

Challenges Faced by Children and Adults in Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Learning English has become increasingly important in the global era, particularly in educational and professional contexts. However, learners of different ages often experience distinct challenges in acquiring English. This study aims to identify and compare the challenges faced by children and adult learners in learning English. This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with four participants consisting of two children and two adult learners. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to linguistic, psychological, behavioral, and environmental challenges. The findings reveal that children mainly experience difficulties in vocabulary and speaking, along with feelings of shyness and nervousness. In contrast, adult learners face more complex challenges, particularly in grammar and pronunciation, as well as higher levels of anxiety and lack of confidence. Additionally, children tend to rely on classroom learning, while adult learners demonstrate more autonomous learning through various media. Environmental factors also influence both groups, with children having limited exposure and adults having more opportunities but still facing psychological barriers. In conclusion, age differences significantly affect the challenges in learning English, suggesting the need for age-appropriate teaching strategies to improve language learning outcomes.

Keywords: *second language acquisition, children and adults*

INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a second language has become increasingly important in the global era, particularly in educational, social, and professional contexts. English functions as an international language that facilitates communication across countries and cultures. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language at all levels of education, from primary school to higher education. However, despite this widespread exposure, many learners still experience significant challenges in mastering English, especially when differences in age and learning characteristics are taken into account.

From a theoretical perspective, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process through which individuals learn a language other than their first language. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is defined as the process by which individuals develop knowledge of a language other than their first language through both formal instruction and natural exposure (Ellis, 1997). According to Rod Ellis (1997), SLA is a complex process influenced by multiple interacting factors. It can be understood through the following key aspects:

1. Cognitive aspect : learners process and internalize language input differently

based on age and learning capacity.

2. Linguistic aspect : learners acquire knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation over time.
3. Affective aspect : emotional factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation influence learning success.
4. Social and environmental aspect : exposure, interaction, and learning context support language development.

In relation to age differences, SLA theories explain that children and adult learners demonstrate different learning characteristics. Children tend to acquire language more naturally through implicit learning and interaction, while adult learners rely more on explicit learning strategies such as grammar rules and conscious analysis (DeKeyser, 2020). This difference often affects how learners experience challenges in language learning. Recent research also emphasizes that second language acquisition is a lifelong process influenced by age, cognitive development, and learning experiences (Pfenninger et al., 2023).

The role of psychological factors is also emphasized in SLA. According to Stephen Krashen (1982), language acquisition is influenced by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, where anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence can hinder language input. This condition is commonly found among adult learners, who tend to experience higher levels of anxiety compared to children. This argument is supported by Hardacre and GÜvendir (2020), who state that language anxiety significantly affects learners' performance and participation in second language learning.

Age is another important factor in SLA. Eric H. Lenneberg (1967) proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis, which suggests that children have a biological advantage in acquiring language more naturally. Recent studies continue to support this idea. Haryono and Manggopa (2024) found that children tend to learn language more effectively in natural settings, while adult learners often face difficulties related to grammar and pronunciation. Similarly, Li (2023) explains that although adult learners may progress faster at early stages, children tend to achieve better long-term proficiency.

Furthermore, Van (2024) highlights that effective language learning depends not only on age but also on instructional methods and learning environments. Children benefit more from interactive and exposure-based learning, while adult learners require structured approaches and strategy-based learning. In addition, Widyaningsih et al. (2022) and Wibowo et al. (2024) found that children are generally more flexible and less anxious, whereas adult learners face greater psychological and linguistic challenges.

Other recent studies also show differences in learning outcomes. Luquin and Mayo (2024) found that structured input significantly improves children's writing development, while Lester et al. (2025) reported that children may still face challenges in oral language development when learning multiple languages. These findings indicate that both children and adult learners experience challenges, but in different forms and contexts.

Despite these findings, most previous studies tend to focus on either children or adult learners separately, rather than directly comparing both groups within the same context. This creates a gap in understanding how age-related differences influence the challenges faced by learners in acquiring English as a second language, particularly from a qualitative perspective that captures real learner experiences.

In addition, the development of English language learning in Indonesia shows that learners are exposed to English at different levels of intensity depending on their

educational environment and access to learning resources. In urban and digital environments, learners tend to have greater exposure to English through online platforms, social media, and multimedia content. However, exposure alone does not guarantee successful language acquisition, as individual differences such as motivation, learning strategies, and emotional factors also play a significant role. Therefore, understanding how age influences these factors becomes essential in designing effective and adaptive English language teaching strategies that meet the needs of different learner groups.

The importance of examining age-related differences is particularly relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context such as Indonesia, where opportunities for authentic language use are often limited. Learners frequently rely on classroom instruction as their primary source of exposure to English. Consequently, differences in learning strategies, motivation, and psychological readiness may become more apparent between age groups. Understanding these differences can help educators develop instructional practices that better accommodate learners' needs and maximize learning outcomes.

Furthermore, investigating learners' perceptions and experiences provides valuable insights that may not be fully captured through quantitative approaches. By exploring learners' perspectives directly, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter and the factors influencing their language learning process. This qualitative perspective is particularly important for identifying age-related differences that may not be visible through test scores or achievement data alone.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse the challenges experienced by children and adult learners in learning English and to identify the differences between the two groups. By integrating theoretical perspectives of SLA and empirical data from interviews, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how age influences language learning challenges and to contribute to the development of more effective and age-appropriate English teaching strategies. This study is significant as it provides empirical insights into age-related differences in language learning challenges, which can inform more effective and context-sensitive English teaching practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research method and focused on the challenges experienced by children and adult learners in learning English as a second language, particularly in relation to linguistic, psychological, behavioural, and environmental aspects. The use of qualitative research is appropriate because it captures participants' real experiences and perspectives in depth. The research aimed to examine the challenges faced by children and adult learners in actual learning situations. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to understand participants' lived experiences, as suggested by Creswell (2003). This focus aligns with the theoretical framework of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly in understanding age-related differences in language learning.

A total of four participants were involved in this study and were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling method was used to ensure that the participants met the research objectives. The participants were chosen based on their experience in learning English.

The participants were grouped as follows:

1. Two children from the fifth and sixth grades of primary school

2. Two adult learners who were university students

Participants were anonymized and coded as C1 and C2 (children), and A1 and A2 (adults). The child participants were selected based on their exposure to English learning at school, while the adult participants were selected based on their experience in learning English at the university level.

The child participants were approached in a spontaneous setting after school, while the adult participants were selected based on accessibility. All participants were considered appropriate for providing relevant information regarding the challenges of learning English. The number of participants was considered sufficient for obtaining in-depth qualitative data relevant to the research focus.

The study was conducted in an informal learning context in Indonesia.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives. An interview guideline was used to ensure consistency across interviews.

The interviews were conducted on April 6, 2026. Each interview lasted around 10–15 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a combination of Indonesian and simple English to ensure participants' understanding, especially for the child participants. The interviews were conducted in an informal setting to encourage participants to express their thoughts freely.

Interviews with adult participants were conducted in a flexible setting based on their availability. Child participants were interviewed in a casual setting after school to ensure comfort and spontaneity. All interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview questions were designed to explore challenges in language learning, including linguistic aspects (such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), psychological aspects (such as anxiety and confidence), learning behaviour, and environmental factors.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). This framework was used to identify, describe, and analyse patterns within the data. The analysis aimed to identify recurring themes related to challenges experienced by both children and adult learners, as well as to compare similarities and differences between the two groups.

The steps of data analysis included:

1. Transcribing the interview data
2. Reading and familiarizing with the data
3. Identifying significant statements related to learning challenges
4. Coding the data
5. Grouping codes into themes: linguistic, psychological, learning behaviour, and environmental factors
6. Comparing themes between child and adult participants

This systematic approach helped identify both similarities and differences in participants' experiences.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through several steps. The researcher carefully checked and reviewed the interview transcripts to maintain accuracy. The data were also interpreted repeatedly to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. In addition, the findings were discussed with peers to support the consistency of the analysis.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their role in it. Participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any time.

For child participants, verbal permission was obtained before conducting the interviews, and the interviews were carried out in a respectful and comfortable manner. All collected data were kept confidential, and participants' identities were anonymized to protect their privacy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are derived from the analysis of interview data collected from both child and adult participants. The findings are presented in four sections based on thematic analysis of the interview data. These sections include linguistic challenges, psychological challenges, learning behavior, and environmental factors experienced by children and adult learners in learning English. As summarized in Table 1, the key differences between children and adult learners are presented across these four main themes.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Children (C1, C2)	Adults (A1, A2)
Linguistic	Vocabulary and speaking difficulties	Grammar and pronunciation difficulties
Psychological	Shy, nervous, afraid of speaking	Anxiety, low confidence, fear of mistakes
Learning Behavior	Learning mainly in classroom	Learning through media (songs, films, social media)
Environmental	Limited exposure outside school	More exposure but limited real life use

The findings indicate that both children and adult learners experience linguistic challenges, although the nature of these challenges differs. Children tend to experience difficulties in vocabulary and speaking. One participant (C1) reported difficulty in speaking English and remembering vocabulary. Another participant (C2) also indicated that answering questions in English is difficult due to limited vocabulary. These findings suggest that children struggle with basic language production, particularly in oral communication.

In contrast, adult learners reported difficulties related to grammar and pronunciation. One participant (A1) stated that grammar is challenging due to the complexity of rules, while another participant (A2) mentioned confusion in understanding tenses and pronunciation differences. These results indicate that children face challenges in basic language use, whereas adult learners encounter more complex linguistic structures. These findings highlight the differences in linguistic challenges between children and adult learners.

Psychological factors play an important role in language learning.

Children tend to experience shyness and nervousness when speaking English. One participant (C1) reported feeling "malu" and "deg-degan" when asked to speak. Another participant (C2) also expressed feelings of nervousness despite a supportive classroom environment. In contrast, adult learners demonstrated higher levels of anxiety and lack of confidence. One participant (A1) reported feeling less confident when speaking English in real-life situations, while another (A2) expressed fear of making grammatical mistakes.

These findings indicate that psychological barriers are more prominent among adult learners compared to children. These results indicate that psychological factors play a more significant role among adult learners.

The findings reveal differences in learning behaviour between children and

adult learners. Children rely mainly on classroom-based learning. One participant (C1) stated that they only learn English at school and do not practice at home. Another participant (C2) also confirmed that learning occurs primarily in the classroom.

In contrast, adult learners demonstrate more independent learning behaviour. They utilize various resources such as songs, films, and social media. One participant (A1) reported learning English through Discord and films, while another (A2) mentioned using TikTok and online resources. These findings suggest that adult learners are more autonomous, whereas children depend more on structured learning environments. These findings indicate that learning behaviour differs significantly between the two groups.

Environmental factors also influence learners' challenges in learning English. Children have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, which restricts opportunities for practice (C1, C2). In contrast, adult learners have more exposure to English through academic and social environments. However, despite this exposure, they still face psychological barriers that limit their active use of English. This is reflected in participants' responses indicating hesitation and lack of confidence in real communication (A1, A2). These findings indicate that environmental exposure alone is not sufficient without psychological readiness. These findings emphasize the importance of both exposure and psychological readiness in language learning.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings in relation to established theories and previous studies in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, which were designed to explore learners' experiences in linguistic, psychological, behavioural, and environmental aspects of learning English. The interview questions were developed based on key SLA concepts, particularly the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982) and general SLA frameworks proposed by Rod Ellis (1997). The questions were also adapted to match the participants' level of understanding, especially for child learners, by using simple and accessible language. The responses were then analysed narratively to identify recurring themes and patterns across participants.

The findings of this study reveal clear and consistent differences between children and adult learners in learning English, particularly in the types of challenges they experience. These findings directly address the objective of this study, which is to identify and compare the challenges experienced by children and adult learners in learning English. These differences can be explained through established SLA theories as well as recent empirical studies.

First, in terms of linguistic challenges, the findings indicate that children tend to experience difficulties related to vocabulary and speaking, while adult learners encounter more complex challenges related to grammar and pronunciation. These findings were derived from interview questions such as "What is the most difficult part of learning English?" and "Do you find grammar or vocabulary difficult?". The responses suggest that children struggle with basic language production due to limited vocabulary and lack of fluency. This is evident in statements indicating difficulty in remembering vocabulary and expressing ideas orally (C1, C2).

In contrast, adult learners demonstrate more advanced linguistic awareness but face difficulties in mastering grammatical structures and pronunciation accuracy. Participants (A1, A2) reported that grammar is challenging due to the complexity and number of rules that must be understood and memorized. These findings support the argument of Stephen Krashen (1982), who suggests that language acquisition is more effective when learners focus on meaningful input rather than explicit grammatical

rules. Adult learners tend to rely more on conscious learning strategies. This may increase cognitive load and lead to greater difficulty in language production. This suggests that linguistic challenges are not only influenced by proficiency level but also by differences in cognitive processing between children and adults. These results also align with previous studies by Widyarningsih et al. (2022) and Wibowo et al. (2024), which highlight that adult learners often experience greater difficulty in grammar compared to children.

Second, psychological challenges play a significant role in shaping learners' experiences. The findings show that children generally experience shyness and nervousness when speaking English, while adult learners exhibit higher levels of anxiety and lack of confidence. These findings were explored through questions such as "Do you feel confident when speaking English?" and "Are you afraid of making mistakes?". Children's responses (C1, C2) indicate emotional hesitation, such as feeling "malu" or nervous when speaking in front of others. However, these feelings do not appear to significantly hinder their willingness to try.

On the other hand, adult learners demonstrate more intense psychological barriers. Participants (A1, A2) reported fear of being judged, especially regarding grammatical accuracy, which leads to hesitation in speaking. These findings strongly support Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Adult learners tend to have a higher affective filter, which limits their ability to actively use the language despite having sufficient knowledge. These results are also consistent with Hardacre and Guvendir (2020).

Third, the findings reveal notable differences in learning behaviour between the two groups. Children tend to rely primarily on structured classroom learning and show limited independent learning outside school. This is reflected in participants' responses indicating that they only learn English during school hours (C1, C2). This suggests that children are more dependent on formal instruction and teacher guidance.

In contrast, adult learners demonstrate more autonomous learning behaviour. Participants (A1, A2) reported using various resources such as songs, films, and digital platforms to support their learning. This indicates that adult learners are more self-directed and capable of managing their own learning process. However, despite this autonomy, their learning outcomes are still influenced by psychological barriers, which may limit their active engagement in real-life communication. These findings reflect differences in cognitive maturity and learning strategies between children and adults.

Finally, environmental factors also contribute to learners' experiences. Children (C1, C2) have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, which restricts opportunities for practice and interaction. Their learning environment is largely confined to formal educational settings.

In contrast, adult learners have broader exposure to English through academic, social, and digital environments. However, the findings indicate that increased exposure does not necessarily guarantee active language use. Participants (A1, A2) reported that psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes, limit their participation in real-life communication. These findings support the Critical Period Hypothesis proposed by Eric H. Lenneberg (1967).

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that age differences significantly influence the types of challenges experienced by learners. Children tend to face challenges related to basic language use and limited exposure, while adult learners experience more complex challenges related to grammar, anxiety, and confidence. These findings reinforce the importance of considering age-related differences in designing effective English language learning strategies. Furthermore, this study highlights the need for teaching approaches that not only address linguistic

competence but also reduce psychological barriers and provide meaningful opportunities for language use in real-life contexts. However, this study is limited by the small number of participants, which may not fully represent broader learner populations. These findings also provide practical implications for educators to design more adaptive and age-sensitive English learning environments.

In addition to the findings above, it is important to highlight the pedagogical implications of age-related differences in second language acquisition. Teachers should consider adapting their instructional strategies based on learners' developmental stages. For children, language instruction should emphasize meaningful interaction, repetition, and contextual learning to support natural acquisition processes. Meanwhile, adult learners may benefit more from explicit instruction, structured grammar explanations, and opportunities for self-directed learning.

The findings of this study also have important implications for English language teaching practices. Since children and adult learners experience different challenges, instructional approaches should be adjusted according to learners' developmental characteristics. For children, language learning activities should emphasize interaction, meaningful communication, and enjoyable learning experiences. Activities such as games, storytelling, songs, and collaborative tasks can help increase exposure to English while reducing anxiety. These activities allow children to develop vocabulary and speaking skills in a natural and engaging manner.

For adult learners, instructional practices should focus not only on linguistic competence but also on psychological support. Adult learners often possess sufficient linguistic knowledge but hesitate to use English because of fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. Therefore, teachers should create supportive learning environments that encourage risk-taking and active participation. Providing constructive feedback and emphasizing communication over perfection may help adult learners develop greater confidence in using English.

This study also contributes to the growing body of research in Second Language Acquisition by providing a direct comparison between children and adult learners within the same research context. While many previous studies focus on a single age group, the present study highlights how age influences linguistic, psychological, behavioural, and environmental aspects simultaneously. The findings demonstrate that language learning challenges cannot be explained solely by age; rather, they emerge from the interaction between age-related characteristics and contextual factors.

Moreover, the study supports the view that successful language acquisition involves multiple dimensions beyond linguistic knowledge. Factors such as confidence, motivation, exposure, and learning autonomy play a significant role in shaping learners' experiences. Therefore, future studies should continue exploring the relationship between age and other variables affecting language acquisition to provide a more comprehensive understanding of second language learning processes.

Furthermore, the integration of digital learning tools can play a significant role in bridging learning gaps between children and adults. Digital platforms such as educational videos, interactive applications, and online communication tools provide learners with additional exposure to authentic language use. However, effective implementation of these tools requires careful guidance to ensure that learners are able to use them productively rather than passively. These considerations highlight the importance of combining cognitive, affective, and technological aspects in second language teaching practices.

CONCLUSION AND SUGESSTION

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify and compare the challenges experienced by children and adult learners in learning English. The findings reveal that both groups face difficulties in linguistic, psychological, behavioural, and environmental aspects, although the nature of these challenges differs. Children tend to struggle with vocabulary and speaking due to limited exposure and reliance on classroom learning. They also experience shyness and nervousness when using English. In contrast, adult learners face more complex challenges, particularly in grammar and pronunciation, and experience higher levels of anxiety and lack of confidence, which affect their language use in real-life situations.

Furthermore, the study shows that adult learners demonstrate more autonomous learning behaviour by utilizing various resources such as social media, films, and online platforms, while children depend more on structured classroom instruction. Environmental factors also play a significant role, as children have limited opportunities to practice English outside school, whereas adult learners have more exposure but are still constrained by psychological barriers.

Overall, the findings confirm that age differences significantly influence the challenges in learning English. These results suggest that teaching strategies should be adapted based on learners' age and characteristics. For children, more opportunities for practice and interactive learning are needed, while for adult learners, reducing anxiety and increasing confidence should be prioritized. This study contributes to a better understanding of age-related differences in language learning and provides practical insights for improving English teaching practices.

However, this study is limited by the small number of participants, which may not fully represent all learners' experiences. Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and explore different learning contexts to obtain more comprehensive results.

In practical terms, the findings of this study suggest that English language teaching should be more responsive to learners' age-related needs. Differentiated instruction can help maximize learning outcomes by addressing specific challenges faced by each group. Teachers are encouraged to create supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety and increase learner engagement, particularly for adult learners who tend to experience higher psychological barriers. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for future studies in second language acquisition, particularly in understanding age-related differences in language learning.

SUGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that English language educators adopt age-appropriate teaching approaches that address the distinct challenges encountered by children and adults in learning English as a second language. For children, teachers should create interactive and engaging learning environments by incorporating games, songs, storytelling, and visual media to maintain motivation and facilitate language acquisition. For adult learners, instruction should emphasize practical communication, real-life contexts, and opportunities for collaborative learning while addressing factors such as anxiety, limited learning time, and varying educational backgrounds.

Learners are encouraged to develop consistent learning habits and actively participate in language-learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. Children should be provided with continuous exposure to English through enjoyable and meaningful activities, whereas adult learners should take advantage of authentic learning resources, digital platforms, and regular communication practice to improve their language proficiency. Maintaining motivation and self-confidence is also essential for overcoming the challenges associated with second-language learning.

Future researchers are recommended to investigate the challenges of learning English as a second language across different age groups, educational settings, and cultural contexts. Further studies may examine the influence of factors such as learning motivation, language anxiety, cognitive development, teaching methods, and technology-assisted language learning on second-language acquisition. Additionally, longitudinal or mixed-method research designs are recommended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how children and adults overcome challenges and develop English proficiency over time.

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