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**“CHALLENGES FACED BY ADULT LEARNERS IN ACQUIRING  
ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE”**

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.1675>**ABSTRACT**

The process of acquiring English as a Second Language (ESL) has become essential for adult learners in educational and professional settings of today, especially in developing countries where English proficiency connects directly to better job prospects and academic success and social mobility. Adult learners face multiple obstacles that block their path to effective language learning, which directly relates to the increasing importance of ESL skills in their professional lives. The research investigates existing literature to identify the key obstacles that adult learners face when they attempt to learn English as a second language by studying cognitive and psychological and occupational and pedagogical and sociocultural factors which apply to the Sri Lankan situation. The study identified the main obstacles which affect adult ESL students and studied their combined impact on second language learning. The research used qualitative methods to search for inductive findings through systematic literature review and thematic analysis of the collected data. Researchers used major academic databases to identify peer-reviewed studies from 2015 to 2025 which they screened through predefined criteria before synthesizing the results using thematic coding procedures. The review identified multiple thematic elements which considerably impact adult ESL learning through age-related cognitive restrictions and memory retention challenges and language anxiety and self-confidence issues and work-life balance difficulties and classroom adjustment problems and restricted access to real-world English interactions and sociocultural obstacles. The research demonstrates that personal and contextual factors create a web of interactions between people which affects their ability to learn a second language. Psychological barriers and occupational responsibilities emerged as particularly influential determinants of learner engagement and persistence. The study calls for teaching methods which base their design on learner needs

while providing psychological support to enhance adult ESL learning results. The findings present essential insights which will guide adult language education practitioners to improve their educational delivery and curriculum development and language policy decisions.

**KEYWORDS:** Adult learners; English as a Second Language; Second Language Acquisition; Thematic Analysis; Systematic Literature Review.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is the dominant language of the world in relation to education, employment, technology and international communication. In some multi-lingual societies the successful navigation of English is expected to lead to greater mobility, academic achievement and career opportunities (Crystal, 2003). English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching, then, has taken on a critical importance as an educational priority for adults working toward skills and occupational growth, wanting to be able to travel around the world, and wanting to pursue further education, among other things. But there are many linguistic, psychological, cognitive and social challenges that adult learners may face in the process of acquiring English proficiency. These problems become more prominent in situations where the English language is not prominent in everyday life, which is the case in Sri Lanka.

Any other language acquired after the first language or mother tongue is called second language (Ellis, 1997). Second language acquisition (SLA) is the learning and acquisition of language, other than one's own, by second language learners, through exposure, interaction, instruction and practice (Krashen, 1982). Within the SLA literature, the difference between 'learning' and 'acquisition' is significant. Language acquisition is an unconscious process of language learning that is based on meaningful communication, while language learning is a conscious process that is based on formal instruction in the language and grammatical knowledge (Krashen 1982). English as a Second Language (ESL) is a term that is used to refer to learning the L2 English as a secondary language by those who speak the L1 with a different language (Richards and Schmidt, 2010).

There are significant differences between adult ESL learners and younger learners because of their maturity and responsibilities, past educational experiences, and expectations from their social context. While adults have a better ability to think in cognitive terms and an ability to be more self-aware, they also often face challenges with respect to their individual aging processes, limited access to truly authentic language scenarios, anxiety, low self-confidence, a fear of making errors, and limited opportunities for practice (Lightbown and Spada, 2021). In

addition, adult students have competing interests in language acquisition: they feel among the responsibilities of work, family and education, choosing and prioritizing language acquisition is difficult or impossible, which leads to lowered motivation, irregularity and less retention of the language (Piccinin and Dal Maso 2021). Other barriers have also been established to have an impact on adult second language acquisition (Jayanetti, 2022). These include memory limitations, pronunciation problem, classroom anxiety and lack of interaction.

In the context of the Sri Lankan world, English has a special socio linguistics place. Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages but English is still considered a link language and is widely respected in the educational system, the tourist industry, business, information technology and government sectors (Meyler, 2007). English is part of the national curriculum from primary level and up but many in the adult population of Sri Lanka exhibit restricted access to communicative competence in English (Samaranayake, 2021). Many studies have noted that learners leaving out of education are not very confident in spoken English and not that fluent, particularly girls from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Samarajeewa and Mohammed, 2025). This reflects on-going shortcomings in formal English learning outside of practice.

There are many contextual issues that hinder Sri Lankan adult learners' English as second language learning. The minimal exposure to English which is granted outside of the classroom, limitation in speaking tasks, teacher-centered pedagogical approach and lack of adequate learner support systems have a significant effect on language acquisition (Jayanetti, 2022). Further, adult learners are often deterred from active participation in the classroom due to psychological concerns like fears of embarrassment, anxiety about pronunciation, and lack of confidence. The results also indicate that English is viewed as a socially prestigious language among adults in Sri Lanka and can further fuel the sense of inadequacy/linguistic insecurity for learners with low levels of proficiency (Samaranayake, 2021). Work-life balance is also a very important issue since adult learners are usually working, have family obligations, and have financial commitments, while learning a language. Competing priorities result in less time for regular practice and exposure to English.

Numerous studies have looked at SLA and ESP problems generally, but less work has focused on the problems encountered by adult ESL learners, and even less of it in developing countries like Sri Lanka. Past research is usually scattered in that it focuses on limited issues such as speaking anxiety, motivation, or method of teaching. As a result, the collective influence of multiple factors of which age, memory, confidence, occupational demands, classroom adaptation, motivation and sociocultural factors can be included is still insufficiently

understood by researchers concerning adult learners' EL learning experiences. Moreover, it is observed that there were no systematic analysis studies using thematic analysis that review and synthesize existing studies on learning problems in adult ESL.

Hence, this study aimed to fill this gap and carry out a systematic review of the literature on the problems of adult learners learning English as a second language. The study aims to identify and synthesize dominant psychological, cognitive, social, occupational and pedagogical barriers that impact on adult ESL learners using thematic analysis. The purpose of the study is to offer implications for educators, policy-makers and curriculum developers aiming to enhance adult ELL and to both contribute to and inform the body of knowledge of SLA research with particular insight based on Sri Lankan and global contexts.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify and critically analyze the major challenges faced by adult learners in acquiring English as a second language through a systematic review of existing literature.
2. To examine how psychological, cognitive, occupational, and classroom-related factors influence English language acquisition among adult ESL learners, with particular reference to the Sri Lankan context.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **2.1 Research Design and Approach**

This study has employed a qualitative research design and the inductive research approach to study problems that are encountered by adult learners learning English as a Second Language (ESL). A qualitative design was chosen because the study was meant to gain understanding and compare and contrast complex educational, psychological and sociocultural realities of learner using the L2. Educational experiences, perceptions, and interpretations can be well understood through qualitative research, especially when investigating human experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Adopting the inductive approach was beneficial for the study in that themes and interpretations could be drawn from the reviewed literature without having to test pre set hypotheses. Thomas (2006) identifies two advantages for the use of inductive analysis: patterns and conceptual categories are likely to "emerge from the data", and it's suitable for "exploratory research aimed at generating increased understanding of a phenomenon. The present study had a goal of uncovering various and interrelated problems in adult ESL learners, and the inductive method offered the needed flexibility and depth for analysis.

## 2.2 Systematic Literature Review

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology was used for this study in order to find, scrutinize and deliver jointly appropriated literature. A systematic review is a research methodology that entails a structured and transparent search of the literature to minimise any bias in the search process and to produce reliable research (Snyder, 2019). This was especially suited to the adult ESL learner, as literature dealing with issues in adult ESL is distributed throughout a variety of levels of teaching, language learning, and psychology. For these reasons, a systematic synthesis had to be carried out to obtain a broad perspective of the research.

The literature search was carried out in various important academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and ERIC. Search process involved various search terms including keywords and boolean combinations: “adult ESL learners”, “second language acquisition challenges”, “adult English learners”, “language anxiety in ESL”, “work-life balance and language learning”, and “adult second language learning barriers”. The review primarily concentrated on peer reviewed journal articles from the period 2015-2025 to capture the most up-to-date and relevant literature. Similar, some key and base studies from before the year 2015 were also added to provide theoretical explanations and conceptual discussions about second language learning.

## 2.3 Selection Criteria and Screening Process

The process of articles selection was carried out based on the articles inclusion and exclusion criteria which were determined prior to conducting the review in order to ensure quality and relevance. A total of about 165 studies were initially identified by the use of database searches. Titles and abstracts were screened (92 articles were potentially relevant) after screening duplicated data. Later full text screening was performed to evaluate if the study would be appropriate for the review. After this process the 48 articles were selected for the final analysis.

The inclusion criteria required studies to:

1. Focus on adult learners aged 18 years and above;
2. Examine English as a second or foreign language learning;
3. Discuss challenges, barriers, or influencing factors related to language acquisition; and
4. Be published in peer-reviewed English-language journals.

The studies that explored only one of the three components of the L2 with the Attachment Agenda (children only, L2 with the Attachment Agenda which excluded non-English language

acquisition, quantitative statistical analysis without the integration of situations of L2 learners experiences) were excluded.

The studies selected were both of variations in geography with studies from Sri Lanka, India, China, Japan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Australia, United Kingdom, and some countries in Europe. Since the context with which ELL is discussed in South Asian and Sri Lankan literature had close linkage with that in Bharat, more attention was paid to it.

#### **2.4 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used for analyzing the reviewed literature. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis tool that locates, classifies and explains common themes or patterns in text. This approach was adopted as it has several desirable attributes; it is flexible, synthesises results across several studies, and provides rich and meaningful interpretation of learner experiences and challenges in the context of the study. Thematic analysis proved well suited to the current study as it is well suited for multi-faceted and interconnected problems of language learning difficulties in later years. This approach allowed the researcher to explore themes in relation to psychological, cognitive, occupational and pedagogical factors in various studies and situations. Braun and Clarke (2019) highlight the relation between thematic analysis and literature-based qualitative synthesis and note that thematic analysis is particularly well suited because it has the ability to make comprehensive thematic interpretations from comprehensive, complex, qualitative data.

The stages of analysis were carried out as per the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization of data, coding of initial data, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and final report writing. After reading and coding the selected studies, some themes that surfaced were age-related learning difficulties; memory and retention limitations; lack of confidence; language anxiety; work-life balance limitations; classroom adaptation challenges; socio-cultural; motivation; and pedagogical limitations.

#### **2.5 Ethical Considerations and Research Rigor**

In this study, all the data was gathered from published literature, with no involvement of human elements. Thus, there were no ethical concerns. However, the study is still academic in nature and paid proper attention to the referencing and citing of sources.

The process for identifying, sorting and analyzing the literature was clear and rigorous to ensure the rigor and reliability of the review. The credibility and trustworthiness of the results were enhanced by predetermined criteria, several databases of academic sources, and thematic

mapping methods. Moreover, the studies in this review were not limited to any specific geographical or sociocultural setting, resulting in a more comprehensive and analytical review.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 RESULTS**

Thematic content analysis of the selected literatures showed that there are at least four challenges for adult learners in acquiring English as a Second Language (ESL) which are interrelated. Results show that adult language learners' foreign language learning experiences are affected by all of the factors mentioned above. There was a common set of themes among the reviewed studies such as: Age-related difficulty in learning problems, lack of confidence, language, anxiety, work-life balance issues, memory and retention difficulties, classroom adaptation concerns, limited exposure of English and sociocultural concerns. These results suggest that the adult ESL learner is an experience that is multi-faceted and influenced by the learner and the context.

#### **Age-Related Cognitive and Learning Challenges**

Likewise, another theme that was widely discussed in the literature reviewed was how the cognitive factors related to age affect L2 acquisition. The usual challenges encountered by adult learners in pronunciation, fluency development, maintaining topic continuity, and grammatical competence were discussed in several studies with the assumption that the cognitive flexibility and memory processing skills of adult learners would decline with age (Lightbown and Spada, 2021). As far as knowledge of language structures is concerned, adults have more analytical and metacognitive knowledge than younger learners, but they need more time and repetition. Projected adaptations for research by Muñoz (2014) demonstrated that decreased phonological adaptability after puberty makes pronunciation and spontaneous communication often difficult for adult learners to master when achieving native-like pronunciation and spontaneous communication is desired. Also, DeKeyser (2013) indicated that age has a significant difference on implicit language acquisition in terms of pronunciation and automatic processing of grammar rules. Some research studies also noted that the attention that adult learners draw on grammar caused significant drawback in classroom interaction, in terms of their communicative fluency and confidence in that language (Jayanetti 2022).

Long exposure to examination oriented and grammar focused education reported to have an impact on the present inability of the adult learners to adapt in any communicative English learning context in the Sri Lankan context (Samaranayake, 2021). Learners who were used to

learning by memorization showed problems when being involved in the learning activities of team presentation, discussion and spontaneous speaking in communicative language learning.

### **Lack of Confidence and Language Anxiety**

Absence of language anxiety and low levels of confidence was one of the most prominent themes found in the research papers reviewed. Many scholars have identified the Common problem of falling into Speaking Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of negative evaluation in doing academic writing to be major problems for adult ESL learners (Horwitz, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). Often English speaking with an adult learner is an embarrassing situation and the adult learner may feel that he or she may not be good enough or else may become self-conscious.

Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2015) assert that FL anxiety has a great impact on the participation and willingness of learners to communicate in foreign language. Adult learners often do not like participating in class because of grammatical mistakes, incorrect pronunciation, and/or social judgment. This is more evident for those taking up learning for the first time after prolonged absenteeism from school.

There are also several Sri Lankan studies which had identified confidence-related barriers in adult ESL learners. There were also a few studies in Sri Lanka that identified confidence-related barriers in adult ESL learners. Jayanetti (2022) noted that many adult learners in Sri Lanka were reluctant to enter into speaking activities due to the fear of criticism and ridicule on their part from their peers. Samaranayake (2021) also noted that English is regarded in Sri Lanka as an SCL (socially valued language), thereby eliciting one's self-picture of being less good at English. In turn, students establish the barriers in their minds which contribute to become the obstacles for active engagement and communicative practice.

The studies also showed that past negative learning experiences has a great amount of effect on adult learners' anxiety levels. Students who faced multiple failures in school in English showed a decrease in self-esteem and motivation to learn in the second language in the later stages of their lives (Tsiplakides and Keramida, 2009).

### **Work-Life Balance Constraints**

The other key theme revealed from the review was that adult learners are struggling to balance language learning and career/family commitments. For adults, learning a second language usually comes with a great deal of responsibilities, such as a child and household duties, business constraints, and financial responsibilities. This is a huge restriction on time and energy

dedicated to regular language practice and learning.

There are also prevalence of low attendance, poor study time and learning fatigue reported among participants who study language alongside full-time work for adult language learners, Piccinin and Dal Maso (2021) reported. One of the main challenges which can emerge is the continuity of learning for adult learners when activity patterns change at work and/or in the personal lives. In a like manner, Norton (2013) noted that adult learner's social identities and working contexts play significant role in determining their chances of language learning and involvement.

Some research works in Asian settings, however, found that adult learners tend to be more concerned about the need to survive and their family responsibilities than learning a language, which will result in the loss of continuity of learning and lack of motivation (Almurashi, 2016). Among the factors that hamper effective learning among adult learners in Sri Lanka, the management of time and exhaustion after work following lessons were instead generally discussed in relation to their private English lessons (Samaranayake, 2021).

The literature also indicated that partial solutions to these problems are to have access to learning that is accessed online and flexible, which allows adult learners to access language learning outside of traditional classrooms. Common technological challenges and lack of digital literacy of some adults, however, complex access of effective online ESL learning environments (Hockly, 2018).

### **Memory and Retention Difficulties**

Another problem that became apparent in adult ESL acquisition was memory and retention. According to many studies, adult learners can often have trouble remembering the vocabulary, recalling the grammatical structures and understanding the spoken language (Lightbown and Spada, 2021). Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and meaning are especially important when overload occurs while a student is trying to retain all the information from his/her interaction. Vocabulary retention is only possible after repeated exposure and using it in meaningful contexts, and adult learners might be less exposed to English in the real world or contexts outside of classroom settings, thus they may not learn the vocabulary as well as they should be able to (Schmitt, 2010). In the same way, Nation (2013) claimed lack of practice opportunities will affect the retention of the language of adult learners.

Findings from the reviewed literature additionally indicated that a state of stress, anxiety and fatigue was found to have a negative impact in the memory performance of adult learners. Research revealed that when pupils experience work and family-related stress they often

struggle to concentrate in lessons and to retain information (Piccinin and Dal Maso, 2021). This was particularly apparent with part-time students that had worked long hours and come for evening classes.

### **Classroom Adaptation and Pedagogical Challenges**

Thematic analysis also identified cultural issues an adult learner encounters when finding classroom settings and methods challenging. However, many of the adult learners are not inclined to engage in communicative tasks, group discussions or fellow peers because of being embarrassed or not familiar with learner centered teaching methods (Richards, 2015).

Some of the peer-reviewed research highlighted the problematic use of didacticism – the traditional pedagogical strategy in many developing countries which still prevails in ESL settings. Richards' view (2015) is that the focus on grammar instruction and tests stifles opportunities for communication and interaction. It has been found that in many adult ESL classrooms in Sri Lanka, the emphasis remains on rote learning and on obtaining written examinations and assessment, rather than on communicative competence (Samarajeeva and Mohammed, 2025).

Limited individualized support was also mentioned in the literature as a problem of adult learners. The attainment levels, prior learning experiences and learning needs of adult learners vary as they have different learning styles and educational backgrounds, making the teaching strategies to be adopted more difficult. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2015) noted that the characteristics of adult learning demand flexible and experiential learning methods, that are learner-centred, in order to increase engagement and motivation in the learning process.

In addition, the negative effects of a lack of psychological safety in the classroom were identified: adult learners do not participate. Five general types of positive teacher behaviors, the presence of peers as a catalyst, and the setting of classroom atmosphere were identified as positively related to learner confidence and communicative participation, which occurred repeatedly throughout the piece (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014).

### **Sociocultural and Environmental Factors**

The review also emphasized the importance of sociocultural and environmental contexts to adult ESL learning. A low level of exposure to English in everyday life was found to be a large obstacle, especially in non-English speaking societies. Several researchers commented that little exposure to the production of English occurs outside the classroom environment in the rural and multilingual context of adult learners (Norton, 2013).

English is often seen as socially privileged, as a language of education and urbanity in Sri Lanka leading to sociolinguistic differences amongst learners (Samaranayake, 2021). English may appear confusing and challenging for learners from rural or under-resourced communities, and may mean that they are less motivated to learn or participate. In addition, inadequate social contexts and access to communities that speak English constrain other language development opportunities.

In summary, the results suggest that adult ESL learners have complex and multilingual learning issues that are shaped by a variety of factors, such as cognitive, psychological, occupational, pedagogical and sociocultural. The results highlight the importance of having supportive, flexible and learner-centred response to enhance their outcomes in adult English language acquisition.

### 3.2 DISCUSSION

The systematic review found that adult learners experience multiple interrelated difficulties when they try to learn English as their second language. The study solved the research problem by analyzing literature through thematic analysis which showed the main obstacles that adult learners face in their ESL learning and educational and sociocultural research. The study achieved its research objectives by determining the main psychological cognitive occupational and classroom factors that affect adult learners in Sri Lanka while showing how these factors matter to the country.

The review found that psychological factors particularly language anxiety and negative evaluation fear and self-confidence deficiencies had a major impact on study results. The reviewed studies found that adult learners tend to avoid speaking activities because of their embarrassment about their English skills and their fear of making mistakes and their belief that they do not speak English well enough (Horwitz 2017 Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014). The study results show that adult second language acquisition depends heavily on emotional and affective factors. English social prestige in Sri Lanka creates more anxiety and self-consciousness problems for learners who come from rural and disadvantaged educational backgrounds (Samaranayake 2021).

Adult ESL learning shows significant impact from both age-related cognitive factors and memory-related difficulties according to the review. Adult learners face difficulties with pronunciation and fluency and vocabulary retention and spontaneous speech according to research studies which showed that they have advanced reasoning and analytical abilities (DeKeyser 2013 Lightbown and Spada 2021). The findings show that adult learners need more

repetition and contextual learning and student-centered instruction than younger students do. The study found work-life balance to be a major hurdle which prevents people from learning languages on a regular basis. Adult learners face challenges which make them unable to attend classes regularly because they must handle work and family and school duties at the same time (Piccinin and Dal Maso 2021). People need to understand that adult language learning happens through social and work situations beyond the classroom environment.

The study discovered that educational methods and classroom organization face difficulties in situations which use conventional teacher-centered methods for teaching ESL. The findings show that grammar-oriented and examination-focused teaching approaches restrict communicative competence and reduce learner engagement (Richards 2015). Adult learners achieve better learning outcomes when educational environments provide them with flexible and communicative support which fits adult learning principles.

The research study provides new insights into second language acquisition research by presenting an extensive overview of the various difficulties which adult ESL learners encounter. The findings show the need for policymakers and educators and curriculum developers to develop adult English language learning programs which center on learners and provide psychological assistance and adapt to local cultural contexts.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The study conducted a comprehensive review of existing research regarding the difficulties that adult learners encounter when they try to learn English as their second language. Through qualitative research and thematic analysis the study found multiple interconnected obstacles which impede adult language learning. These obstacles included language anxiety and lack of confidence and age-related cognitive limitations and memory and retention difficulties and work-life balance constraints and classroom adaptation challenges and sociocultural influences.

Adult ESL learning depends on many personal and environmental factors which create a complicated learning experience. Students who suffer from psychological barriers including fear of making mistakes and low self-esteem unwillingly participate in class and face difficulty to speak. Their work and family obligations stop them from practicing and participating in activities. The combination of traditional teaching methods and limited contact with actual English-speaking situations creates a major obstacle to language development in Sri Lanka.

The research study demonstrates that successful adult ESL instruction needs educational approaches which combine flexibility with learner support while focusing on the special

cognitive and emotional and social requirements of adult students. The research results offer essential information to educational institutions and curriculum designers and decision makers who want to enhance adult English language learning results. Future research should investigate three areas of study which include technology-assisted learning and motivational strategies and context-specific interventions which support adult second language acquisition.

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