

# Exploring Learning Strategies and Emotional Responses among Child and Adult EFL Learners: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the English learning experiences of child and adult learners in Indonesia within the framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Although age-related differences in language learning have been widely discussed, limited research has explored how learners from different age groups experience English learning in real classroom contexts. This study employed a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with two elementary school students and two university students. Thematic analysis revealed two major findings. First, child learners predominantly relied on teacher-guided instruction and interactive classroom activities such as songs and videos, while adult learners demonstrated greater autonomy through the use of digital resources, films, and online materials. Second, both groups experienced positive emotions toward English learning; however, their motivational sources differed, with children driven by enjoyable activities and adults by academic and future-oriented goals. Despite this, both groups reported anxiety and fear of making mistakes, particularly in speaking. The findings highlight that English learning is shaped by the interaction of cognitive, affective, and contextual factors. This study emphasizes the importance of adapting English instruction to learners' developmental and emotional needs.*

**Keywords:** *second language acquisition, child learners, adult learners, learning strategies, emotional responses*

## INTRODUCTION

English is widely used in various aspects of life, including international communication, education, technology, and professional development. It functions not only as a subject taught in schools but also as a medium for sharing knowledge, accessing information, utilizing digital platforms, and interacting with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The growing influence of globalization in education, business, and digital communication has made English an essential skill for learners across different age groups. Consequently, English is widely taught and learned as a second or foreign language in both formal and informal learning contexts (Gass et al., 2020; Ortega, 2014).

In the Indonesian context, English is generally learned as a foreign language in schools and universities. Although English is not commonly used as the primary language of daily communication, learners are increasingly

exposed to English through school subjects, social media, online platforms, entertainment media, academic materials, and digital communication technologies. The rapid development of digital technology has significantly expanded learners' exposure to authentic English input outside formal classroom settings, thereby creating more diverse opportunities for language learning. This situation also indicates that English learning is no longer limited to classroom instruction but extends into learners' daily lives through informal and incidental learning experiences (Zein, 2020; Marlina, 2025).

Learning English as an additional language is closely associated with Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a field that examines how individuals learn a language other than their first language. SLA is a complex and multidimensional process influenced by interrelated factors, including cognitive development, social interaction, motivation, emotional conditions, learning strategies, language exposure, and learning environments. Ellis (2015) explains that second language acquisition involves how learners receive, process, internalize, and utilize linguistic input across different contexts. Similarly, Ortega (2014) emphasizes that language learning is shaped by both internal learner characteristics and external contextual factors. Therefore, English learning should not be viewed merely as the acquisition of linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation, but as a dynamic process constructed through learners' experiences, identities, and social interactions.

Among the various factors influencing SLA, age has received considerable attention in second language research. Children and adults often learn a second language through different processes and under different learning conditions. Children tend to acquire language through natural exposure, imitation, songs, games, storytelling, and meaningful interaction, whereas adult learners are more likely to rely on explicit instruction, metalinguistic awareness, and structured learning strategies. Recent studies on young learners in EFL contexts indicate that interactive, meaningful, and engaging learning environments significantly enhance learners' motivation and language development (Gatrell, 2025). Consequently, teaching approaches that are effective for child learners may not necessarily be equally effective for adult learners, and vice versa.

However, age should not be considered the sole or deterministic factor in second language learning success. While younger learners may demonstrate advantages in pronunciation and implicit acquisition under sufficient exposure, adult learners often exhibit stronger analytical abilities, higher levels of self-regulation, and clearer goal orientation in learning. Singleton and Ryan (2004) emphasize that age-related differences in language learning are complex and cannot be simplified into the assumption that younger learners are always more successful than older learners. Instead, contemporary SLA perspectives suggest that age interacts dynamically with other variables such as motivation, learning strategies, exposure, and learning environments in shaping language learning outcomes (Ellis, 2015; Ortega, 2014).

Learning strategies constitute a crucial component in understanding how learners actively engage in language learning processes. Recent studies highlight that strategic learning behaviors are strongly associated with learner autonomy, self-regulation, and successful language development in both formal and informal learning contexts (Teng & Zhang,

2024). Learning strategies refer to deliberate actions, techniques, and approaches employed by learners to facilitate, regulate, and optimize their language learning processes. Chamot (2005) states that such strategies can be developed through instruction and practice, enabling learners to become more effective and independent in managing their learning. Furthermore, Habók and Magyar (2018) indicate that strategy use varies depending on learners' age, learning context, and learning goals. Oxford (2016) and Griffiths (2020) further emphasize that successful language learners are active agents who continuously select, adapt, and evaluate learning strategies according to their needs and contexts.

In addition to cognitive and strategic dimensions, emotional experiences also play a fundamental role in second language learning. Learners' confidence, motivation, enjoyment, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes significantly influence their willingness to participate in language learning activities. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) highlight that motivation and self-beliefs are essential factors that determine learners' engagement and persistence in language learning. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis further suggests that low anxiety facilitates language acquisition, whereas high anxiety can hinder learners' ability to process and acquire input effectively. Horwitz et.al., (1986) also identify foreign language anxiety as a specific psychological barrier commonly experienced by language learners, particularly in productive skills such as speaking.

Recent developments in SLA research have expanded the focus from negative emotional factors to include positive emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, and interest. Lee (2022) reported that classroom enjoyment positively influences learners' willingness to communicate and active participation in EFL learning. Similarly, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) emphasize that positive psychological factors support learners in coping with challenges and maintaining sustained motivation. More recently, Saito et.al., (2025) highlight the dynamic interplay between motivation, enjoyment, and anxiety in shaping learners' language learning experiences. These findings suggest that emotional factors are not merely outcomes of learning processes but active components that directly influence how learners engage with language learning activities.

Although age has been widely investigated in SLA research, much of the existing literature tends to focus on measurable outcomes such as language proficiency, test performance, pronunciation accuracy, or experimental comparisons between age groups (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook learners' subjective and lived experiences during the language learning process. In particular, there is still limited research that explores how learning strategies and emotional responses interact in shaping English learning experiences across different age groups. Furthermore, qualitative studies comparing child and adult learners' experiences within Indonesian EFL contexts remain relatively scarce. Considering that learners in Indonesia are exposed to different learning environments, instructional practices, and opportunities for English exposure, it is important to understand how these contextual differences influence their learning strategies and emotional responses. Unlike previous studies that mainly focused on language proficiency, age effects, or experimental comparisons, this study specifically examines how learning strategies and emotional responses interact in shaping the English

learning experiences of child and adult learners in Indonesian EFL contexts. By adopting a qualitative perspective, the study provides a deeper understanding of learners' subjective experiences that are often overlooked in quantitative SLA research. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring and comparing the English learning experiences of child and adult learners, with a specific focus on learning strategies and emotional responses in SLA contexts (Ellis, 2015).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and compare the English learning experiences of child and adult learners within the framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses in their natural learning contexts (Creswell, 2017). This study specifically focused on examining differences in learning strategies and emotional responses among learners from different age groups during the English learning process.

The participants consisted of four English learners in Indonesia, including two elementary school students and two university students. The elementary school students represented child learners, while the university students represented adult learners. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct and relevant experience in learning English and were able to provide rich, detailed, and meaningful information related to the focus of the study. The participants were coded as C1 and C2 for child learners, and A1 and A2 for adult learners. Despite the small sample size, the participants were considered information-rich cases suitable for an in-depth qualitative investigation, which prioritizes depth of understanding over generalization.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed information regarding learning strategies, emotional responses, learning difficulties, and meaningful language learning experiences. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives. Interviews with child participants were conducted in simple Indonesian to ensure comprehension, while adult participants were interviewed primarily in Indonesian with occasional use of English where appropriate. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable and informal setting to encourage openness and reduce participant anxiety. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts. This was followed by initial coding of meaningful data segments, which were then organized into broader categories and further refined into final themes. The analysis followed an iterative process, where codes and themes were continuously reviewed and refined through constant comparison across participants' responses. An inductive approach was applied, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Representative excerpts from participants were

used to support and illustrate each identified theme and to strengthen interpretation.

To ensure research rigor, several strategies for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research were applied, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was ensured through member checking, where participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of summarized responses during the interview process. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of coding procedures and analysis steps. Confirmability was achieved by grounding all findings in participants' actual responses, minimizing researcher bias in interpretation. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of participants' learning contexts, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and parental consent was secured for child participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonymous codes (C1, C2, A1, A2) instead of real names to protect participant identity.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **FINDINGS**

This study explored the English learning experiences of two child learners (C1 and C2) and two adult learners (A1 and A2). The analysis of the interview data generated two major themes, namely learning strategies and emotional responses. These themes represent participants' approaches to English learning as well as their emotional experiences throughout the learning process. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Themes and Participant Perspectives**

| <b>Theme</b>        | <b>Children (C1, C2)</b>                                                                  | <b>Adults (A1, A2)</b>                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Learning Strategies | Songs, videos, writing activities, teacher guidance, and seeking assistance from teachers | Songs, films, articles, dictionaries, online resources, and independent learning                                                              |
| Emotional Responses | Enjoyment of learning, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence in speaking situations | Positive perceptions of English learning, anxiety related to grammar and pronunciation, and confidence developed through learning experiences |

### **Learning Strategies**

The findings indicate clear differences in the learning strategies employed by child and adult learners. Child learners predominantly described learning experiences that were closely associated with classroom instruction and teacher-supported activities, whereas adult learners reported utilizing a wider range of learning resources beyond formal educational settings.

For child learners, English learning was largely situated within the school environment. Both participants reported that songs, videos, writing activities, and teacher explanations constituted important components of their learning experiences. C1 explained that English lessons generally involved writing activities and teacher-provided materials. However, I expressed a particular preference for learning through songs, stating, "Aku suka saat belajar menggunakan lagu." Similarly, C2 reported that songs and videos were frequently incorporated into classroom instruction, explaining, "Biasanya menggunakan lagu" and "Video dari YouTube." These responses indicate that multimodal learning activities were commonly experienced by child learners during English instruction.

When encountering difficulties, both child participants reported seeking assistance primarily from teachers. C1 stated, "Aku biasanya bertanya kepada guru. Kadang saya juga bertanya kepada teman atau mencoba belajar sendiri." Likewise, C2 explained, "Aku biasanya bertanya kepada guru." These responses suggest that teachers functioned as the principal source of support in addressing learning difficulties and understanding unfamiliar language items.

In contrast, adult learners reported employing a broader range of learning strategies that extended beyond classroom instruction. Both participants described learning English through songs, films, online videos, articles, and digital resources. A1 explained, "Saya biasanya mendengarkan musik berbahasa Inggris, menonton film, atau menonton video di YouTube." Similarly, A2 stated, "Biasanya saya mendengarkan lagu berbahasa Inggris dan membaca artikel." These responses indicate that adult learners frequently accessed English through various forms of authentic input available in their daily environments.

Adult learners also reported employing independent problem-solving strategies when encountering difficulties. A1 explained, "Saya biasanya mencari penjelasan di internet atau menonton video yang membahas materi yang saya anggap sulit." Similarly, A2 stated, "Biasanya saya mencari arti kata di kamus atau internet. Kalau masih belum paham, saya mencoba mencari contoh penggunaan kata tersebut dalam kalimat supaya lebih mudah dimengerti." These findings demonstrate that adult learners relied extensively on self-directed learning practices and digital resources to support their language development.

Taken together, the findings indicate that child learners relied primarily on teacher-supported learning experiences, whereas adult learners reported greater use of independent learning resources and self-directed strategies. In addition to learning strategies, participants also described various emotional experiences associated with learning and using English.

### **Emotional Responses**

The second theme identified from the interview data concerns participants' emotional responses toward English learning. The findings revealed that both child and adult learners generally expressed positive attitudes toward learning English. Nevertheless, feelings of anxiety and concerns about making mistakes were also evident across both groups.

Among child learners, positive emotions were primarily associated with classroom learning experiences. Both participants reported enjoying English lessons, particularly when learning activities involved songs and videos. C1 stated, "Aku merasa senang," while C2 similarly explained, "Aku

merasa senang." These responses indicate that enjoyable classroom activities contributed positively to learners' perceptions of English learning.

Despite these positive perceptions, both child learners reported experiencing uncertainty and low confidence when required to use English. C1 admitted, "Aku sering takut salah." Likewise, C2 explained that the participant often preferred not to respond when lacking confidence, stating, "Aku biasanya diam dan tidak menjawab." The participant further explained, "Iya, aku takut salah ketika berbicara bahasa Inggris." These responses suggest that concerns about making mistakes influenced learners' willingness to participate in English communication.

Adult learners likewise expressed positive perceptions of English learning. However, unlike child learners, their positive attitudes were largely associated with the perceived usefulness of English for academic and future professional purposes. A1 stated, "Saya merasa senang karena bahasa Inggris sangat bermanfaat untuk mencari informasi, mendukung kebutuhan akademik, dan mempersiapkan diri untuk dunia kerja." Similarly, A2 explained, "Saya senang belajar bahasa Inggris karena banyak informasi dan sumber bacaan yang menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Selain itu, kemampuan bahasa Inggris juga membantu saya dalam perkuliahan."

Although both adult learners recognized the importance of English, they also reported experiencing anxiety in situations requiring oral communication. A1 stated, "Saya terkadang merasa gugup, terutama ketika harus berbicara atau melakukan presentasi menggunakan bahasa Inggris di depan banyak orang." Likewise, A2 explained, "Iya, kadang masih merasa gugup, terutama kalau harus berbicara menggunakan bahasa Inggris secara langsung." The reported sources of anxiety were primarily associated with concerns regarding pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. A1 explained, "Karena saya khawatir melakukan kesalahan, baik dalam pengucapan maupun dalam menyusun kalimat." Similarly, A2 stated, "Karena saya takut salah mengucapkan kata atau salah menggunakan tata bahasa."

Overall, the findings indicate that both child and adult learners experienced a combination of positive and negative emotions during English learning. While positive perceptions of English were evident across both groups, concerns regarding mistakes and language performance remained apparent. However, the nature of these emotional experiences differed. Child learners' emotional responses were closely associated with classroom experiences and teacher support, whereas adult learners' emotional responses were more strongly related to academic demands, language accuracy, and future-oriented objectives.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that there are notable differences between child and adult learners in terms of their English learning strategies and emotional responses. Although both groups demonstrated positive attitudes toward learning English, their ways of engaging with the learning process and dealing with challenges were influenced by different learning environments, levels of autonomy, and contextual demands. These findings are consistent with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspectives which emphasize that language learning is shaped by cognitive, affective, and contextual factors rather than age alone (Ellis, 2015; Ortega, 2014).

Regarding learning strategies, child learners in this study primarily

relied on teacher-guided instruction and classroom-based activities such as songs, videos, writing tasks, and teacher explanations. Their learning experiences were strongly embedded in the school context, indicating that language learning for children is still highly dependent on external support. This dependence suggests that scaffolding plays a central role in early language learning, where learners still require structured input and guided participation to process new linguistic information effectively.

The preference for songs and videos among child learners suggests that engaging and multimodal learning materials play an important role in maintaining attention and motivation. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that collaborative language-learning tasks foster young learners' motivation and active engagement during language learning activities (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020). Songs and videos not only provide entertainment value but also support incidental learning by exposing learners to repetitive linguistic input in a low-pressure environment. In this study, such activities were consistently associated with positive learning experiences among child participants.

In contrast, adult learners demonstrated a higher level of autonomy in managing their English learning process. They reported using a wide range of learning resources, including songs, films, articles, dictionaries, online videos, and internet-based materials. Unlike child learners, they actively engaged in independent problem-solving strategies, such as searching for explanations, finding word meanings, and identifying example sentences. This indicates that adult learners are more capable of self-directed learning and are more strategic in selecting learning resources that support their needs.

This difference in learning strategies between children and adults can be explained through the concept of learner autonomy and cognitive maturity. Adult learners tend to possess higher metacognitive awareness, allowing them to regulate their own learning more effectively. Ellis (2015) and Oxford (2016) argue that adult learners are generally more capable of selecting, evaluating, and applying appropriate learning strategies based on their goals and learning contexts. The findings of this study also suggest that exposure to digital learning environments may further strengthen autonomy, as learners are increasingly required to manage their own access to language input outside formal classrooms.

In terms of emotional responses, both child and adult learners reported generally positive feelings toward English learning. However, the sources of their positive emotions differed significantly. Child learners associated positive emotions with enjoyable classroom activities, particularly songs and videos that made learning more engaging. Their enjoyment was closely tied to immediate classroom experiences rather than long-term goals, indicating that affective engagement at early stages of learning is highly experience-driven.

On the other hand, adult learners' positive emotions were primarily driven by instrumental and future-oriented motivations. They perceived English as an important tool for academic success, access to information, and future career development. This aligns with Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), who emphasize that adult learners are often motivated by goal-oriented and utilitarian factors. Furthermore, Serafini (2020) argues that second language motivation is dynamic, socially mediated, and contextually grounded, emerging from the interaction between learners' identities,

goals, and learning environments, which helps explain why adult learners often view English learning as a long-term personal investment. The findings suggest that motivation in language learning varies depending on learners' age, identity construction, and perceived future self, which is consistent with contemporary "L2 motivational self system" perspectives.

Despite these positive attitudes, both groups experienced anxiety, especially in speaking situations. Child learners expressed fear of making mistakes and low confidence, often resulting in avoidance behavior such as remaining silent when unsure. This indicates that anxiety can significantly affect participation in classroom interaction, particularly among young learners who are still developing communicative confidence and linguistic readiness.

Similarly, adult learners also reported anxiety during speaking activities, especially in presentations or spontaneous communication. However, their anxiety was more closely linked to concerns about grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and performance expectations. This suggests that although adult learners are more autonomous, they may also hold higher self-imposed standards, which can contribute to increased pressure in language use situations and greater self-monitoring during output production.

These findings are consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who introduced the concept of foreign language anxiety as a significant psychological barrier in language learning. Anxiety appears to persist across different age groups, although its triggers and manifestations differ. For children, anxiety is more related to fear of error and lack of confidence, while for adults, it is more associated with accuracy, correctness, and public performance.

Furthermore, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a useful lens to interpret these findings. According to this theory, emotional factors such as anxiety can inhibit language acquisition by raising the affective filter, which reduces learners' ability to process input effectively. The presence of anxiety in both groups suggests that emotional factors continue to play an important role in shaping language learning outcomes regardless of age or learning experience. This implies that even when learners have access to rich input and strategies, emotional barriers may still limit language production and participation.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight that English learning is a complex process influenced by the interaction of learning strategies, emotional experiences, and contextual factors. Child learners tend to rely on structured guidance and classroom-based learning, while adult learners demonstrate greater independence and strategic learning behavior. However, both groups share similar emotional challenges, particularly anxiety in speaking situations, although the sources of anxiety differ.

These results support contemporary SLA perspectives that reject age as a sole determinant of success in language learning. Instead, language learning is better understood as a dynamic process shaped by multiple interacting factors, including motivation, learning environment, emotional state, learner autonomy, and access to learning resources (Ellis, 2015; Ortega, 2014). Therefore, effective language teaching should consider both cognitive and affective dimensions of learners, ensuring that instructional practices are adapted to their developmental and emotional needs, as well as providing opportunities for safe practice and meaningful interaction.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the English learning strategies and emotional responses of child and adult learners within the framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with two child learners (C1 and C2) and two adult learners (A1 and A2), the findings demonstrate that English learning is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of learning strategies, emotional experiences, and contextual learning environments. Although both groups exhibit positive orientations toward English learning, their learning behaviors and affective responses differ in meaningful ways.

In terms of learning strategies, child learners tend to rely heavily on teacher-guided instruction and structured classroom activities such as songs, videos, writing tasks, and direct teacher assistance. Their learning process reflects a high level of dependence on external scaffolding, indicating that language learning at this stage is strongly mediated by instructional support. In contrast, adult learners demonstrate greater autonomy by engaging with diverse learning resources such as films, songs, articles, dictionaries, and digital platforms. They also apply independent problem-solving strategies, reflecting stronger metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning capacity.

Regarding emotional responses, both groups express positive attitudes toward English learning, although the underlying motivational orientations differ. Child learners' positive emotions are primarily driven by immediate enjoyment derived from engaging classroom activities, while adult learners' motivation is more instrumental, emerging from academic demands and future career-oriented goals. Despite these positive orientations, anxiety remains present across both groups, particularly in speaking contexts. Child learners tend to experience fear of making mistakes that leads to avoidance behavior, whereas adult learners experience anxiety related to linguistic accuracy, pronunciation, and performance expectations in formal communication settings.

From an SLA perspective, these findings reinforce the view that age alone does not determine language learning outcomes. Instead, English learning is shaped through a dynamic interaction between cognitive strategies and affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety. The study highlights the importance of integrating both dimensions in pedagogical practice. Therefore, language instruction should be designed to accommodate developmental differences by providing supportive, engaging, and low-anxiety learning environments for younger learners, while simultaneously fostering autonomy, strategy use, and authentic language exposure for adult learners. However, this study was limited by the small number of participants and the restricted educational contexts represented. Therefore, future research is encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse sample and to employ additional data collection methods, such as classroom observations and learner journals, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of English learning experiences across different age groups.

### **SUGGESTION**

Based on the findings of this study, English teachers should consider

selecting teaching strategies that are appropriate for learners' developmental stages. For child learners, incorporating enjoyable and interactive activities, such as songs, videos, games, and storytelling, may help increase motivation and reduce anxiety during English learning. For adult learners, providing opportunities to use authentic materials, digital resources, and collaborative discussions can promote greater learner autonomy and independent learning. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to create a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere where learners feel confident to practice speaking English without being afraid of making mistakes.

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