



# Reasons for Unsuccessful English Learning in Algeria

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## Abstract

**T**he present paper describes the factors that make good or bad language learners. As far as Algerian English learners are concerned, I will deal with the negative influences on these learners which resulted from different factors such as the critical age at which English learning takes place in Algeria. The paper will be concluded with some suggestions that may be useful for successful English learning. My analysis and study are not based on controlled investigation but rather on my personal experience.

## Introduction

**L**anguage acquisition and language learning are among the topics that gave birth to a heated debate and many contrasting viewpoints amongst linguists. Deep and serious investigations conducted by many scholars claim that there are different factors which decide the success or failure of language learners. Age, for instance, according to some researchers, is a factor which has much to do with learning; they argue that successful language acquisition and language learning can be attained only if they take place at an early age. On the other hand, others see that anxiety, and lack of motivation and self confidence, etc. prevent individuals from learning language. Language learning is also affected by other factors such as society and pedagogy. The former refers to the environment in which language learner lives; it includes parents, peers, teachers, etc. The latter deals with the quality of teaching.

## 1- Age

Age which is considered to be of a great importance in language acquisition and language learning, engendered a great deal of controversy amongst researchers. Some findings demonstrate that both language acquisition and language learning are successful whether the learner is young or old. Others, namely short-term studies, ranging from a few minutes to a few months (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p 155), prefer old learners. While long-term studies claim the superiority of the young ones. The conclusion that these studies came to is that old learners are faster and young learners are better. This supports Krashen's (1987, p.43) claim: **"...It is not simply the case that "younger is better"; children are superior to adults only in the long run"**. To study the naturalistic acquisition of Deuch by 96 English speaking individuals living in Holland, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) divided the learners into three groups, children (ranged in age from 8 to 10), adolescents (12 to 15) and adults, to measure each group's performance on pronunciation, morphology, imitation and translation task, after three, six and nine to ten months. The result was that the adolescents and adults outperformed the children after three and six months, but the children caught up on most tasks by the time on the third testing (see Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, pp 155-56). The fact of being faster can be explained by Steinberg's (1993, p 215) claim: **"...adult learners are more successful than younger learners because they know how to be students and have sufficient maturity to meet the rigours of a formal learning environment, where concentration, attention and even the ability to sit still for a long time, all play a role in learning."**, and that of Krashen: **"...Thus despite the simpler input directed at the younger children, it is likely that older acquirers actually get more comprehended input, and this may be the key factor in their faster initial progress."** (1987, p. 44)

Long-term studies pointed out the success of young children over older children, and old children over adults. The findings demonstrated that children acquire native pronunciation in a second language easily because they possess the flexibility in motor skills that adults do not have. According to Steinberg (1993, p. 209), Oyama (1976) and Tahta et al, (1981) and Scovel (1988) argued that younger children in immigrant families are found to acquire perfect or near to perfect accent, while old people could only master other aspects of the language like its syntax and vocabulary. Psycholinguist Thomas Scovel (1988)

claimed: **"The critical period of accentless speech simply means that adults will never learn to pass themselves off as native speakers phonologically..."** (Quoted in Steinberg 1993, p 216). In this regard, researchers assume that age-related constraints begin to set as early as six for segmental phonology, and soon after for suprasegmental phonology. In addition, children are found to be superior to adults in that when learning two simultaneously they experience no first language interference.

Some neurologists and psycholinguists relate the decline in the ability to learn a language with the two crucial phenomena that take place at the level of the brain: firstly, according to (Scovel 1981), the loss of flexibility of neurophysiologic programming of neuromuscular coordination mechanism that results the inability to control the articulators necessary in second language pronunciation (see Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 164). Secondly, the decrease in the number of the brain cells in the cortex which affects individual's memory. It had been claimed that at the age of fifty there is a decrease of about 20 percent in the number of the brain cells, then it (the decrease) reaches 40 percent at the age of seventy (see Steinberg 1993, p. 207). Some investigators believe that successful acquisition of language typically happens by 4, is guaranteed for the children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly before puberty. But these findings do not deny that are individual differences which depend on quality of teaching, attitudes, talent, effort and amount of exposure.

In Algeria, English starts to be learned at about 13 of age, which is regarded by many scholars to be the critical age for language learning. The delay in learning English, and the little exposure to this language make learners much influenced by their first language or by French. This influence is revealed at different levels: phonology, grammar, word-for-word translation, etc. At the phonological level, learners find difficulty in articulating some sounds especially in spontaneous speech. The English short vowel / ə/, for instance, is most of the time replaced by the great majority of the students either by the French open vowel /a/ in words like approximant, syllable, acquisition, theatre, addition, according, etc. or by the close back vowel /o/ as in theory, information, method, phonology, etc. These examples involve believing that this kind of influence concerns mainly English words which have the same form and similar meaning to those of French. The difficulty can also be easily noticed in the articulation of the dark /ɔ/ and

The typical introvert, on the other hand, is quiet, retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people; he is reserved and distant, except with intimate friends. He tends to plan ahead...and distrusts the impulse of the moment. He does not like excitement, takes matters of everyday life with proper seriousness, and likes a well ordered mode of life..."

(Quoted in Johnson 2001, p. 140).

Thirdly, motivation, which attracted attention of many researchers and teachers, is regarded to be one of the most important affective factors. It was defined primarily in terms 'motivational intensity'. Lambert and Gardner (1959), being the first to deal with motivation, distinguished between integrative and instrumental motivation. While the former refers to the learner's wishes to belong to the target language culture, the latter has to do with the learner's wish to learn the target language for utilitarian purposes, for example, to get a job. Spolsky (1969), in a study of newly arrived foreign students at US universities, noted that the students' great desire to be like speakers of English than like speakers of their own language was significantly correlated with the students' English proficiency (Larsen- Freeman and Long 1991, p. 173). Contrary to these findings, recent studies stated that, in some learners, motivation resulted from success in learning.

### 3- Social factor

It is strongly believed that motivation is much affected by attitudes towards the target language and its speakers. Most of the studies came to conclusion that second language success depended on the learner's attitudes. In other words, positive attitudes make the learner attain success and the opposite is true. Many surveys of the research demonstrated that there were different sources being able to affect language learning. In this respect, Spolsky (1969 p. 237) claimed:

**" In a typical language learning situation, there are a number of people whose attitudes to each other can be significant: the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents, and the speaker of the language. Each relationship might be well**

**shown to be a factor controlling the learner's motivation to acquire the language."**

(Quoted in Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 178).

Other research saw the absence of the correlation between attitudes and language learning. That is, negative or positive attitudes do not necessarily mean failure or success in language learning. In this regard, Oller, Beca and Vigil (1977) stated that women, living in New Mexico, who had positive attitudes towards Americans performed poor English. (see Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 176).

Again, in Algeria, one can easily notice that students are much influenced by different sources of attitudes. Parents, for instance, are felt to be a crucial source of positive or negative attitudes. Their positive attitudes towards the target language encourage and motivate their children, but their negative attitudes do not. In some areas, parents and grandparents relate foreign languages to historical events. English and mainly French are still considered by some people to be the languages of enemy. This can be understood through some individual's reaction and answer, **"It is not my language"** when one asks them why they do not succeed in learning French or English. Students are not influenced only by their parents but also by their teachers. Most of them experience positive attitudes towards teachers who, for instance, insert the first language, from time to time, in their teaching, believing that these teachers are closer to them. This fact makes the students feel at ease and more confident with these teachers than with those who use only the target language. In addition to positive attitudes, students sometimes show negative attitudes towards part time graduate teachers (vacataires licenciés), thinking that the latter are less competent than the post graduate ones. These negative attitudes were so acute in our university that many students went to other universities or abandoned definitely their language learning.

### 4- Pedagogical factor

Another factor that is well worth mentioning here is pedagogy which is thought to have a powerful effect on language learning. While age and socio-psychological aspects affect only the learners' ability, pedagogical principles seem to have impacts on both teacher's

the post alveolar approximant /r/ which are replaced by their Arabic counterparts in words like 'little' and 'rub'. Researchers believe that the first language influence is more frequent in complex word order and word-for-word translation of phrases. Duskova (1969), for instance, found that interference from the other tongue was plainly obvious in errors of word order and sentence construction when she studied written errors in the compositions of Czech post graduate students (see Krashen 1981, p. 65). This claim holds true for Algerian English learners who have a tendency to experience interference from their first language. The error frequently made by many students is the confusion between the grammatical structure of English and that of the Arabic language. This kind of interference occurs in the use of object pronouns like 'it' and 'them' as repetition of the subject of the same sentence as in

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As for word-for-word translation, again, some English learners translate literally from their mother tongue into English. A good example that can be cited here is the Algerian Arabic sentence |نخرج من الزمان| /nəxɾɪ ʒ mə zmaan/ Which had been literally translated |I will go out of the time|, meaning 'I will become rich'. In this sentence, the Algerian Arabic word 'zmaan' means 'poverty' or 'misery'.

## 2- Psychological factors

Besides age, researchers, namely psychologists and applied linguists, see that psychological side plays a crucial role in language acquisition and learning. Many recent findings, like that of Krashen, in his filter hypothesis, argue that psychological factors, made of affective variables, include: firstly, anxiety that is considered as a natural phenomenon that all human beings experience, and whose degree differs from an individual to another. Two kinds of anxiety can be distinguished: trait anxiety that is an inbuilt tendency to feel anxious, and situational anxiety that learners experience in particular contexts (Ellis 2004, p.539). Baily (1983) found that classroom learners often experienced anxiety, especially when they feel themselves to be in competition with other learners ( Ellis 2004, p. 539). Some scholars went

further by distinguishing two types of classroom anxiety: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. According to Scovel (1978) **“facilitating anxiety motivates the learners to ‘fight’ the new learning task; it gears the learners emotionally for approval behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to ‘flee’ the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour.”** (Quoted in Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 187). In the same vein, Speilman and Radnofsky (2001) believe that one cannot examine anxiety only in terms of quantity since it has a qualitative dimension. They propose that anxiety can be 'euphoric/ non- euphoric' (i.e., an event can be viewed as stressful but still viewed as positive or at least as not possessing negative characteristics) or 'dysphoric/ non-dysphoric (i.e., an event can be stressful can negatively or as lacking in positive attitudes.) (See Ellis 2004, p. 540). Secondly, personality, being a factor that explains differences in second language learning, includes, according to researchers, risk taking, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, inhibition and, finally, extroversion that has received the greatest attention as an aspect of personality. Extroversion gave birth to a heated debate among scholars. Findings like those of Naiman et al (1978), Suter (1976) and Busch (1982) state that there is no significant relation between extroversion/introversion measure and performance on listening comprehension, pronunciation, reading and grammar since the introverts tended to have higher scores in these tasks. Others, on the other hand, claim that extroverts showed to be better in oral communicative speech, and have lower levels of anxiety thanks to their good physiological equipment to resist stress. (see Ellis 2004, pp. 541-42). The success of extroverts in oral communicative speech, and the one of introverts in listening comprehension, reading, pronunciation, and grammar can be explained by the characteristics of both types of individuals. In his book about individual differences, Skehan (1989) related extroversion/introversion and foreign learning with Esenck's (1965) descriptions of extroverts and introverts personalities:

**“The typical extrovert is sociable, likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to, and does not like studying by himself. He craves excitement, takes chances, often sticks his neck out, acts on the spur of the moment, and is generally an impulsive individual. He... always has a ready answer, and generally likes change...”**

and learner's ability. For example, deficiency at this level influences negatively by taking the teachers' and learners' motivation away. The Pedagogical deficiencies that can be cited are as follows:

- 1- Age at which English learning takes place, which is considered to be the critical age by many scholars.
- 2- Large number of learners in class and hours imposed to the teachers, which make the latter tired and less attentive.
- 3- Small number of hours devoted to English learning.
- 4- Unreliable orientation that makes many students study English against their will.
- 5- Lack of English post graduate teachers.
- 6- Absence of coordination among English teachers.
- 7- Absence of teacher training in some universities.
- 8- Lack of audiovisual materials, book, computers, etc.
- 9- Objectives of programs that do not correspond to the learners' need.
- 10- Number of examinations that makes the learners learn for the exam.

## Conclusion

From what has just been mentioned, one can safely conclude that successful English learning happens if it takes place at an early age since this period is strongly believed to be beneficial at many levels. Firstly, from neurological viewpoint, children have an intact memory and the ability to control their motor skill of pronunciation. Secondly, from sociological viewpoint, attitudes are not thoroughly developed in young learners. In this regard, Macnamara (1973) claimed:

**“A child suddenly transported from Toronto to Berlin will learn German no matter what he thinks of Germans.”**

**(Quoted in Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 176).**

Successful learning also depends on the quality of teaching and the amount of exposure to the target language. That is, learners must be much

more exposed to the target language in classroom and even outside the classroom. In this respect, recent empirical and theoretical work on language acquisition (e.g., d'Anglejan 1978, Krashen 1981a, Stern 1981, Swain 1981) suggests that gains in second language proficiency are best achieved in situations where the second language is used as a vehicle for communication about other subjects rather than itself being the object of study (Wesche and Ready 1985, p. 90). Accordingly, one can say that **“good language learners”** (Krashen 1987, p. 45) practice the target language, and the more they communicate in this language, the higher level of proficiency they reach. In addition to the amount of exposure, the target language must be taught by language specialists with developed materials such as computers whose use is, according to educators, a necessary factor which motivates learners. Pennington (1996) assumes that learners gain motivation through computer use because they are less threatened and thus take more risks and are more spontaneous (Gruba 2004, p. 631).

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