

NON-FORMAL/INFORMAL ESL ACQUISITION BY DIFFERENT AGE  
CATEGORIES OF UKRAINIAN ADULT LEARNERS

ВИВЧЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ ДОРОСЛИМИ  
УЧНЯМИ РІЗНИХ ВІКОВИХ КАТЕГОРІЙ У  
НЕФОРМАЛЬНОМУ/ІНФОРМАЛЬНОМУ НАВЧАЛЬНОМУ СЕРЕДОВИЩІ

У статті представлено результати дослідження шляхів набуття іншомовної компетентності дорослими двох вікових категорій (студентів вишу та вітчизняних науковців); виявлено найбільш типові способи вивчення англійської мови у неформальному та інформальному навчальному середовищі; здійснено їх порівняльний аналіз; схарактеризовано їх схожі та відмінні риси.

Ключові слова: неформальне/інформальне навчальне середовище, набуття іншомовної компетентності, шляхи, юні дорослі, старші дорослі, порівняння.

The importance of a foreign language competence nowadays is undeniable for everyone. New technologies and globalization processes have made political, economic, social, cultural, educational connections between countries very tight. People need to communicate and the English language is the franca lingua that is used by the majority of people throughout the world in their international activities. Thus, the question of English as a second (foreign) language (hereinafter - ESL) acquisition is becoming more acute. Educators are thinking over the ways of improving ESL teaching and learning methods for various learner's categories from younger children to older people. They are willing to make use of innovative techniques, to increase the learners' motivation and develop their self-learning competence in different learning settings (formal, non-formal and informal). The results of their efforts are illustrated in a wide range of publications which shows that the problem of ESL acquisition is really cutting of edge, especially for adults.

A great deal of corresponding literature has been reviewed to find out the most significant aspects of ESL learning by adults which are investigated by scholars, shared by teachers and trainers. The majority of the publications are devoted to practical aspects of teaching adults English as a second or foreign language. The literature on the question can be summarized into 3 groups:

- those publications that touch methodological questions,
- the articles that illustrate various psychological approaches,
- the papers that present the linguistic aspects of ESL learning.

Mostly, all of them concern ESL learning by adults in formal education. For example, Yassin, S.Z. and Almegren, A. investigate the perceptions and attitudes of adult learners towards reading English materials via Internet in their ESL classroom learning. They come to the conclusion that “multimedia applications can exert powerful motivation and provide bored students with exciting new ways to learn” [15, c.6287].

Viberg, O. and Gronlund, A. examine the current state of using mobile technology by younger adults who are students of higher educational institutions and their attitude towards it. The study is done from socio-cultural perspective showing that ESL learning to be the most important culture-shaping factor [14, c.170].

The factors which are relevant to the prediction of success on English or foreign language learning for adults and for children are presented in the article “A study on the effect of music on English education” [1, c. 254].

Only few publications touch the peculiarities of ESL learning by adults in non-formal or informal educational settings. In this context, the results of the pilot study by Song, Y.J. and Fox, R. are of great interest. The researchers explored the working adult learners’ experience of mobile technology in ESL vocabulary learning in their workplace [13, c.155].

Rather related to the topic of our study is the paper on the development of scientific communication skills by a group of researchers Cameron, C., Collie C.L., Baldwin, C.D. et al. They investigated how mentored junior researchers learn scientific communication skills and the mentor’s role in this process [3, c. 1500]. It is

about the adults' learning process in non-formal educational environment, but it does not reveal the peculiarities of ESL learning. Though the processes of acquiring scientific communication skills can be much alike the acquisition of foreign language skills. Yet, studies of non-formal/informal ESL learning by different groups of adults have not been under consideration.

In view of this, the **goal of this publication** is to investigate the ways of non-formal/informal ESL learning by adults. It is also aimed at the comparison between 2 groups of adults: younger and senior, students at tertiary level and scholars, in the following questions: frequency of non-formal/informal learning, correlation between education level and ESL experience, factors of importance and personal benefits from ESL learning. Additionally, we will analyze the opinions and suggestions made by these categories of adults of how to improve ESL learning.

To achieve the established objectives, a questionnaire was designed. It included 15 questions of 3 types – close-ended, open-ended and mixed. The first ones (5 of them) implied the answers “yes/no” or choosing one definite answer from the list of the offered. There was only 1 open-ended question as for the respondent's opinion how to improve the ways of learning English as a second language. The rest 9 questions were of mixed type. They offered the respondents to choose as many answers as they suited them, in their opinion. In addition, these questions asked the respondents to specify the details of their answers.

Two age groups of adults were chosen for this research. The amount of participants was supposed to be 50. One group comprised of 26 young adults aged from 18 to 20 years old. All of them are students of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University of the first year of study.

The second group involved 24 adults – scholars from the scientific library and different academic institutions of National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. The scholars were the participants of the experiment at Institute of Pedagogical and Adult Education of National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. On the initiative made by Professor Larysa Lukianova, the Director of the mentioned academic institution, there was organized 3 month's English language

courses for Ukrainian scholars. One of this publication authors (Svitlana Babushko) worked as a peer teacher at these courses. More information about this initiative is represented in the article published in Volume 44/2016 of *The New Educational Review* [2, c. 230-239].

All in all, 49 questionnaires were handed out (1 expected participant failed to come on the day of the survey). Thus, 25 university students and 24 Ukrainian scholars took part in the investigation.

Such diverse adult categories were chosen to check if there are any similarities and differences in acquiring foreign language competence in non-formal setting between different age and civil status groups of adults.

When conducting any educational research various methods and methodologies are drawn on [4, c. 143; 10], but the most commonly used are qualitative and quantitative. Their importance cannot be overestimated as the first one gives the best answers and sheds light on a particular problem which is often qualitative in nature [9]. And the quantitative method gives a researcher an opportunity “to familiarize with the problem or concept to be studied, and perhaps generate hypotheses to be tested” [5, c. 597].

To collect the proper data for the research and to validate its results, it is natural to use these two methods in complex, without separating them because “it is ... what anyone would do who wanted to answer any real set of research questions (Gorard 2012, 12). We also support this idea as “the demarcation line” between the two types of methods is difficult to be drawn and it is “a meaningless tradition of dividing data into the two Q word silos” [6].

Thus, to achieve the established goals of our research, we used the qualitative and quantitative methods in their tough combination. This allowed us to realize their advantages, making the research “time consuming and resource intensive” [12, c. 17].

Thanks to the qualitative method, the investigation was designed; the data was organized, accounted for the respondents’ characteristics (age, gender, education, experience of studying English, etc.). At the same time, the quantitative method was used in giving the questionnaire to the respondents and in analyzing the received

data. Figures, numerals, statistics helped to measure and standardize the investigated phenomenon, to validate the results and to make them reliable.

Out of 49 questionnaires given to the participants, there are 45 females and only 4 male respondents. The ratio of male to female is approximately 1 to 11. The reason for this difference in gender is the profession – pedagogy. University students are studying to become future secondary school teachers and scholars are engaged in educational sphere as well. This ratio displays great drawbacks in Ukrainian educational system which lacks male teachers and male scholars in the educational field. The reason for this is a low motivation of male teachers to teach due to the low social status of a teacher, low salaries, the absence of good promotion prospects and others.

The second question concerns the age of the respondents with the aim to trace some relationships between the age and the objectives of acquiring ESL competence. There are three age groups of respondents, the main one comprising of 25 people is university students aged 18-25, while the scholars' age falls within 2 subgroups: between 36-45 and 46-55 years old. No respondents of 26-35 years old and older than 56 took part in the survey.

Another question is to see what level of education the respondents have in order to understand the significance of foreign language competence for the participants and if the education level influences the motivation factors of ESL acquisition. In general, among the university group 23 students have finished school, 2 have already got their Bachelor' Degree and it's their second higher education. Among the ESL course group 20 adult learners are PhDs and 4 respondents have their Master's Degree.

The question how long the respondents have been learning English was given to compare the duration of ESL learning experience in different adult age groups. It appeared that both adult categories have studied ESL for a long period. Nobody in both groups has been learning English for less than 1 year. The period of 2-5 years was devoted to learning English by 2 university students while none of senior respondents have learnt ESL for such a short time. The fact with the younger adults

may seem strange if to consider the fact that a foreign language learning is comprehensive in Ukrainian schools from the first form according to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine Decree and the typical school curricula [8].

It can be supposed that these 2 respondents learnt another foreign language at school and started learning English as a second foreign language only at the University. 11 students (22,5%) versus 8 scholars (16,4%) have been learning English within 5-10 years' period. The question arises in relation to scholars who are supposed to learn a foreign language at secondary school (at least 10 years), at university (from 4 to 5 years). But in fact, they pointed out the period not exceeding 10 years. The reason can be the same. They studied another foreign language either at university or at school. 10 students and 16 scholars have been learning English for more than 10 years which constitute 20,4% and 32,7% correspondingly.

Seemingly, the longer period of learning, the better results are like the situation is with children. The successful foreign language learning by children depends on their spending a long time in learning that language [11, c.161].

However, it is not the case with adults. Adults often fail to learn a foreign language because they cannot invest the proper time in learning the language [11, c.162]. . Ukrainian scholars in our study invested quite a lot of time in ESL learning (more than 10 years) but it does not mean they have developed the necessary ESL competences. The length of studying seems not to be an indicator of effectiveness. The scholars who took part in the survey are in extreme need of ESL knowledge at B2 level which has not been achieved by them by this time. These results show another drawback of Ukrainian educational system – low effectiveness of any foreign language teaching.

One more question offers the respondents to choose out of the list all the ways they have used to learn English outside the formal educational settings. 4 options are listed: in language courses, with a private teacher, self-study with the printed materials and self-study through the Internet. Table 1 contains the figures of popularity of the mentioned ways in both groups.

The figures in the table show that 8 university students use language courses to develop ESL competence while the number of scholars who prefer this way is three times higher and makes 100%. The reason lies in the ability and desire to work in team. At the same time, all scholars do not choose the private teacher's educational services. The explanation to this can be found in M. Knowles' theory of peculiarities of adult's learning. One of his statements says that adults are independent and self-oriented who are willing to manage their own learning [7 c. 11-12].. It means that mature adults don't want to be taught individually, to become dependent on the teacher as if returning back to school years.

**Table 1. Non-Formal Ways of ESL learning.**

Categories of adults	Language Courses	Private Teacher	Self-Study	
			Printed Materials	Internet Resources
Younger adults (university students)	8	20	9	25
Adults (scholars)	24	-	8	24

The fact that 20 people from the university group have used or are using the services of private teachers proves that they are not far away from schoolchildren's age and are still accustomed to being taught.

Interestingly, both categories mention self-study as a reliable non-formal method of foreign language acquisition. Almost equal number of respondents use various printed materials to master their ESL skills. But the most striking is that 100% of respondents in both groups make use of the on-line resources to achieve their goals. This demonstrates how deeply the Internet has rooted itself in the learning process in spite of the age differences. Senior adults, though born in the previous century, refer to the same technological tools as younger adults who were born in digital times.

The question how often the respondents are engaged in the learning activities outside the formal environment implied 5 answers: once a week, twice, thrice, four times a week and almost every day. Younger adults are engaged in ESL learning

mostly three or four times a week, the latter being the peak with 14 students. 2 respondents from this group tend to learn almost every day. Scholars chose the answer “two times a week”. Not a single mature adult devotes him/herself to learning the foreign language oftener than twice a week. In general, the patterns of the ESL learning is because scholars learn from 1 to 2 times a week while university students do that twice oftener.

The explanation to this phenomenon is rather simple. Students, whose main occupation is studying, find the possibility to improve their ESL skills more easily than the scholars who are busy with their job, scientific activity, family, household chores.

As 100% of respondents use Internet in their non-formal ESL learning, it was interesting to find out how often and which Internet resources were used. So, one more question connected with the frequency of learning was offered. Such options were offered: very often, sometimes, do not use and the request to specify what resources were applied. The received data show that 20 students out of 25 cannot learn without frequent use of Internet resources. And only 5 students do it from time to time. As for the second group, 24 older adults (100%) showed that they applied to Internet from time to time.

These results do not contradict the above described picture of general frequency of ESL learning. The general trend is that younger respondents are more active than their older ones in both ESL learning and in frequent use of Internet resources.

The open question about what Internet resources are used was not answered by any scholar while 20 students replied the following: on-line dictionaries, e-reference books in grammar, cartoons and films in English, you-tube, on-line translators, different English-speaking sites. Surprisingly, not a single respondent mentioned any English speaking on-line courses. It may be concluded that these learning tools and resources have not become popular in Ukraine yet.

The answers about the level of significance of ESL learning (very important, important, didn't think about it, not very important, not important) show that the majority of students (23) and scholars, (20) consider it very important which is 47%



and 41% accordingly. The rest of respondents (2 students – 4% and 4 scholars – 8%) believe that learning English is important for them. Interestingly, that not a single respondent in both groups has chosen other options. It may prove that ESL learning is being recognized now as one of the adult literacy skills which are necessary for life and work.

The related question was to assess the listed options (ESL learning develops positive attitude towards learning, it evolves self-study skills, it motivates a person, it develops communication skills, it encourages the development of team work skills, it develops IT skills and it raises the level of confidence and self-esteem) on the scale from the most to the less important (from 5 to 1). Table 1 below displays the received data.

**Table 1. Importance of ESL Learning**

Learning English develops...	Younger adults					Senior adults				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
a positive attitude to learning	5	12	7	1	0	12	8	4	0	0
self-study skills	9	13	2	1	0	12	4	8	0	0
motivation	18	4	3	0	0	16	4	4	0	0
communication skills	18	5	2	0	0	20	4	0	0	0
team work skills	7	11	5	2	0	16	8	0	0	0
IT skills	6	10	3	3	3	12	8	4	0	0
self-esteem and raises the level of confidence	10	9	3	3	0	12	12	0	0	0

As shown in the Table, younger respondents think that the most important result in learning English is the motivation and communication skills which are developed during the non-formal learning process. At the same time, scholars consider only one result which greatly dominates over others (the development of communication skills) the most important result. The second most important for the first group is the

development of self-study skills (13 younger adults). On the contrary, scholars chose 2 points as the second important – motivation and team work skills. Both groups of respondents with equal number of participants (12 in each group) put the development of positive attitude to learning in the third place. But the whole picture seems rather intriguing. When assessing the results of non-formal learning, senior adults chose only within 5 to 3 point range while younger respondents were more detailed. The reason for this may be explained by the experience older respondents have had in their life. They appreciate any learning and are sure of its fruitfulness to the maximum. The common thing for both groups is that no one thinks of ESL learning as useless. All participants did not assess the results with 1 point as the least important.

Taking the above-mentioned study results into consideration, the following conclusion has been made. Non-formal ways of ESL learning are widely used by adult learners (younger and senior) irrespective of their age. Both groups give the priority to the use of Internet resources in developing their ESL competences while printed materials may equally attract learners. Similarities are also found in the length of ESL learning, its effectiveness and in defining important factors of the ESL learning process. In spite of their age, the adults in Ukraine learn English for more than 10 years at school, at college or university. At the same time, they are not satisfied with their level of ESL competences and are in great need of improving their foreign language skills. In opinion of both groups of learners, the most significant results of ESL learning are, undoubtedly, the development of motivation and communication skills.

The differentiating factors are the use of services of an ESL private teacher, the frequency of the language learning, personal benefits that the learners can receive from ESL learning.

Thus, though ESL acquisition in non-formal/informal education at first sight may seem similar and coherent for any categories of learners, still there are differences even inside one group of adults. Evidently, this is due to the difference in age and the amount of learning and life experience.

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The problem of acquisition of English as a second language is very challenging for every educated person nowadays, especially in developing countries, Ukraine being one of them. Adults use different ways to get ESL competence; most of them are in non-formal and informal education. The goal of the study was to investigate

what ways of non-formal/informal ESL learning are used by adults in Ukraine. Two age groups of adults were chosen to trace the similarities and differences. Younger adults were students at tertiary level and senior adults were scholars at academician institutions. A specially designed questionnaire was given to 50 respondents to find out their background; to identify the most typical ways of learning English; to compare them in the frequency of learning, in importance, personal benefits; to analyze the offered suggestions how to improve the efficiency of ESL learning. The obtained results showed that non-formal ways of ESL learning are popular and widely used by both group of respondents. However, there are more differences than similarities in their non-formal/informal ways of ESL acquisition which can be explained by different age and experience.

Key words: non-formal/informal education, ESL acquisition, ways, younger adults, senior adults, Ukraine, comparison.