Motivation in Adults Between 30 to 60 Years Old for Learning a Foreign or Second Language

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Abstract

Learning another language, especially English, has become quite popular in the last years. Adults have very busy lives, between work, family, and personal and economical goals, learning a language can be very challenging. The following research inquires some of the reasons that adults between 30 to 60 years old have regarding learning English as a second or foreign language. The research tool used was a questionnaire that was asked to 3 participants, all of them with different backgrounds and contexts. The research concluded different motivational factors that adult students have to learn English. Some of these factors are job opportunities, personal growth or satisfaction, and public relations. The research shows how all of the participants consider learning English as something useful in the modern world.

Keywords: motivation, adult language learning, English as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

The reasons why adults learn a language are different than the reasons children or teenagers learn a language. They do not learn because of a personal conviction. In contrast, adults have several obligations and learning a language is not always one of them, but they still do it. Even though there are cases of external motivators such as being asked by their work place or company to learn a language, or starting to live in another country, many adult students learn a second or foreign language by their own decision. Anderson et al. (2022) notice that:

> "It wouldn't make sense to think about the motivations of infant language learners: they can't help learning whatever language they have access to. In contrast, adult language learners may have any number of different reasons to learn a language, and their motivations affect the ways they learn" (Anderson et al., 2022).

The motivational factors of adult students are significantly different to motivational factors of children or teenagers. Perera (2022) argues that "Young learners are mainly interested in learning the English language for its benefits in the future, while adult learners expect to make language a part of their disposal, so that they can use it whenever needed" (p. 1). Therefore, the perspective adopted by adult learners is clearly different from that of young learners. "Adult learners bring a wealth of experiences to the class, that helps them understand concepts, contexts quickly and understand abstract ideas" (Perera, 2022: 1). Their motivation is something worth observing and inquiring about because it can have an impact on their performance. Students'

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motivation is important because it can be a predictor of learning and achievement. Hulleman and Hulleman (2018) explain that "Students who are more motivated to learn persist longer, produce higher quality effort, learn more deeply, and perform better in classes and on standardized tests."

2. Literature review

This part of the paper will present some concepts relevant for the research.

2.1 *Motivation*

Motivation is a fundamental factor of language learning. However, defining motivation can be challenging because of how broad the concept is (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). For this reason, there are plenty of definitions for the word motivation. For example, Salvin (2001: 345, as cited in Rehman et al., 2014: 254) defines motivation as "an internal process that activates, guides and maintains behavior over time." Similarly, Woolfolk (2013: 431) defines it as "an internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior." Moreover, some authors such as Fernald and Fernald (1978), and Pribram, (1971) define motivation as, but not exclusively, a feeling that actively guides behavior, or a goal-directed activity that is impacted by a strong feeling. In other words, motivation is what makes learners want to learn.

2.2 *Types of motivation*

Motivation has been an extensively studied topic throughout the years. For this reason, there are several categorizations of motivation. Deci and Ryan (1985) have classified motivation as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the desire to engage in activities because of the expectation of obtaining internally rewarding consequences such as feelings of competence and self-determination. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is defined as the desire to engage in activities because of a reward from the outside. Similarly, Woolfolk (1998, cited in Santrock, 2004: 418) believes that intrinsic motivation arises from factors such as interest or curiosity whereas extrinsic motivation involves doing something to obtain something else.

Further, another categorization of motivation has been proposed by Gardner (2001) which is the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to "an openness to identify at least in part with another language community" (Gardner, 2001: 12). Integrative motivation happens when an individual's main goal is to be part of a new language community. Rehman et al. (2014: 255) mention that "integrative motivated learners want to learn the target language so that they can better understand and get to know the people who speak the language and mix up in their culture". Learners with this type of motivation want to take a role in the new language society and connect with other members of it.

Instrumental motivation refers to a means to get social and economic reward through L2 learning. (Gardner, 2001). Individuals with this type of motivation are enhanced to obtain something in exchange for learning the language. According to Rehman et al. (2014: 255) "Learners with an instrumental motivation want to learn a language because of a practical reason such as getting a salary/bonus or getting into college." It can be said that learners with this type of motivation use language as a tool to upgrade their lifestyle.

2.3 *Importance of motivation in language learning*

Hall (2011) claims that motivation is a key factor when accomplishing any activity, but language learning is the most notorious one. He states, "It is difficult to imagine anyone learning a language without some degree of motivation" (Hall, 2011: 134). Motivation is fundamental when learning a language because "it determines the extent of the learner's active involvement and attitude toward learning" (Ngeow, 1998: 1). The more motivation learners have, the more time and energy they would be willing to spend on their learning process. Gardner (1985) argues that motivation is the most important factor in language learning. He mentions that in order to learn a language, individuals must be in an environment that enhances motivation.

Moreover, Slavin (2014: 785) claims that "motivation is the single most impactful part of the learning process", because adult learners tend to focus more on the reward or goal than on the process itself. Further, the author states that "motivation drives cognitive process, which in turn produces learning" (Slavin, 2014: 786). Motivation is considered the fuel for the language learning process of adult learners. Thus, motivation is what encourages students to keep learning. With this in mind, it can be said that motivation has a crucial impact in the success of L2 learning.

2.4 *Adult language learning*

Children's language learning process is very different from an adult's. Newport (2019: 1) mentions that "children and adults differ in how they acquire linguistic patterns that are productive, variable, inconsistently used, or lexically restricted". Children learn categorical rules and follow patterns that are spread in their natural environment, even when those patterns do not have high probability to happen in their linguistic input. In contrast, adult learners reproduce mainly the probabilistic patterns presented in the input. This is one of the reasons why the outcomes of learning are quite different (Newport, 2019).

Moreover, factors such as motivation, affective blocks, and cognitive plasticity are also different in adult language learning (Ausubel, 1964). According to Litchman (2012) "child first language (L1) learning as happening implicitly, not under learner control, whereas adult L2 learners consciously apply general abstract problem-solving skills to the problem of language learning". Adult classroom learners tend to receive less input and more explicit instruction than child language learners (Nikolov, 2009). Adult language classes tend to incorporate explicit rule instruction, extensive exposure to written language, and explicit error correction. In contrast, children are more likely to have activities that allow them to experience 'whole-language' input such as songs and stories in the L2.

Furthermore, children are typically less self-conscious than adults in attempting to speak the new language, which makes them less afraid of failure. With this said it is important to remark that mistakes are also different in adult language learning. Bailey et al. (1974) mentioned that mistakes made by children are "developmental" because they are similar to the mistakes they would make in their L1, whereas mistakes made by adults can be considered "interference".

In addition, children's intellectual capacities are wider because of the nature of their brain development stage. "Genetic and epigenetic processes, in concert with early experience, shape neuronal connections and give rise to neural circuits that enable increasingly complex mental activities" (Cantor et al., 2018). In other words, children's brains are more malleable and thus their learning process might have less obstacles. Furthermore, because of their short age, they have fewer past frustrating experiences in academic work. As a result, they are also less likely to manifest strong emotional blocks in particular subject-matter areas than adult learners are. Lastly, another significant differentiator of adult language learning is that adult individuals have already developed preferences and specific goals towards their learning. One example of this is the fact

that adults prefer and even need more explicit or 'formal' instruction when learning a language (Krashen & Seliger, 1975).

3. The study

The current study was created under a qualitative paradigm. Teherani et al. (2015) define qualitative research as "the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings. These phenomena can include, but are not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals and/or groups behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships." The aim of qualitative approach in research is for the researcher to examine the reason(s) why certain events occur, how do they occur, and what does the event(s) meant for the participants of the study. The qualitative approach was best for this research because of the kind of data that could be obtained and the small number of participants providing it. Further, qualitative research cares about participants' perceptions, and it provides the opportunity to obtain a more accurate picture of the events.

The methodology, instruments of data collection, and the context and participants of the current research will be explained in the following part of the paper.

3.1 *Methodology*

Motivation can be a crucial factor for adult language students. For this reason, the objectives of the present study are: To discover the perspectives of a selected group of adults with different ages, backgrounds and context towards learning a second or foreign language, and to find out what are some motivational factors that affect adult students to learn a foreign language.

For the aims of achieving the research objectives the research questions are the followings:

1. What are some of the adults' perspectives towards their motivation and/or reasons for learning a second or foreign language?

2. What are some motivational factors on adults between 30 to 60 years old to learn a second or foreign language?

The method used for this research was case study. Heigham and Croker (2009) define case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 68). Heigham and Croker (2009) also mention that there are several types of case studies, such as intrinsic, instrumental, collective or multiple, exploratory, explanatory, longitudinal and descriptive. This research used the descriptive case study, which aims only to present a detailed, contextualized picture of a particular phenomenon. Further, Hartley (2004: 323) adds that "The phenomenon is not isolated from its context but is of interest precisely because the aim is to understand how behavior and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context." In other words, participants are affected by their context as well as their context is affected by them.

It was decided to use case study because it involves an in-depth investigation of a contemporary, real-life phenomenon in its context. It permits establishing a relation between phenomena, context, and people. Additionally, it provides the opportunity to focus on one specific group of people. Thus, it is good for understanding complex issues in real-life settings, and to understand the perspective of participants in those settings.

3.2 *Context*

This research was carried out in Mexico. All of the participants are native Spanish speakers that are currently taking virtual classes in a private Institution. All the data collection was digital and neither the participants nor the researcher interacted face to face. This was for practical reasons because all of the participants live in different cities and have different schedules.

3.3 *Participants*

The study was carried out with three participants of different backgrounds, ages, and contexts which will be explained in the table below.

Table 1. Pseudonym, age, city, occupation, and level of participants.

Participants	Age	City	Occupation	Level
Romeo	44	Mexico City	Lawyer	A1
Sara	38	Querétaro	Realtor	A1
Julio	37	Monterrey	Salesperson	B1

The three participants are currently studying English in private institutions in a digital context. They spend between 8-12 hours per week studying the language. None of them have previous experience learning English.

3.4 *Techniques*

For the aims of this the instruments used were observation and the questionnaire with open-ended questions. Observation methods are useful to researchers in a variety of ways. Kawulich (2005: 4) argues that observation "provides researchers with ways to check for nonverbal expression of feelings, determine who interacts with whom, grasp how participants communicate, and check for how much time is spent on various activities". For this reason, observation gives the researcher the opportunity to notice things that could not be noticed any other way. It was possible to implement this instrument because of the digital nature of student's classes. Observing their behavior in class and towards the language was helpful to provide data about the impact of their motivational factors on their performance.

Further, the questionnaire is helpful to inquire on the insights the participant might have in an organized way. "Open-response questionnaires provide a way to find out, in an unstructured manner, what people are thinking about a particular topic or issue" (Brown, 2009: 201). Students were asked to answer a Google forms questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Answering a questionnaire can have different advantages. For example, answering a questionnaire is more practical than doing an interview. Participants do not need to arrange a meeting with the researcher in order for data to be collected. Since participants were adults with jobs, families and other personal commitments to attend, this was the best way of collecting data because they could answer the questionnaire whenever they found time to do it. Another advantage is that participants might feel "safer" or less observed by answering a questionnaire instead of being recorded in an interview. This diminished the observer's paradox, which is when the results are affected because of the fact that the participants are conscious that they are being observed.

3.5 *Data analysis procedures*

Heigham and Croker (2009: 210) mention that "The ultimate goal of interpreting your data is to discover patterns that are revealing and interesting." For this reason, the process of data analysis was the following: First the data was read, and some general notes were taken, then the

data was coded, after that some themes emerged by identifying certain patterns in the data. The data was organized in a macro and then micro level data coding table, this with the purpose of analyzing and interpreting the data in a summarized way. This is called thematic analysis.

Jansen (2022) defines thematic analysis as "the study of patterns of meaning". In other words, it is about analyzing the themes within your data set to identify meaning. "Thematic analysis is an approach for extraction of meanings and concepts from data and includes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns or themes" (Javadi & Zarea, 2016: 34). Thematic analysis is suitable for qualitative research because it allows the researcher to inquire about participants' insights and then provide an interpretation about them. Javadi and Zarea (2016: 34) mention that "One of the advantages of content analysis is its flexibility. A good thematic analysis can highly help in both reflecting and clarifying the reality".

After filling the table with the information provided by the questionnaires of the three participants, patterns were discovered. Such patterns were then divided by theme and then reflected on. Javedi and Zarea (2016) define theme as "a kind of agreement that, in comparison to the main text from which the theme is extracted, is more concise, accurate, simpler and shorter" (p. 34). Researchers analyze the data and take the decision of which excerpts are worth considered patterns, then they identify the theme and, in this way, interpret the data in a systematic way. In order to be considered a theme two basic principles need to be achieved: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity.

4. Results

The results obtained in this research will be presented organized by the themes found in the following part of the paper. The perspectives and motivational factors of adult learners in this research are expressed through the answers of their questionnaires.

4.1 *Theme 1: Job opportunities*

The first pattern was that participants commented the advantage English gives you when it comes to work life. Knowing English and being capable of communicating in the language can result to better job opportunities (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). The comment below, which was made by Romeo, illustrates his perception towards knowing English in relation to job opportunities:

"Personal improvement and better job opportunities". (Romeo, Th.1, P1Q1)[1]

According to this comment we can infer that Romeo perceives the English language as an advantage in the working environment. According to Pandey and Pandey (2014: 93) "English is the most commonly used language in the business world". English has become an international language that is used for many purposes, and business is one of the main ones. For this reason, Romeo seems to feel that learning English can result to not only an improvement in his social life, but also on better job opportunities.

Further, Sara seems to agree with this by commenting the following:

"Job growth". (Sara, Th.1, P2Q1)

Therefore, it seems that she is aware of the usage of the English language when getting better or more job opportunities. It can also be interpreted that Sara refers to getting higher job titles in the same occupation by using the word "growth".

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[1] Original excerpt in Spanish. Translation made by the author of the article.

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Lastly, Julio suggested that learning English can provide better business opportunities and also communication ones by mentioning the following:

"Greater business and communication opportunities". (Julio, Th.1, P3Q1)

Julio may suggest that knowing English positions yourself with other prepared people or companies. Also, he argues that "bigger" opportunities might come when you know the language.

The findings suggested that all the participants agreed on the usefulness of learning English in order to obtain better job opportunities. Having better job opportunities can be translated as being in a better economical position, which is beneficial for the participants. It can be interpreted that the participants share the idea that knowing English increases your chances of getting a better job in a multinational company within your home country or even for finding work abroad. It can be perceived that they think of English as a tool to take them one step further in business, entrepreneurship, and work in general.

4.2 *Theme 2: Personal growth*

It was noticeable that another motivational factor that was found to be present in all of the participants was personal growth. Romeo illustrates in the comment below how his daughters and personal beliefs impacted his desire to learn English language:

"Personal improvement, because my two daughters already have their English in C1...personally, it makes you feel different when you see one more overcome achievement, due to the advances in understanding the language. This motivates you to keep going and trust more in one's own capacity". (Romeo, Th.2, P1Q8)

With this comment the participant expresses the inner ambition of becoming a better version of himself. It can be perceived that for him achieving the goal of learning English is more than a language gain, because it may also represent a self-esteem subject. He mentions "trusting in ones' capacity" which can be understood as feeling confident and capable of doing more things. Further, this can be an intrinsic motivation factor in the learner's process, since he mentioned that this feeling motivates him to keep learning. Perhaps he perceives English as something worth investing time too because he has seen how this language had helped people that surround him, like his daughters.

Moreover, Sara said that she has become almost obsessed with learning English:

"...it has become a fixation and I know that if I achieve it I will feel a radical change in my learning process and in my life". (Sara, Th.2, P2Q8)

What stands out from this excerpt is that Sara perceives English as such a powerful life-changing tool. She not only explained that learning English can impact her life, but it may be interpreted that it could change her life completely. For this reason, it can be understood that she wants to keep learning and keep improving in order to see these beneficial changes in her everyday life.

Furthermore, Julio commented:

"I enjoy learning something new all the time and the challenge of achieving it is something that drives me". (Julio, Th.2, P3Q10).

This is a valuable finding because it can be seen that for Julio it is not only the result or the consequences of learning English what he enjoys, but the actual process too. The fact that he perceives this learning process as a "challenge" can be motivating for him because it might make him feel accomplished when overcoming it.

Participants consider learning English as a goal for self-development. Recent study's findings indicate that a better command of English is directly linked with a 18% in personal happiness, and 12% in overall positive life experiences (Koundouno, 2019). The evidence showed above regarding participants' insights about their motivation has established that learning English is associated with greater personal growth. They are not doing it because of external motivation. They are learning English to achieve a personal goal and earn the satisfaction that comes with this. This is an example of intrinsic motivation, which Shaikholeslami and Khayyer (2006: 814) define as "doing an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequences."

4.3 *Theme 3: Trips and social relations*

Another common motivational factor among the participants was the fact that they wanted to use English for communicative purposes. This way they will feel able to speak with other people and create social bonds in their country or even in foreign countries. Romeo informed that:

> "Learning English gives me a chance to relate to different people. Some of my own language with initiatives to improve or grow, and others of different nationalities that language allows me to interact with and thus expand my circle of relationships".
> (P1, Th.3, P1Q10)

It appears that Romeo thinks that people that share his mother tongue and have the ambition of learning English are people that are worth relating with. Saying that speaking the language gives you opportunities to relate with people that 'have improvement and growth initiatives' may be evidence that Romeo perceives English language learners as hard workers, ambitious, with thirst of success.

Agreeing with this, Sara added:

> "I traveled and it was a disaster with my basic level… I want to understand and be understood in other countries". (P2, Th.3, P2Q3)

She expressed that she wanted to be understood in other places, apart from English speaking countries, that are not Spanish-speaking countries. The English Language Centre (2013) discusses that "Being able to speak English is not just about being able to communicate with native English speakers, it is the most common second language in the world". It can be noticed that Sara is aware of this situation. She knows that if she speaks English she will be able to communicate in almost every country in the world. Supporting this idea, Mahu (2012: 374) mentions that "Even if you're not going to an English speaking country, it is very likely that locals will understand you if you speak in English". This can also be perceived as a social advantage for her because she will be able to communicate with many more people.

It can be observed that the participants have a similar idea, they feel motivated to be competent in the English language because they know they can use it to communicate all over the world. Being able to communicate in English can be very useful to widen your understanding of other cultures and avoid situations of misunderstanding (Mahu, 2012).

4.4 *Theme 4: Usefulness of learning English*

Romeo, Sara, and Julio share a perspective of agreement when it comes to the usefulness of learning English. The three of them seem to add to the English language a significant level of importance when it comes to the purposes and necessities that it can cover. This is illustrated in the comment Romeo made:

> "It is quite useful because today it puts you at a better job level, as communication through the English language is necessary at a global level". (Romeo, Th.4, P1Q5)

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According to this comment it can be inferred that Romeo's perception of the English language might have been impacted by previous personal experiences in his job or even in his personal life. Experiences such as traveling or being a professional for a long time might be the reason he started noticing the usefulness English has in the world. He mentions the phrase 'now a days' which can lead to the understanding that he didn't perceive English the same way some years ago. However, know he has noticed a change in people's lifestyle and thus an increase on the necessity of the English language.

Further, Sara agreed with Romeo by mentioning that:

"I find it totally useful, because it opens up other scenarios, horizons and life opportunities, not just work". (Sara, Th.4, P2Q5)

Therefore, it seems that Sara has similar ideas to the ones Romeo has. She perceives English as a key to open many doors, not just in the working environment but in life in general. For Sara English is useful because learning it brings with it "life opportunities", which can be translated as new friends, partners, jobs, experiences, and more.

Finally, Julio also expressed his agreement about the usefulness on learning English by adding that:

"English is very useful for both work and personal relationships". (Julio, Th.4, P3Q5)

It can be seen that Julio also mentions both areas personal and work. Thus, for Julio English language is also a social tool, and it helps establishing relations at work, but also in his private life.

To notice the usefulness of learning English was another motivational factor that then branched to the different purposes of learning English. Participants are conscious of their perspectives toward the "status" that learning English gives you, and they agree with the advantages it can provide. In the modern world, knowing English has become more and more important because all of the perks it brings with it. It can open up employment opportunities and being able to speak the language helps to connect with more people and thus learn about other cultures, places, and lifestyles ("Why is important to learn English?", 2020).

5. Conclusion

Adult learners usually hold a clear purpose for learning English, and this has a huge impact on their motivation factors. The origin of their motivation is usually based in the context they find themselves.

Although learning English can be challenging and time-consuming, it can be noticed that for the participants of the study, it is also valuable to learn it and create many opportunities for themselves. From communication, to personal and work opportunities, participants consciously feel motivated to learn English because of what it represents to their realities. Working towards a goal that contributes to their personal growth, social life, personal enjoyment, and even work opportunities has been shown to be motivating enough for the participants to spend their time studying the language. Students are very conscious of the advantages of learning English in the modern world, additionally they use this conscious to motivate themselves to achieve their language learning goal.

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Appendix 1:

Questionnaire

Sex:

Age:

Background (place of living, occupation):

Level of English:

Hours per week dedicated to study English:

1. What are the benefits of learning English?

2. At what age did you start learning English?

3. What motivated you to start learning English in this moment of your life?

4. In the past, where you also motivated to learn English? Why? or Why not?

5. Do you consider learning English is useful in life? Explain why.

6. Can you explain how you have learned English?

7. How would you describe your process of learning another language?

8. How do you think learning English changes your current life?

9. If any, what external factors motivate you to learn English? (job, promotion, salary increase, growth opportunity, etc)

10. Do you enjoy learning English? If you do, what do you enjoy about it?

C O A S