

NAVIGATING MOTIVATIONAL DIMENSIONS AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN ADULT ESL LEARNING

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Abstract. *This paper examines the primary motivational dimensions influencing adult ESL learners, drawing attention to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations, future self-guides, and fluctuating enthusiasm. Building on second language acquisition research, it identifies common barriers—situational, institutional, dispositional, and technological—that impede adult learners' progress. Strategies such as flexible scheduling, targeted support services, technology tutorials, and self-regulatory training are recommended to address these challenges. Ultimately, understanding both the motivational drivers and the barriers adults face can lead to more responsive and effective ESL program designs, promoting deeper engagement and higher rates of learner achievement.*

Keywords: *Adult Learners, ESL (English as a Second Language), Motivation, Extrinsic Factors, Future Self-Guides, Barriers in Education, Flexible Program Design, Self-Regulation.*

Adult ESL (English as a Second Language) learners bring a distinct set of needs, experiences, and aspirations to the language classroom. Their personal, professional, and societal goals often inspire high levels of motivation—yet these same adults frequently encounter situational, institutional, dispositional, and technological barriers. Drawing upon contemporary scholarship, including the works of Cranton on adult learning traits and models by Gardner and Dörnyei on language acquisition motivation, this paper explores how educators and program designers can address these obstacles. By tailoring instruction to adults' goals and applying flexible support mechanisms, stakeholders can create more inclusive, effective language programs that sustain learner motivation and success.

Cranton suggests¹⁹ that adult learners in any educational environment often demonstrate a desire for autonomy, a need to connect learning with real-life tasks, and a readiness to engage in reflective thinking. These aspects are amplified in ESL contexts, where language proficiency becomes a tool for social integration, career advancement, or

¹⁹ **Cranton P.** *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. – 2006. – P. 45

academic success. As such, adult learners typically have a set of characteristics that shape their approach to language study.

Motivation is widely cited as a driving force behind second language acquisition. Various theoretical models, including Gardner's²⁰ Socio-Educational Model and Dörnyei's²¹ L2 Motivational Self System, highlight the interplay between individual aspiration, sociocultural context, and the learner's vision of themselves as a competent language user. Adult ESL learners often exhibit instrumental motivation, where language study is linked to pragmatic goals such as employment, legal status, or academic degrees²². At the same time, integrative or assimilative motivations may also be present, with adults seeking cultural understanding, acceptance in a new community, or deeper social connections.

The table 1 below summarizes key motivational aspects affecting adult ESL learners, derived from contemporary research on second language acquisition. Each row details a specific dimension of motivation—whether it be intrinsic versus extrinsic, identity-based “future self-guides,” or fluctuating enthusiasm—and offers illustrative points or instructional insights.

Table 1. Key Motivational Dimensions in Adult ESL Learning

Motivational Dimension	Description	Examples
Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation	Adult learners who enjoy language study for personal or intellectual satisfaction. They might read English for pleasure or explore advanced structures due to curiosity ²³ . Those driven by external factors such as job requirements, immigration rules, or standardized test pressures (IELTS, TOEFL).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An adult studying English purely for enjoyment of literature (intrinsic). - Learners who must achieve a certain score on an exam to secure a job or residency permit (extrinsic). - ESL tasks that incorporate personal interests (hobbies, creative writing) can sustain motivation more effectively.

²⁰ **Gardner R. C.** *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitude and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold. – 1985. – P. 67

²¹ **Dörnyei Z.** “The L2 Motivational Self System.” In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. – 2009. – P. 9–42

²² **Ellis R.** *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. – 2015. – P. 12

²³ **Deci E. L., & Ryan R. M.** *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press. – 2002. – P. 90

Future Self-Guides	<p>According to Dörnyei²⁴, many adults visualize themselves as successful L2 speakers (“future self-guides”). This identity-based motivation is powerful yet vulnerable to negative feedback or learning setbacks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An adult aiming to conduct professional conferences in English (strong future self-image). - Encounters with criticism or accent-shaming may erode self-confidence, undermining motivation. - Positive reinforcement and achievable short-term goals can buffer against discouragement.
Motivational Fluctuations	<p>Adult learners often experience changes in motivation levels due to life events (relocation, family changes, health issues) or external demands (job deadlines). Motivation may spike near certain milestones, then dip under stress²⁵.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners showing high enthusiasm before a job interview but losing momentum afterward. - Intervals of demotivation when personal/family obligations increase. - Flexible course designs or targeted check-ins can help learners navigate these ebbs and flows in motivation.
Instructional Implications	<p>Recognizing these motivational factors allows ESL educators to tailor lessons to adults’ professional, social, or personal contexts. Materials relevant to workplace tasks, civic engagement, or academic endeavors can sustain deeper motivation²⁶. Also, explicit self-regulation training²⁷ assists learners in goal-setting and time management, further supporting long-term motivation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incorporating real-world applications and context-specific tasks (e.g., resume writing, professional emailing). - Providing guidance on self-regulation (time management, reflective practice). - Offering varied activities to accommodate changes in motivational levels.

²⁴ Dörnyei Z. Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. – 2001. – P. 89

Cross K. P. Adults as Learners. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. – 1981. – P. 34

²⁵ Lamb M. “The Motivational Dimension of Language Teaching.” *Language Teaching*, 50(3). – 2017. – P. 301–346

²⁶ Griffiths C. “Lessons from Good Language Learners.” In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from Good Language Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. – 2008. – P. 83–98

²⁷ Zimmerman B. J. “Attaining Self-Regulation: A Social Cognitive Perspective.” In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of Self-Regulation*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press. – 2000. – P. 13–39

While adults can bring strong motivation, they are equally susceptible to various barriers that impede consistent or successful language study. Cross categorizes²⁸ barriers into situational, institutional, and dispositional factors. The following table outlines several common barriers that adult ESL learners face, adapted from various studies in adult learning and second language acquisition. By categorizing these obstacles into situational, institutional, dispositional, and technological, educators and program designers can better identify and address the specific challenges adult learners encounter.

Understanding these four main categories of barriers—situational, institutional, dispositional, and technological—can guide educators, policymakers, and adult learning specialists in creating more effective and supportive ESL programs. By recognizing the unique challenges adult learners face, stakeholders can implement flexible scheduling, tailored support services, confidence-building strategies, and user-friendly digital tools. Ultimately, addressing these barriers systematically not only enhances learner engagement and success but also contributes to the overall quality and inclusivity of adult language education.

Addressing these barriers requires flexible program design, sensitivity to adult learners' schedules, and robust support mechanisms. For instance, evening or weekend classes, short modules focusing on specific skill sets, child care services, or scholarship opportunities can mitigate situational and institutional hurdles²⁹. Additional strategies might include integrating study skills workshops, technology tutorials, and counseling resources that help learners navigate personal and academic challenges.

Adult ESL learners possess strong motivational forces, shaped by pragmatic objectives and a desire for integration, yet their progress may stall without proper support. By recognizing the complexity of adult motivation—ranging from intrinsic enjoyment to high-stakes extrinsic incentives—educators can adopt strategies that harness learner enthusiasm. At the same time, systematically addressing situational, institutional, dispositional, and technological barriers is crucial. Providing flexible programs, personalized resources, and resilience-building measures empowers learners to persevere despite life's demands. Ultimately, the interplay between motivation and obstacle mitigation underscores the importance of a holistic, learner-centered approach in adult ESL education.

²⁸ Cross K. P. **Adults as Learners**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. – 1981. – P. 56

²⁹ Butler M., & Costentino M. "Raising Adult Literacy Rates: The Role of Technology." *Adult Learning Quarterly*, 27(2). – 2006. – P. 32–45

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