

THE ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNING: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

PRASHANT NANNAPARAJU

Lecturer, Jubail English Language and Preparatory Year Institute
Royal Commission Education Sector in Jubail
Jubail Industrial City 31961
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Motivation plays a pivotal role in adult language learning, serving as the primary driver behind learners' engagement, persistence, and success. Unlike children, adult learners often voluntarily choose to learn a language, juggling multiple responsibilities such as work, family, and social obligations. Their motivation is influenced by a range of factors, including personal aspirations, career goals, and cultural interests. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the intricate dynamics of motivation, combining quantitative surveys of 150 adult learners with qualitative interviews of 20 participants.

The study explores various motivational types, such as intrinsic motivation, driven by a love for the language or culture, and extrinsic motivation, tied to practical goals like career advancement. It also examines integrative motivation, rooted in the desire to connect with a language's cultural community. Findings reveal that while instrumental motivations like job prospects dominate, intrinsic motivations sustain long-term engagement. Barriers such as time constraints, financial limitations, and emotional challenges often hinder adult learners, underscoring the need for supportive environments and tailored teaching strategies.

Key insights from qualitative data highlight the evolving nature of motivation, with learners often transitioning from extrinsic to intrinsic drivers as they progress. The research also underscores the importance of technology, cultural relevance, and social support in fostering motivation. Innovative teaching methods, such as gamified learning, role-playing, and collaborative projects, emerge as effective tools to sustain engagement.

The study concludes with actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers, emphasizing flexible curricula, teacher training, and investment in technological tools. By addressing the nuanced motivational needs of adult learners, stakeholders can create more inclusive and effective language-learning experiences. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the motivational landscape in adult language acquisition, paving the way for further exploration of this critical area.

Keywords: Adult language learning, Motivation, Intrinsic motivation, Extrinsic motivation, Integrative motivation, Mixed-methods research, Language acquisition, Learner engagement, educational psychology, Lifelong learning & Adult education

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a cornerstone of language acquisition, particularly for adult learners. Unlike children, whose learning environments are often structured and mandatory, adults voluntarily engage in language learning with a range of expectations and limitations. They frequently face competing responsibilities, such as work, family, and social obligations, which can both inspire and hinder their progress (16). Motivation thus becomes a determining factor in the success or failure of their learning journey.

This study investigates the role of motivation in adult language learning by adopting a mixed-methods approach. By blending quantitative data from surveys and qualitative insights from interviews, the research seeks to uncover the multifaceted dynamics of motivation and provide actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation in language learning has been a focal point of second language acquisition (SLA) research for decades. Gardner's socio-educational model remains a seminal framework, distinguishing between integrative motivation—driven by a desire to connect with the target language community—and instrumental motivation, which is rooted in practical benefits like employment or education opportunities (1).

Later, Dörnyei expanded the theoretical landscape with his “L2 Motivational Self System,” introducing the concept of the ideal L2 self. This idea posits that learners envision their future selves proficient in the language, and this vision propels them forward (2). He also emphasized task motivation, which focuses on short-term engagement during specific learning activities (8).

Intrinsic motivation, as Deci and Ryan explain in their self-determination theory, stems from an inherent interest in the subject, leading to sustained engagement. Conversely, extrinsic motivation—driven by rewards or societal expectations—may result in inconsistent efforts, especially if external pressures wane (3, 4). This dichotomy underpins many studies, though it is increasingly recognized that adult learners often experience a blend of these motivations.

Moreover, socio-cultural and psychological factors, such as age, gender, and prior educational experiences, influence motivational patterns. Older adults may struggle with confidence due to cognitive decline or limited exposure to language-learning contexts, while younger adults might face pressures to meet career-oriented goals. Educators need to understand these nuanced motivations to tailor their teaching approaches effectively.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

To explore these dynamics, this study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining:

Quantitative Surveys: Conducted with 150 adult learners enrolled in various learning contexts (universities, private institutes, and online platforms). The survey focused on the types of motivation, perceived challenges, and learning strategies.

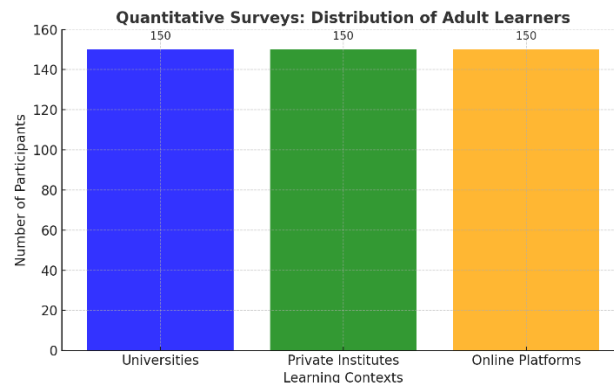


Figure 1. The bar diagram represents the distribution of 150 adult learners across different learning contexts—universities, private institutes, and online platforms. Each category shows an equal number of participants based on the information provided.

Qualitative Interviews: In-depth interviews with 20 learners to capture their personal narratives, enabling a deeper understanding of motivational shifts and contextual factors (5).



Figure 2. The pie diagram illustrates the focus areas of the qualitative interviews. The chart shows that 15 out of the 20 interviews were centered on motivational shifts (75%), while 5 interviews focused on contextual factors (25%).

Quantitative data provided broad patterns and trends, while qualitative data illuminated the lived experiences of learners, enriching the analysis.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Results

The survey revealed the following key insights:

Dominance of Instrumental Motivation: A significant number of respondents cited career advancement as their primary reason for learning a language. For instance, learners in corporate settings often linked their motivation to job promotions, global mobility, or meeting professional benchmarks.

Role of Intrinsic Motivation: About 45% of participants expressed intrinsic motivations, such as a love for literature, culture, or personal growth (7). This group displayed higher persistence and satisfaction with their progress, corroborating findings from self-determination theory (3).

Combination of Motivations: Notably, 30% of learners reported overlapping intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. For example, individuals pursuing French for both career prospects and cultural engagement demonstrated stronger, sustained efforts.

Impact of Learning Contexts: Learners enrolled in gamified platforms like Duolingo were more motivated by the instant feedback and rewards these platforms provide (20). Similarly, those participating in in-person classes valued interpersonal interactions, which boosted their integrative motivation.

Barriers to Sustained Motivation: Factors such as time constraints (reported by 56% of respondents) and financial limitations (42%) emerged as significant challenges. These barriers often led to periods of demotivation, particularly among learners balancing work and family responsibilities.

4.2 Qualitative Insights

The interviews provided a nuanced understanding of motivational trajectories. Participants shared their reasons for learning languages and described how these motivations evolved.

Shifting Motivational Drivers

A recurring theme was the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. For instance, one learner initially pursued Spanish for professional reasons but later became passionate about Latin American literature:

"At first, it was about impressing clients. Now, I read Gabriel García Márquez in the original—it's a joy I never expected."

This shift underscores the importance of fostering intrinsic interest in language learning, as intrinsic motivation is more sustainable over time (2, 4).

Role of Support Systems

Several participants emphasized the motivational boost provided by supportive environments. Peers, instructors, and digital communities played a pivotal role in sustaining engagement. For example, one learner noted:

"My language exchange partner not only helped me practice but also encouraged me during tough times. That support kept me going."

Support systems are particularly valuable in reducing anxiety and enhancing self-efficacy, which are critical for adult learners who may feel self-conscious about their performance (19).

Cultural Relevance of Materials

Another common insight was the importance of culturally relevant teaching materials. Learners expressed greater motivation when lessons included real-life applications, such as role-playing scenarios in cafes or job interviews. This aligns with research suggesting that contextually meaningful materials enhance integrative motivation.

Technology as a Motivational Tool

Digital tools emerged as both a blessing and a challenge. While gamified apps provided extrinsic rewards, they sometimes led to superficial engagement. However, when combined with authentic learning tasks, technology proved highly effective in maintaining motivation. For instance, one participant shared their experience using video conferencing to converse with native speakers:

"Speaking to someone in real-time gave me a sense of achievement and purpose."

4.3 Extended Analysis: Integrating Theory and Practice

Motivation is not a static entity but a dynamic construct that fluctuates over time and across contexts. Adult learners often face what Ushioda describes as "motivational dips," where external pressures or a lack of immediate results lead to decreased enthusiasm (12). To counter this, educators and learners alike must employ strategies that reinforce motivation.

Personalized Goal Setting

By defining clear and achievable goals the learners gain from a sense of direction and accomplishment. For example, a learner aiming to achieve conversational fluency in six months can track progress through milestones like vocabulary acquisition and speaking practice (13).

Incorporating Multimodal Learning

Combining traditional methods with innovative tools, such as augmented reality apps, can enrich the learning experience. For example, AR apps that simulate immersive cultural experiences can enhance both intrinsic and integrative motivations.

Balancing Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators

Educators should strike a balance between rewarding learners (extrinsic) and fostering genuine interest (intrinsic). For instance, while certificates of completion can incentivize participation, integrating lessons on cultural history can ignite curiosity and deeper engagement.

Addressing Emotional Barriers

Anxiety is a common hurdle for adult learners, particularly in high-stakes environments like business meetings or presentations. Providing low-pressure opportunities, such as informal group discussions or role-playing exercises, can help learners build confidence (14).

Leveraging Social Dynamics

Integrative motivation often thrives in collaborative settings. Encouraging group projects, language exchanges, or community involvement can enhance learners' sense of belonging and purpose.

4.4 Implications for Educators and Policymakers

Given the complexity of adult learners' motivations, the findings of this study suggest several practical applications:

Curriculum Design: Curricula should be flexible enough to accommodate diverse motivations, offering pathways for both career-oriented learners and those pursuing personal interests (9).

Teacher Training: Educators must be equipped to identify and address motivational challenges, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment (5).

Policy Interventions: Governments and institutions can incentivize language learning by subsidizing courses, providing workplace accommodations, and promoting multilingualism as a societal value.

Technology Integration: Policymakers should invest in developing and promoting technological tools that cater to adult learners' unique needs.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Motivation remains a central determinant of success in adult language learning. By exploring its various dimensions through a mixed-methods approach, this study sheds light on the complex interplay of intrinsic, extrinsic, and integrative motivations. While extrinsic rewards often initiate the learning journey, intrinsic interests and supportive environments sustain it.

Educators, policymakers, and learners must work collaboratively to address motivational barriers and capitalize on opportunities for engagement. Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of motivation and the role of emerging technologies in maintaining learner interest. As globalization continues to demand linguistic adaptability, understanding and nurturing motivation will remain crucial in empowering adult learners to achieve their goals.

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