

A Study on Adult Learners of English as A Foreign Language in Vietnam: Motivations, Advantages, and Challenges

Nguyen Le An Phuong^{1*}, Nguyen Thi Hoang Bau¹

¹ The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: nlaphuong@ufl.udn.vn

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8569-9756>

 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.24313>

© Copyright (c) 2024 Nguyen Le An Phuong, Nguyen Thi Hoang Bau

Received: 12/01/2024

Revision: 31/01/2024

Accepted: 01/02/2024

Online: 01/02/2024

ABSTRACT

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, adult learners, learning challenges

English has become highly popular in Vietnam, emerging as the preferred language for diverse purposes. The increasing attendance at English Training Centers and schools shows a surge in adult learners seeking language refinement. Motivated by career progression, job prerequisites, learning objectives, and communication needs, these learners encounter many difficulties. This article explores the obstacles Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face, providing practical solutions for both learners and educators. A comprehensive study involving 70 adult learners studying EFL at the University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies (UD-UFLS) utilized questionnaires and interviews, employing qualitative and quantitative analyses. The research revealed that despite high motivation driven by job and career goals, learners struggle due to time constraints, limited English literacy skills, and financial burdens, diminishing the effectiveness of their learning. In response to these difficulties, constructive recommendations are offered to enhance the learning experience and address the prevalent issues.

Introduction

In recent years, the impact of globalization and integration has led to a remarkable increase in the number of adult English learners in Vietnam. English is widely recognized as essential to meet occupational demands and fulfill the learning outcome requirements of various training programs. A significant aspect of this linguistic journey is the VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) examinations, which serve as a pivotal means for achieving English proficiency, required for graduation from undergraduate courses and as an entry requirement for postgraduate programs (Nguyen, 2020).

While adult learners possess valuable attributes like independence, experience, and motivation (Mei, 2023), they also face a unique set of challenges due to their multiple roles and responsibilities (Brookfield, 1986) and the influence of age-related factors (Zhu, 2017). These

challenges can often impede their progress and hinder their success in learning English. To address these obstacles and provide better support for adult learners, this article aims to identify the prevalent issues in the Vietnamese context and propose various effective strategies that can benefit educators and learners.

Literature review

Adult learners

Adults are characterized as being independent and self-directed learners, possessing a wealth of life experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, they are goal-oriented, value relevance, are practical, and demand respect (Lieb, 1991). However, the precise definition of adulthood varies across societies and cultural groups. Likewise, adult learners are perceived in diverse contexts. They constitute a varied group with distinct educational backgrounds and diverse learning needs, characterized by maturity and understanding (Svetina & Perme, 2004).

Adult learners, participants in adult learning opportunities, encompass individuals with varying educational histories and needs. They are mature and seek additional skills and knowledge to enhance their personal and professional lives (Hudson, 2002; Tight, 1996). Described as more autonomous, adult learners can independently develop their knowledge and experiences in learning a second language. Krashen (1988) defines adult learners as formal thinkers capable of employing conscious grammar, meta-awareness, and general abstract language rules. While defining adult learners of English as a foreign language remains challenging, it is apparent that these learners juggle multiple roles in their lives and often opt for part-time rather than full-time courses.

Adult learners' learning challenges

Extensive research has been conducted to investigate the challenges adult learners encounter acquiring the English language. In particular, Mali (2017) posits that adults face a multitude of non-academic responsibilities, such as tending to their families, participating in family-related gatherings, and managing financial obligations. These demands can significantly divert their attention from their studies. This perspective aligns with the findings of Ruijuan Wu, Wu, and Tai (2014), who demonstrated that the "family factor" exerts a detrimental impact on adults' English as a Second Language (ESL) learning.

The challenge of learning English for adults is explored by Cozma (2015), who contends that, due to their lower energy levels and a plethora of responsibilities, adults often arrive in English classrooms fatigued. Mei (2022) delves into the psychological aspects, noting that adults tend to possess stronger self-esteem and emotional sensitivity. While this can make them less hesitant to communicate and share their ideas, it also renders them particularly averse to potential ridicule stemming from mistakes. This lack of self-confidence and courage hampers their ability to seize valuable opportunities to practice their second language and enhance their overall language skills.

In a comprehensive study, Ruijuan Wu and colleagues (2014) explored how adults often experience stress when they struggle to articulate themselves clearly and accurately in a second

language. Cozma (2015) emphasizes that anxiety among adult learners can arise from a variety of factors, including a perceived lack of progress, reluctance to speak during English classes, and a fear of making errors. These anxieties are closely linked to concerns about losing face, which become more pronounced with advancing age.

Nevertheless, there is a notable scarcity of studies conducted within the context of Vietnam aimed at identifying the specific challenges adult learners face in their pursuit of language learning, particularly in the case of English. Such research is crucial for enhancing the quality of both teaching and learning in this domain.

Research Questions

The study aimed to provide answers to the following research questions

1. What motivates adult learners to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL)?
2. What advantages do adult learners have in EFL education compared to children?
3. What challenges do EFL adult learners face?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Seventy participants of this study are EFL adult learners at The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies (UD-UFLS) with 77.1% identified as male and 22.9% as female. Roughly 50% of the participants fall within the age range of 25 to 35 years old, while 42% are in the 36 to 50 years old category. The participants comprise individuals employed in the public sector, including but not limited to teachers, police officers, soldiers, and various government officials. Additionally, more than half of the participants have been learning English for more than five years. They are currently enrolling in the program of Bachelor of English language program at UD-UFLS, specifically designed to attain a C1 (VSTEP) proficiency level.

Data collection & analysis

The research is conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Regarding quantitative analysis, information was gathered using a survey comprising of 14 questions. The questionnaire used in this study is adapted from the research conducted by Ruijuan, Ruiting, and Tai (2014). Their study, titled "Challenges of Adults in Learning English as a Second Language: Focus on Adult Education in China," served as the foundation for the questionnaire. The survey was translated from English to Vietnamese before being distributed to participants, considering their limited proficiency in English. Subsequently, the results obtained were translated from Vietnamese to English for the purpose of analysis and inclusion in the study.

The initial four questionnaire questions investigated adult learners' motivations for learning EFL in Vietnam. The subsequent five questions were designed to identify the advantages that adult learners have in acquiring EFL compared to younger learners. The last set of five questions scrutinized the difficulties encountered by participants while learning EFL.

The study's questionnaire has demonstrated noteworthy reliability within the defined context, as evidenced by the substantial Cronbach's alpha of **.795**. This robust statistical measure attests to the consistency and dependability of the results obtained through the questionnaire.

The study also utilized a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews that delved into three key themes: the motivations driving adult learners to study English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the advantages experienced by adult learners in the process of acquiring EFL skills, and the difficulties they encountered. The research involved conducting five distinct interviews with five adult learners actively engaged in the study of EFL. The first two participants successfully obtained a Bachelor of English language from UD-UFLS five years ago. The following three participants are currently enrolled in the In-service Bachelor of English program at UD-UFLS. They were queried about the challenges they encountered while studying English and their expectations for alleviating these issues. These valuable discussions and shared experiences have provided deep insights into the challenges faced by adult learners.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, a series of 14 questions was formulated and subsequently administered to a group of 70 participants. All respondents completed and returned the questionnaire.

The motivations adult learners have for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Table 1 illustrates the motivations driving adult learners to pursue the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Table 1

Motivations for undertaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning

SDA=strongly disagree; DA= disagree; NC= no comment; A= agree; SA=strongly agree

	n	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
6 The Vietnamese government strongly emphasizes English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Vietnam.	70	8.6%	12.9%	31.4%	24.2%	22.9%
7 In Vietnam, adults must learn English as a foreign language to improve their chances of career advancement.	70	11.4%	15.7%	34.3%	25.7%	12.9%
8 Proficiency in English is highly significant for Vietnamese adults to stay competitive in the job market.	70	2.9%	2.9%	21.3%	38.6%	34.3%
9 The English language is a crucial tool for Vietnamese individuals to generate income.	70	1.4%	4.3%	17.1%	41.3%	35.9%

Observing the data in the table, we can see that approximately 47% of participants acknowledge the emphasis placed by the Vietnamese government on the significance of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The majority of participants, comprising 72.9%, believe that English proficiency is crucial for job competitiveness, while 77.2% view it as a valuable tool for income augmentation. Notably, Participant 3 shared, "*I initially learned Chinese as a second*

language. However, due to job requirements as a border guard managing immigration gates, I enrolled in an in-service English course." Only slightly higher than one-third (38.6%) concur that English is mandatory for career advancement.

Advantages adult learners obtain in EFL education over children.

Table 2 delineates the advantages adult learners possess in acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) compared to children.

Table 2

Advantages that adults might possess in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in comparison to children

SDA=strongly disagree; DA= disagree; NC= no comment; A= agree; SA=strongly agree

No.		n	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
10	Adults tend to focus on learning more readily than children do.	70	18.6%	20%	34.3%	17.1%	10%
11	Typically, adults take on greater responsibility for the learning process and are more actively engaged in learning compared to children.	70	10%	17.2%	40%	21.4%	11.4%
12	Adults tend to display a higher motivation level in learning English than children.	70	10%	15.7%	34.3%	27.1%	12.9%
13	Adults generally exhibit a higher cognitive capacity compared to children.	70	5.7%	7.1%	31.4%	35.8%	20%
14	Adults learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) typically possess broader general knowledge and greater life experience.	70	2.9%	2.9%	10%	40%	44.2%

As can be seen from the table, the majority of participants (84.3%) believe that having a broader general knowledge and more experience is a significant benefit in learning English. Participant 3 expressed this by saying, "I believe that as an adult, I have more experience in memorizing and logically organizing vocabulary and knowledge. Additionally, I have a stronger determination, which proves valuable when presenting something in English."

Around 55% of participants agree that adults exhibit superior cognitive abilities. However, only 27% believe that adults have better concentration than young learners, and nearly 34% agree that adults take more responsibility for the learning process and are more actively engaged in their learning. Less than half (40%) acknowledge that adults are more motivated to learn English than children.

Challenges EFL learners face

The difficulties adult learners encounter while studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Challenges associated with adults' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning

SDA=strongly disagree; DA= disagree; NC= no comment; A= agree; SA=strongly agree

	n	SDA	DA	NS	A	SA
10 Adults, in particular, encounter challenges in acquiring a native-like accent.	70	4.3%	5.7%	21.4%	28.6%	40%
11 Adults who did not have the opportunity to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during their childhood may suffer a loss of confidence.	70	4.3%	1.4%	21.4%	32.9%	40%
12 Adults frequently experience stress when they struggle to articulate themselves clearly and accurately in a language that is not their native tongue.	70	2.9%	4.3%	14.3%	47.1%	31.4%
13 Family-related factors negatively impact the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for adults	70	20%	22.9%	25.6%	22.9%	8.6%
14 Adults encounter significant interference in learning English when their first language is prominent.	70	4.3%	20%	28.5%	24.3%	22.9%

It is obvious that a large proportion of participants (68,6%) believe that it is nearly impossible for adults to achieve native-like pronunciation. It is widely accepted that achieving native-like pronunciation in a foreign language, particularly for those who commence learning a second language after puberty, is considered a challenging feat (Lenneberg, 1967).

Furthermore, 72.9% express a lack of confidence stemming from their limited English background. EFL students often experience fear of speaking when they lack mastery of grammatical rules, sufficient vocabulary, and the ability to pronounce words accurately. Similarly, in research of Tuong (2022), one of the difficulties of non-English majors in speaking English is getting stuck with vocabulary and pronunciation. A significant hindrance to the effective communication of EFL students is the lack of vocabulary knowledge (Adam, 2016). A significant proportion, 78.5%, find discomfort in expressing ideas in English, and an equal percentage admit feeling pressured when attempting to articulate thoughts in the language. In addition to the specific figures obtained from the questionnaire, there are major challenges faced by adult EFL learners found through face-to-face interviews with participants.

Time constraints

Time constraints are a prominent issue for adult English learners, particularly for mature individuals laden with work responsibilities, duties, and family obligations. Effective English learning demands a significant investment of time and focused concentration. Participant 3, currently an in-service student majoring in English at UFLs, highlights the lack of time as his major hurdle. Unlike formal training students, he cannot dedicate the majority of his time to studying English due to his concurrent work commitments and family responsibilities. Participant 4 also faced an overload of family responsibilities, resulting in her habitual tardiness to class and frequent absences.

Similarly, Participant 1, an in-service graduate from UFLs, faced difficulty finding time for after-class practice due to frequent work interruptions. The struggle to manage time to attend classes with fixed schedules at English centers is echoed by Participant 2, who articulates,

I work eight hours a day and sometimes have extra tasks to do after working hours. While I attempted English classes with fixed timetables on several occasions, I eventually gave up halfway. Such classes are impractical for full-time employees like me, given their prolonged duration and the requirement for regular attendance."

Limited English literacy

Limited English literacy is a prevalent issue among adult learners, stemming from various factors. Many adults come to English classes with minimal experience and literacy in the language, influenced by factors such as having learned other foreign languages in secondary and high school or not recognizing the importance of the subject when they were younger. Participant 1, for instance, acknowledges that his limited English foundation hinders his progress in class, despite putting in considerable effort. He faces challenges in memorizing vocabulary, retaining only 20% of what he learns in a week and subsequently forgetting it two weeks later. Participant 5 acknowledged that her limited English background contributed to her failure in the mandatory proficiency English test required for completing her master's degree.

Financial Burdens

Learning English can be financially burdensome, particularly for older learners who contend with numerous expenses. The costs associated with English learning can become even more daunting when considering the need for sustained lessons over several years. Participant 2, for example, previously invested a substantial amount for a six-month English study program in Canada. However, he soon realized that the financial strain exceeded his capacity, prompting him to opt to study the language in his home country, which better aligned with his budget.

Participant 1 shares a similar financial struggle: "*Given my busy schedule, I chose one-on-one lessons with a tutor to facilitate quick learning with a flexible schedule. However, I could only sustain this form of learning for four months before depleting my bank account.*" The expenses associated with English learning, especially for personalized or overseas programs, can pose significant challenges for adult learners, particularly those with numerous financial obligations. Based on the results generated from the questionnaires and interviews, it is evident that English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning significantly influences the participants' career

development. As individuals strive to attain proficiency in English, they encounter various obstacles and challenges, despite possessing certain advantages compared to younger learners.

Recommendations

The study's findings highlight the challenges Vietnamese adult EFL learners face, including struggles with achieving native-like pronunciation, a lack of confidence, and limited progress due to their English background, time constraints, and financial burdens. Recommendations are proposed for teachers, education centers, and adult learners to address these issues. For educators, establishing an encouraging learning atmosphere with diverse and captivating activities, scaffolded instructions, and ample space for group and pair work is crucial. Collaboration stands as a vital learning tactic for everyone, as it allows learners to inspire and provide mutual support to each other. (Deborah, Lori & Salwa, 2018). Additionally, collaborative learning can alleviate feelings of isolation among students and enhance their overall productivity (Phan, 2023). Flexibility in teaching approaches, alternative class times, and additional support outside regular hours can alleviate time constraints. For adult learners, collaboration for knowledge and experience sharing, along with cultivating effective immersion habits like reading, listening, and watching English content, can enhance memorization, pronunciation, and authentic language interaction. Technology activities using more generic and non-personal channels like television and the internet are used to provide visual and audio support for language acquisition (Jiuhan, Evie & Deanna, 2011). These measures aim to enhance the overall learning experience for Vietnamese adult ESL learners.

Conclusion

This paper explored various aspects related to Vietnamese adult EFL learners. Regarding learning objectives, it was established that the majority of learners pursue English studies to enhance job competitiveness and increase income. Despite adults having certain advantages over younger learners, they encounter several challenges in their EFL journey. The paper suggests recommendations as potential solutions to these issues.

This study is subject to certain limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The relatively modest sample size may inadvertently introduce bias into the findings and subsequent discussions. The interviews conducted with a limited number of participants might offer a constrained viewpoint, potentially undermining the reliability of the study. Additionally, the adult learners participating in the study predominantly hail from specific roles within the public sector, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other work environments. Therefore, future research endeavors could enhance the existing knowledge base by exploring teaching approaches and learning strategies aimed at enhancing adult English education. Furthermore, investigating adult learners in diverse working sectors would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their unique needs and challenges in language learning.

References

- Adam, M. A. A. (2016). *Role of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Promoting EFL Learners Performance* (Doctoral dissertation, Sudan University of Science and Technology).
- Anh, N.Q.P. (2021). Under the impacts of globalisation: the rising power of English as a foreign language (EFL) and the corresponding response of EFL policy in Vietnam. *SN Social Science*, 1(31). 11 January, 2021. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-020-00047-9>
- Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Deborah.S., Lori, K. & Salwa, M. (2018). Teaching strategies that motivate English language adult literacy learners to invest in their education: A literature review. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 26(1), 25-42. <https://doi.org/10.5130/lms.v26i1.6260>
- Jiuhan, H., Evie, T. & Deanna, N. (2011). Authentic Activities and Materials for Adult ESL Learners. *Journal of Adult Education*, 40(1), 1-10.
- Krashen, S. D. (1988). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1967). *The Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley.
- Lieb, S. (1991). *Principle of Adult Learning*. Phoenix, AZ: Vision – South Mountain Community College.
- Mali, G. C. Y. (2017). Adult learners' experiences in learning English: A case study of two university students in Indonesia. *JOLTL: Indonesian Journal of Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 2(2),131-146. <http://doi.org/10.30957/ijoltr.v2i2.280>
- Mei, B. (2022). The Characteristics of Adult Learners and Second Language Teaching Strategies. Chengdu 610037, *SEAA 2022*, 675, 980–987. 2023. Sichuan, China. http://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-05-3_117
- Mihaela, C. (2015). The Challenge of Teaching English to Adult Learners in Today's world. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 197(1209-1214). July 25, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.380>
- Nguyen, T. N. Q. (2022). Vietnamese standardized test of English proficiency: A panorama. *English Language Proficiency Testing in Asia. 1st Edition*. Routledge. 2019.
- Phan, T. T. Q. (2023). EFL Students' Perceptions towards Cooperative Learning in Writing Skills at a University in the Mekong Delta. *International Journal of Language Instruction*, 2(3), 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.23232>
- Ruijuan, W., Ruiting, W. and Tai, V. L. (2014) Challenges of Adults in Learning English as a Second Language: Focus on Adult Education in China. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(5), 1132 –1138. September, 2014. <http://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.5.5.1132-1138>
- Ruyun, H. (2016). The age factor in second language learning. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(11), 2164 – 2168. <http://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0611.13>

Svetina, M., & Perme, M. (2004). *Adult Learner – 1st Module*. Retrieved August 28, 2019 from http://arhiv.acs.si/publikacije/Adult_learner-1st_module.pdf

Tight, M. (1996). *Key concepts in adult education and training*. London: Routledge.

Tuong, H. G. B. (2022). TVU Non-English Majors' Attitudes toward Utilizing Oral Presentations to Overcome Speaking Difficulties in English Classroom. *International Journal of Language Instruction*, 1(1), 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.22119>

Biodata

Nguyen Le An Phuong earned a Master of Arts in TESOL studies in 2006 from The University of Queensland, Australia. In addition, she completed an Advanced Diploma of Event Management in 2012 at William Angliss Institute, Australia. Presently, she serves as a lecturer at the Faculty of English, Da Nang University of Foreign Language Studies, where she earned her Bachelor of English degree in 2004. Phuong boasts 20 years of teaching experience and has been involved in the National Project of Foreign Languages for ten years as a trainer.

Nguyen Thi Hoang Bau holds an M.S in Tourism Management from Chinese Culture University, Taiwan (2015) and an M.A in Applied Linguistics from the University of Melbourne, Australia (2018). She is a lecturer at the Faculty of English for Specific Purposes, the University of Foreign Languages Studies, the University of Danang, where she obtained her Bachelor of Business English in 2012. She is an accomplished author of local and international papers and has guided students in research. Her research interests span tourism and linguistics.

Appendix

Survey to Investigate Challenges Faced by Vietnamese Adult Learners of English as a Foreign Language

Part A: Please highlight only one selection

1. Your native language: a. Vietnamese b. English
2. Gender: a. Male b. Female
3. Age: a. 18-24 b. 25-35 c. 36-50 d. Over 50
4. Duration of studying English as a foreign language (up to the present moment)
 - a. Less than 12 months
 - b. Over one year to four years
 - c. Over four years to nine years
 - d. Over nine years
5. The highest level of education achieved
 - a. High school b. Certificate/diploma c. Bachelor degree
 - d. Master degree e. Doctoral degree f. Others (please specify) _____
6. Your current job/position
Please specify _____

Part B: Please highlight your most appropriate response

Directions: Indicate your most suitable response based on the following criteria

SDA = strongly disagree

DA = Disagree

NC= no comment

A= Agree

SA = Strongly agree

No.	Challenges Faced by Adult Learners of English as a Foreign Language: A Case in Vietnam	Scaled scores				
	Motivations for undertaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning					
6	The Vietnamese government strongly emphasizes English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Vietnam.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
7	In Vietnam, adults must learn English as a foreign language to improve their chances of career advancement.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
8	Proficiency in English is highly significant for Vietnamese adults to stay competitive in the job market.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
9	The English language is a crucial tool for Vietnamese individuals to generate income.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
	Advantages that adults might possess in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in comparison to children					
10	Adults tend to focus on learning more readily than children do.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA

11	Typically, adults take on greater responsibility for the learning process and are more actively engaged in learning compared to children.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
12	Adults tend to display a higher motivation level in learning English than children.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
13	Adults generally exhibit a higher cognitive capacity compared to children.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
14	Adults learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) typically possess broader general knowledge and greater life experience.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
	Challenges associated with adults' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning					
15	Adults, in particular, encounter challenges in acquiring a native-like accent.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
16	Adults who did not have the opportunity to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during their childhood may suffer a loss of confidence.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
17	Adults frequently experience stress when they struggle to articulate themselves clearly and accurately in a language that is not their native tongue.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
18	Family-related factors negatively impact the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for adults..	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA
19	Adults encounter significant interference in learning English when their first language is prominent.	SDA	DA	NC	A	SA