learners when developing curricula and instructional strategies. Creating a supportive learning environment that addresses psychological barriers and promotes social interaction can enhance learner engagement and success. Moreover, integrating adaptive learning technologies and resources tailored to adult learners' specific needs can help overcome some of the challenges identified, such as time constraints and lack of resources. Ultimately, a learner-centered approach that acknowledges and leverages the unique qualities of adult language learners can significantly improve language learning outcomes.

Authors' Contributions

In this article, the corresponding author was responsible for the intervention implementation, data analysis, and manuscript writing, while the other authors supervised the data analysis and manuscript writing.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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