

CHALLENGES AND DETERMINANTS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG CHINESE-SPEAKING ADULT IMMIGRANTS IN NIGERIA

Okwakwom-Amadi, Fortune

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examines the challenges and determinants of second language acquisition (SLA), with a focus on English learning among Chinese-speaking adult immigrants. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 30 participants through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with five of them, ten of whom reside in Nigeria. The findings highlight multiple interconnected barriers, including pronunciation and grammatical difficulties, language anxiety, limited meaningful social interaction, and significant socio-economic constraints. In the Nigerian context, participants faced additional hurdles such as navigating Nigerian English varieties, Pidgin English, and the fast-paced demands of market and business interactions. Although motivation levels remained high, socio-economic realities strongly shaped learning outcomes. The study calls for the development of flexible, context-sensitive language programmes that address both linguistic needs and the broader life circumstances of adult immigrants in Nigeria.

Keywords: second language acquisition, adult immigrants, Chinese learners, Nigeria, language anxiety, socio-economic factors, Nigerian English, Pidgin English

1. Introduction

Language proficiency plays a vital role in the social and economic integration of immigrants. In Nigeria, the ability to communicate effectively in English—the country's official language and lingua franca—greatly affects access to employment, education, healthcare, and social networks (Chiswick & Miller, 2020). Chinese-speaking adult immigrants, who form part of the expanding Asian business community in Nigeria, encounter both opportunities and notable challenges in acquiring English.

Global migration has drawn increased scholarly attention to second language acquisition among adults. Unlike children, adult learners often contend with age-related cognitive constraints, entrenched first-language habits, and the pressures of work and family life (DeKeyser, 2021; Birdsong, 2018). Socio-cultural adjustment, language anxiety, and economic pressures further complicate their progress (Horwitz, 2017; García & Wei, 2018).

This study investigates the specific experiences of Chinese-speaking adult immigrants learning English, with particular emphasis on those in Nigeria. It explores linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, affective, and socio-economic factors and how they interact to influence learning outcomes. The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the major barriers to English language acquisition among these adult learners?

How do psychological factors such as motivation and anxiety affect their learning?

In what ways do social and cultural dynamics influence the acquisition process?

How do socio-economic conditions shape language learning opportunities and outcomes?

The study tests the hypothesis that socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, and socio-economic factors significantly influence SLA success among adult immigrants. Special attention is given to the Nigerian setting, where English functions alongside regional accents, Nigerian Pidgin, and context-specific usages in trade, governance, and everyday interactions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Second language acquisition refers to the development of communicative competence in a language other than one's mother tongue. For adult immigrants, the process goes beyond grammar and vocabulary to include cultural adaptation and identity negotiation (Hummel, 2021; Ellis, 2021). This study draws on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and cognitive perspectives on memory and automaticity.

2.2 Importance for Adult Immigrants

Proficiency in the host country's language improves employment prospects, social integration, and access to essential services. Research consistently links stronger language skills to better economic outcomes and reduced marginalisation (OECD, 2019; Arenas, 2024). For Chinese immigrants in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, English serves as a crucial bridge for business, education, and daily interactions (Kenne & Bodomo, 2024).

2.3 Challenges

Adult learners commonly struggle with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, particularly when the phonological and syntactic systems of their first language (Mandarin) differ markedly from English. These difficulties are often compounded by anxiety, limited interaction with proficient speakers, and demanding work schedules (Larrotta & Adversario, 2022; Chen & Buckingham, 2025). Socio-economic barriers, such as the cost of classes and family responsibilities, further limit progress.

2.4 Interrelated Nature of Challenges

Linguistic problems frequently trigger anxiety, which in turn reduces practice opportunities and reinforces socio-economic disadvantages, creating a cycle of slow advancement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary perspectives:

Behaviourist Theory (Watson, 1913): Emphasises habit formation through repetition and reinforcement.

Cognitive Theory (Piaget): Focuses on internal mental processes, including memory and problem-solving.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978): Highlights the role of social interaction, scaffolding, and cultural context.

These frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for examining both individual and contextual dimensions of SLA.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods design. The target population consisted of Chinese-speaking adults (18 years and above) learning English in Nigeria and other diaspora settings. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques yielded 30 participants. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire (administered online and in-person) and semi-structured interviews with five participants. Instruments were made available in both English and Chinese to accommodate varying proficiency levels.

The questionnaire elicited demographic information, self-reported proficiency, perceived challenges, motivation, and learning strategies. Interviews provided deeper personal accounts. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Pilot testing and expert review strengthened the validity and reliability of the instruments.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender.	Frequency.	Percentage
Male.	14.	46.7%
Female.	16.	53.3%
Total.	30.	100%

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Range.	Frequency.	Percentage
18-24.	3.	10%
25-34.	15.	50%
35-44.	9.	30%
45-54.	2.	6.7%
55+.	1.	3.3%
Total.	30.	100%

Table 3: Country of Residence

Country.	Frequency.	Percentage
Nigeria.	10.	33.3%
China.	7.	23.3%
UK.	6.	20%
USA.	6.	20%
Spain.	1.	3.3%
Total.	30.	100%

Participants were mostly tertiary-educated (50% tertiary, 20% postgraduate), with varied lengths of English study and learning modes (online being most common). Self-rated proficiency was mostly intermediate.

4.2 Key Findings

Barriers to Second Language Acquisition

Linguistic challenges were common across the sample. Participants reported persistent difficulties with pronunciation—especially interdental sounds (/θ/ and /ð/) and the /r/ versus /l/ distinction. In Nigeria, exposure to diverse local accents intensified these issues. One 32-year-old male participant in Lagos noted: “In China, I learned British or American English, but here in Lagos market, people speak very fast with heavy Yoruba or Igbo accent... It makes me confused.”

Grammar issues, particularly article usage, tense consistency, and prepositions, were also widespread. Cognitive demands increased when dealing with rapid code-switching between English and Nigerian Pidgin.

Nigeria-Specific Socio-Cultural and Contextual Challenges

Among the ten Nigeria-based participants, eight highlighted the added complexity of Nigeria’s multilingual environment. Market transactions and business negotiations frequently involve Pidgin English, which differs substantially from the formal varieties taught in textbooks. A 34-year-old female trader in Lagos explained: “When I go to Alaba or Balogun market, the sellers mix English with Pidgin. If I speak only proper English, they sometimes laugh or try to cheat me... I have to learn small Pidgin to survive in business.”

Another participant (male, 41, Abuja) observed challenges with register shifting in business meetings.

Affective and Psychological Factors

Language anxiety was pronounced. Six of the ten Nigeria-based participants admitted avoiding public speaking for fear of mockery. Motivation, however, remained strong driven by business needs and family responsibilities. Learners made practical use of Nollywood films, local radio stations (e.g., Nigeria Info, Classic FM), and WhatsApp voice notes.

Social Integration and Cultural Dynamics

Supportive relationships with Nigerian friends or colleagues accelerated progress. Three interviewees credited participation in Pentecostal churches with providing safe spaces for practice. In contrast, those embedded in predominantly Chinese business communities in Lagos experienced slower gains due to limited daily exposure.

Socio-Economic Influences

Socio-economic factors emerged as the most formidable barrier, especially in Nigeria. High living costs in cities like Lagos, long working hours in trade and construction, and unreliable electricity (which disrupted online learning) featured prominently. Nine of the ten Nigeria-based participants cited financial limitations. One 38-year-old male in Lagos remarked: “English classes in Lagos are very expensive... After paying shop rent and sending money home, I cannot afford it. I learn only when I have time after market closes.” Inconsistent internet access due to power outages and data costs added further strain.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

The results align with broader SLA literature while illuminating context-specific realities in Nigeria. Universal challenges such as pronunciation and anxiety persist, but the Nigerian environment adds demands related to multilingual repertoires, high-stakes informal commerce, and infrastructural limitations. These findings extend studies on adult immigrants in non-Western multilingual settings and underscore the pragmatic strategies—blending formal study with immersive market experience—that Chinese immigrants employ (Kenne & Bodomo, 2024). Socio-economic pressures stand out as particularly influential in developing economies, where language learning must compete with immediate survival needs.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study shows that second language acquisition among Chinese-speaking adult immigrants in Nigeria involves a complex interplay of linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and—most critically—socio-economic factors. Nigeria’s vibrant multilingualism and dynamic business environment provide rich opportunities for authentic practice, yet they also present unique obstacles that demand tailored responses.

5.2 Recommendations

Nigerian universities, language institutes, and NGOs should develop affordable evening and weekend programmes tailored to working adults. These should incorporate Nigerian English varieties and practical Pidgin elements for real-world communication.

Curricula should draw on authentic local scenarios such as market bargaining, banking, immigration procedures, and business negotiations.

Partnerships between Chinese business associations, religious organisations, and local language centres could foster peer-learning and conversation clubs.

Programmes should combine offline materials with mobile-friendly resources suitable for low-data environments and intermittent power supply.

Government agencies, including the Nigerian Immigration Service and the Ministry of Education, should explore basic language support as part of broader immigrant integration efforts, recognising the economic contributions of long-term residents.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should involve larger samples across major Nigerian commercial centres (Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Onitsha) and employ longitudinal designs to track proficiency development over time in real business contexts.

References

- Arenas, A. (2024). Biological age and second language acquisition (SLA) overtime: A literature review. *Journal of Literature Language and Academic Studies*, 3(1), 1-10.
- Birdsong, D. (2018). Plasticity, variability and age in second language acquisition and bilingualism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 81.
- Chen, Y., & Buckingham, L. (2025). The English-language learning difficulties of older migrants in New Zealand: A life course perspective. *Educational Gerontology*, 51(1), 57-71.
- Chiswick, B. R., & Miller, P. W. (2020). *The economics of language*. Routledge.
- DeKeyser, R. M. (2021). Age effects in second language learning: Stepping back to advance forward. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 41, 1-19.
- Ellis, R. (2021). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2018). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2017). Anxiety and second language learning revisited. In *The Cambridge handbook of anxiety and related disorders*.
- Hummel, K. M. (2021). *Introducing second language acquisition: Perspectives and practices*.
- Kenne, J. K., & Bodomo, A. (2024). Migration and linguistic integration: An investigation of Chinese immigrants' language learning experience before moving to Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2420844>
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- Larrotta, C., & Adversario, J. (2022). Adult Chinese immigrants learning English. *Adult Learning*, 33(1), 3-14.
- OECD. (2019). *Indicators of immigrant integration 2019: Settling in*. OECD Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Watson, J. B. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it. *Psychological Review*, 20(2), 158-177.