

CHALLENGES FACED BY ADULT ESL LEARNERS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

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Abstract: Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners face numerous challenges in academic environment, which can obstruct their academic development and long-term consolidation. These obstacles involve cross-linguistic barriers, narrow academic proficiency, cultural misconception, time hindrances due to family or work commitments, sentimental issues, and unfamiliarity with digital and institutional systems. The purpose of this research article is to explore the multifaceted obstacles adult ESL learners face and to propose pedagogical and institutional strategies that promote their academic success. Drawing from current literature and educational theory, the paper underscores the need for culturally sensitive teaching practices, flexible program design, and comprehensive learner support systems.

Keywords: Adult learners, ESL, academic challenges, second language acquisition, academic literacy, cultural barriers, educational support

1. Introduction

As global migration increases and international student mobility grows, academic institutions are welcoming a larger number of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Unlike younger students, adults often return to education after years or decades away from formal schooling, bringing with them distinct experiences, responsibilities, and learning needs. While adult learners are typically highly motivated, their academic journeys are frequently marked by substantial challenges. These difficulties can be compounded when English is not their first language, particularly in academic settings where expectations are high and support may be limited. The goal of this article is to analyse the core academic challenges faced by adult ESL learners and to identify solutions that educational institutions can implement to foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

2. Language Proficiency and Academic Literacy

One of the most significant challenges faced by adult ESL learners is the gap in academic English proficiency. Academic discourse requires mastery of specific vocabulary, complex sentence structures, critical thinking skills, and the ability to interpret and produce formal written texts. Many adult ESL learners struggle with:

Understanding dense academic readings

Writing essays or reports in correct academic format

Engaging in oral presentations or class discussions

Grasping subject-specific terminology

Academic literacy is a higher-level skill than conversational fluency, and adult learners often find themselves linguistically competent in daily life but underprepared for academic demands. Moreover, they may not have had the opportunity to develop writing and research skills in their first language, further compounding the challenge.

3. Cultural and Educational Adjustment

Culture deeply influences communication styles, classroom behaviour, and expectations about teaching and learning. Adult ESL learners often come from educational systems with different norms—for instance, where memorization is valued over critical discussion, or where students are expected to be passive recipients of knowledge. This can result in confusion and misalignment when learners enter academic environments that expect independent thinking, participation, and self-direction.

In addition, cultural misunderstandings may lead to a sense of isolation or even discrimination. Many adult ESL learners report difficulties building relationships with peers or instructors due to linguistic hesitancy or perceived cultural gaps. Such isolation can reduce motivation and participation, leading to lower performance and higher attrition rates.

4. Time Constraints and Life Responsibilities

Adult learners frequently juggle multiple responsibilities outside the classroom, including full-time employment, childcare, and financial obligations. These life demands significantly limit the time and energy they can devote to academic tasks such as studying, reading, and attending classes.

Furthermore, institutional systems are often not designed with adult learners in mind. Traditional schedules, rigid deadlines, and lack of flexible learning options (e.g., online or evening classes) can disadvantage adults who may already be struggling to keep up. Unlike younger students, adult ESL learners often lack a peer support network to help navigate the academic workload and balance external commitments.

5. Psychological and Emotional Barriers

The affective domain plays a significant role in second language acquisition. Adult ESL learners often report feelings of embarrassment, fear of failure, or low self-esteem—especially in situations where their language abilities are under scrutiny. This can lead to “language anxiety,” a well-documented phenomenon that negatively affects speaking, writing, and test performance.

Moreover, the pressure to succeed academically, support a family, and integrate into a new culture can lead to emotional stress, depression, or burnout. These psychological challenges are

rarely addressed directly by educational institutions, despite their strong influence on academic outcomes.

6. Technological and Institutional Literacy

Many adult ESL learners have limited familiarity with digital platforms commonly used in higher education, such as learning management systems (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard), online research databases, and academic software. This technological gap can hinder their ability to access assignments, participate in online discussions, or submit coursework correctly.

Additionally, adult learners may be unfamiliar with academic norms such as plagiarism policies, citation formats, and academic honesty expectations. Without proper orientation and training, they are at risk of unintentional academic misconduct or failure due to misunderstood expectations.

7. Pedagogical Strategies for Support

Educational institutions must take a proactive role in supporting adult ESL learners. Recommended strategies include:

Culturally responsive teaching: Instructors should recognize and respect learners' cultural backgrounds and adjust their teaching styles accordingly.

Scaffolded academic literacy: Courses should integrate language and content instruction to gradually build academic skills.

Flexible scheduling and blended learning: Evening, weekend, or online classes accommodate learners with time constraints.

Mentoring and peer support: Creating communities of support can reduce isolation and foster motivation.

Technology training: Offering workshops on how to use academic platforms helps bridge the digital divide.

Holistic support services: Counselling, writing centres, and tutoring should be tailored to adult learners' needs.

8. Conclusion

Adult ESL learners face a unique intersection of linguistic, cultural, personal, and institutional challenges in academic settings. These barriers often limit their full participation and success in educational programs. However, with informed, inclusive pedagogical practices and institutional commitment, these challenges can be mitigated. Providing adult ESL learners with the tools, flexibility, and support they need not only enhances their academic outcomes but also contributes to more equitable and diverse learning communities.

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