

Cognitive-Psychological Resistance in Adult Learners Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract: Whether an adult is motivated or unmotivated to learn depends on the actual learning experience. To further our understanding of English as a second language (ESL) learners and their language learning experience, this paper delves into the intricate realm of learning resistance. Ultimately, we seek to provide a comprehensive perspective on motivation and resistance within the complex landscape of adult ESL learning. By shedding light on the multifaceted nature of learning resistance and its impact on learners' motivation, the paper aims to contribute to the development of effective pedagogical strategies and enhance the ongoing dialogue between researchers and practitioners in the field of adult ESL education

Keywords: cognitive-psychological resistance, motivation, English as a second language (ESL), adult learning

Understanding and addressing resistance in the realm of learning is a complex endeavor that involves the intertwining of multiple factors, as highlighted by Brookfield (2015). To cultivate learner motivation and enhance their positive learning experiences, it becomes imperative to delve into the various catalysts behind resistance to learning. This paper aims to explore cognitive-psychological resistance among adult learners engaged in English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition within the United States. By extracting concepts from Illeris' (2007, 2017) learning theories, this research examines the phenomenon of learning resistance specifically in the context of foreign language acquisition, employing a cognitive-psychological lens. The cognitive-psychological perspective on learning resistance emphasizes the role of cognitive processes and psychological factors in shaping individuals' responses to the learning experience. This perspective underscores that resistance can stem from cognitive and psychological influences, encompassing beliefs, attitudes, fear of failure, prior negative experiences, lack of interest, cognitive overload, motivation gaps, and mismatches in learning styles.

In second language acquisition, where individuals experience “the process of learning a second language other than a speaker’s first language” (Brown, 2000, p. 26), the focus shifts to internal processes (Izadpanah, 2010). The inherent limitations of imperfectly mastering a second language learning process are likely “the threat to an individual’s self-concept caused by the inherent limitations of communication in an imperfectly mastered second language” (Saito et al., 1999, p. 202), which could “lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic” (Tsui, 1996, p. 156). These challenges are particularly pronounced in adult learners, who often grapple with language ego – a fear of mistakes that hinders proper language acquisition (Akhter & Abdullah, 2015).

The adult demographic learning English as a second or foreign language is marked by its diversity, originating from various countries and cultural backgrounds (Floyd, 2022), highlighting the multifaceted linguistic landscape (Esterline & Batalova, 2022). Moreover, challenges like limited literacy skills, financial constraints, and immigration experiences further complicate the learning journey for these adults (Jaros-White, 2017). Consequently, tailored ESL programs are imperative to effectively address the diverse learning needs of this demographic.

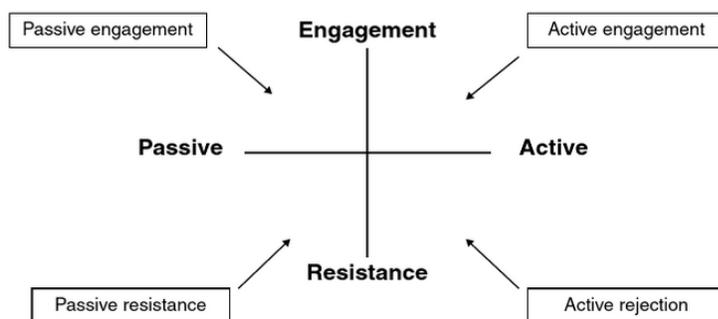
Drawing on Taylor's conceptualization of learning resistance as a state of non-receptivity within specific educational contexts and Caplin's emphasis on delving into the fundamental causes of resistance, this paper acknowledges the multidimensional nature of resistance and underscores the urgency of developing a robust ESL curriculum. We encourage researchers to explore the complexities of resistance, devise targeted interventions, and enhance learner motivation and engagement in ESL language learning endeavors.

Literature Review

The literature on cognitive-psychological learning resistance and motivation in the context of learning English as a Second Language (ESL) highlights the intricate interplay between internal factors, such as cognitive processes and psychological aspects, and their impact on language acquisition. Various scholars have investigated the dynamic relationship between these factors, shedding light on the challenges learners face and strategies to enhance motivation.

Figure 1

Learner resistance and learner engagement



The concept of learning resistance has been explored across various contexts, as noted by Wells et al. (2014). Taylor (2014) conducted an extensive analysis of scholarly perspectives on resistance, encompassing both positive and negative aspects, to propose a more comprehensive understanding of its significance. Taylor's perspective suggests that "Learning resistance can be considered a state in which a learner is not open to learning in a specific learning situation as demonstrated through either active rejection or passive disengagement" (p. 60). This viewpoint positions learner resistance in direct contrast to learner engagement, as depicted in Figure 1 (Taylor, 2014, p. 58). Undoubtedly, Taylor's elucidation introduces a diverse array of expressions of resistance, prompting a deeper exploration of the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon.

As early as a half-century ago, Caplin (1969) argued that “an adequate understanding of resistance demands careful analysis of causes” (p.37). Following a comprehensive examination of distinct paradigms, Taylor (2022) organized four broad and potentially overlapping categories in learning resistance: *environmental resistance*, which is triggered by specific learning events; *cognitive-psychological resistance*, mainly triggered by internal factors like anxiety; *sociocultural resistance*, arising from social or cultural dynamics such as issues related to marginalization; and *epistemological resistance*, triggered by a disconnection between the learner's and teacher's conceptions. By classifying resistance into these distinct categories, scholars are better equipped to analyze and address the underlying causes and manifestations of resistance in educational contexts.

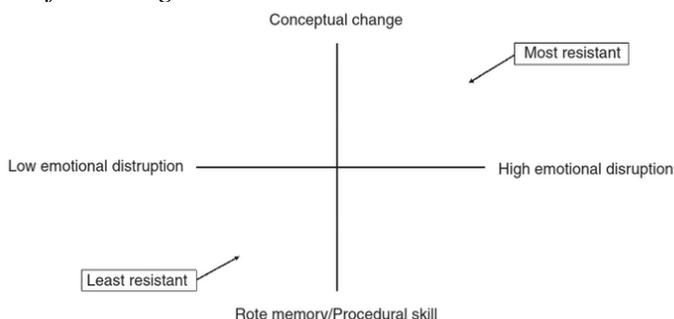
Language learning resistance extends to the model of language non-acquisition, explained by Schumann (1978), focusing on social and psychological factors. Social factors encompass learners' interactions with peers, teachers, and the community, while psychological factors involve cognitive mechanisms and emotional states. Both categories contribute to learners' motivation and resistance to ESL learning. Adult ESL learners' diminished self-efficacy, elevated anxiety levels, and vulnerability tendencies (Ma, 2022) and the interplay of social and psychological factors significantly influence their resistance and motivation.

Conceptual Framework

“Understanding student resistance... provides a framework for developing strategies more likely to help students succeed” (White et al., 2010, p. 127). Taylor (2022) asserted that cognitive-psychological resistance involves “the psychological and emotional ability to be open to learning” (p. 23). Drawing from Gold's (2005) discussion on learning resistance and his description of states that are “emotionally disrupted” (p. 380), Taylor (2022) conceptualized an explanatory two-dimensional plot, as illustrated in Figure 2 (p. 27, adapted from Gold 2005). This visual representation aids in comprehending the interplay between resistance and engagement within the intricate relationship between learners and the learning process. Figure 2 highlights the connection between a learner's emotional disruption and the corresponding level of learning resistance: heightened emotional disruption leads to reduced learner motivation. This dimension of resistance and engagement underscores contextual elements that could contribute to resistance, focusing on the continuous ebb and flow of learners' commitment between the decision “to learn or not to learn” throughout their learning journey.

Figure 2

Range and strength of learning resistance



To explore pedagogical strategies for addressing challenges posed by the dimensions of interaction and acquisition in foreign language learning, we centered our investigation on Illeris's (2017) learning triangle, encompassing three core dimensions: content, incentive, and interaction. Content is defined as the subject matter that cultivates abilities, insight, and understanding, while incentive pertains to the mental energy necessary for learning, fostering sensitivity towards learners and the learning environment. The dimension of interaction involves individuals' active engagement within the learning environment. Furthermore, Illeris framed this learning triangle within the social context where learning occurs.

Instructional Inspirations

Considering the complexity of foreign language acquisition and adult learners' characteristics, we propose implementing the following instructional practices will contribute to positive adult ESL language learning experiences:

Create a Safe Learning Environment

Learning carries emotional significance as Taylor (2022) highlighted the essential connection: "Learners do not learn without feeling" (p. 34). Brockett (2015) emphasized that "Effective teachers pay close attention to the learning environment" (p. 99). Stevick's (1980) insight from four decades ago remains astute, underling how classroom success often "depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4). In the realm of adult ESL education, establishing a secure and nurturing learning environment is imperative. This environment allows students to feel comfortable and supported (Soo & Goh, 2013; Tsui, 1996).

Center Learner in Content

Adult ESL learners bring a wealth of diverse experience. Adult ESL teachers should create an environment where each individual is empowered to "bring their needs to the table and participate in understanding the curriculum of their lives" (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 70). In conjunction with honoring adult learners' communicative aspirations and the context of their daily lives, ESL instructors should also recognize and embrace their students' cultural backgrounds and native language (Calderon et al., 2011). This involves incorporating students' cultures into the learning process (Fishkin, 2010) and devising conversation focused approaches that are student-centered and open (Larotta, 2007).

Begin Interaction with the Connection

Numerous researchers in the field of second-language acquisition have emphasized the significance of interactional and social aspects in the process of language acquisition (Canale & Swain, 1980; Habermas, 1970; Halliday, 1973; Hymes, 1968, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Taylor (2022) aptly captured the essence, stating that "teaching an individual human being is about fellowshipping with an individual human being" (pp. 183-184). To foster cooperation and collaboration, ESL programs should invest the necessary time to cultivate connections between teachers and learners, as well as among learners themselves, both within the classroom and the broader community. Considering this, we encourage adult ESL educators to create additional opportunities for adult learners to use the language both inside and outside the classroom. One

approach could involve participating in social activities within the community (e.g., attending community events).

Discussion

In the realm of adult education, Knowles (1980) aligned with Maslow's concept of self-actualization as the ultimate goal, advocating that the learning process should encompass the entirety of an individual's emotional, psychological, and intellectual dimensions. Motivation stands as a significant determinant influencing the success of second/foreign language learning (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1980). This intrinsic drive cannot be comprehended without considering the language learning experience in conjunction with an individual's broader life context. When considering language learners, it's crucial to adopt a holistic perspective that recognizes their entire identity beyond just being language learners. Embracing this approach empowers educators with a broader comprehension of motivation, enabling the development of more impactful pedagogical strategies. In the context of instructing adult ESL learners, educators should take into account not only their language needs but also the distinct challenges they encounter as they engage with their experiences within the socially and culturally dynamic realm of adult ESL learning.

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