



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THE ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNER: CHALLENGES AND ASSETS

Adult second-language learning is often discussed through a deficit lens, as if the main story were what adults can no longer do. It is true that adult learners may show reduced sensitivity to unfamiliar contrasts in sound systems and may acquire certain patterns less implicitly than children. Yet adult learning is better understood as a different configuration of constraints and resources rather than as simple decline. Adults typically build an interlanguage—an evolving internal system shaped by input, practice, and hypothesis testing—that can reach high levels of proficiency when conditions support it. Outcomes therefore depend heavily on the learning ecology: time, quality of exposure, communicative necessity, and the degree to which instruction aligns with adult strengths.

Phonological learning provides a clear illustration. Many adults interpret new sounds through phonemic categorization established in childhood, perceiving unfamiliar contrasts as “the closest” categories in their first language. This can produce persistent pronunciation patterns, and in some cases fossilization, where errors stabilise despite continued exposure. However, fossilization is not inevitable. Research and classroom practice suggest that intelligibility can improve substantially when learners receive targeted perception training, abundant high-quality feedback, and opportunities to notice the mismatch between what they intend and what listeners hear. In other words, accent may remain, but communicative effectiveness can still rise sharply with deliberate practice and informed coaching.

For many adults, the most limiting factor is not biology but opportunity. Children acquiring a language in naturalistic settings often accumulate thousands of hours of input, distributed across meaningful contexts that continually recycle vocabulary and structures. Adults, by contrast, frequently encounter the language in short lessons separated by long stretches of non-use. This spacing can be helpful for memory in certain tasks, but it becomes a barrier when the goal is fluent, automatic processing. The “time-on-task” problem is intensified when adults have limited chances to use the language outside class, so knowledge remains inert rather than procedural. When adults do gain sustained immersion—through work placement, migration, or intensive programmes—performance gaps narrow, indicating that environmental constraints can outweigh age as an explanation.

Psychological factors add another layer. Many adults experience a strong affective filter: anxiety, fear of embarrassment, and perfectionism can reduce willingness to speak,



especially in public settings where identity and competence feel at stake. Because fluent speech requires repeated use, avoidance becomes self-reinforcing: less speaking leads to fewer opportunities for automatised use, which in turn sustains hesitancy. Classroom norms matter here. Environments that treat errors as evidence of failure raise the affective filter, while supportive communities that normalise mistakes and reward risk-taking increase participation. Adult learners often benefit from structured speaking tasks that lower social risk while still demanding real-time language use.

At the same time, adults possess cognitive advantages that can accelerate certain aspects of learning. They can deploy metacognitive strategies: setting goals, monitoring which study methods work, and adjusting plans based on outcomes. Adults can also exploit explicit knowledge—learning rules, asking for clarification, and noticing patterns—rather than relying solely on implicit absorption. Literacy is another asset. Strong reading skills can speed vocabulary growth by enabling extensive exposure to word forms and collocations that are less frequent in speech. Although explicit learning does not automatically translate into fluent performance, it can supply a scaffold that, with practice, becomes more automatic.

Cross-linguistic influence, sometimes described as transfer, is also double-edged. Similarities between languages can support rapid comprehension and efficient learning, allowing adults to map new forms onto familiar structures. But differences can also generate persistent errors when learners project first-language assumptions onto a new grammar or pragmatic system. Effective instruction often makes contrasts explicit so that learners can anticipate predictable traps. This includes highlighting where familiar word order, tense marking, or politeness conventions do not carry over. Rather than trying to eliminate the first language, many approaches treat it as a resource that must be managed, not denied.

Motivation and identity shape persistence over the long term. Adults often have clear instrumental goals—employment, exams, integration after migration—but they may also face identity tension if the new language threatens their sense of competence. Some learners avoid complex topics to protect face, which restricts the linguistic range needed for higher proficiency. Others incorporate the language into a new identity, seeking communities where use is meaningful and socially valued. These trajectories show why “motivation” is not simply a trait; it is sustained or eroded by environments that either reward participation or punish error.

Technology expands options but does not remove constraints. Apps can support spaced repetition and quick corrective feedback, and online communities can provide conversation partners across time zones. However, digital practice can become



fragmented if it substitutes for extended interaction and rich input. The most effective use of technology combines brief drills with sustained communication, guided reflection, and authentic exposure to varied registers. Overall, adult success is most likely when instruction compensates for time scarcity, reduces the affective filter, and uses adult cognitive strengths to build an interlanguage that continues to develop rather than fossilise.

Questions 14–18

Select the correct answer.

14 According to the passage, what most strongly shapes adults' eventual language outcomes?

- A** A fixed biological cutoff that makes high attainment impossible
- B** Learning ecology, including time, quality of input, and opportunities to use the language
- C** Avoiding explicit study in favour of exposure alone
- D** Completely preventing first-language influence during learning

15 Why can certain pronunciation distinctions remain difficult for adult learners, according to the passage?

- A** New contrasts are filtered through earlier phonemic categorization
- B** Adults receive no feedback in any learning context
- C** Pronunciation improves only after grammar is mastered
- D** Adults are unwilling to practise listening tasks

16 What does the passage identify as the most common practical barrier for adults?

- A** Lack of instrumental motivation
- B** Weak literacy that prevents vocabulary growth
- C** Limited time-on-task and long gaps of non-use
- D** Excessive reliance on apps rather than face-to-face teaching

17 Which psychological factor is mentioned as reducing willingness to speak?

- A** Curiosity
- B** Impatience
- C** Boredom
- D** Anxiety

18 What does the passage imply about using technology effectively?



- A** It works best when it replaces longer interaction with short online exercises
- B** It works best when brief drills are combined with sustained communication and rich input
- C** It works best when it eliminates transfer entirely
- D** It works best when it removes the need for supportive learning communities

Questions 19–22

Match each statement with the correct factor, **A–D**, below. **NB** You may use any letter more than once.

List of Factors

- A** Phonological processing issues
- B** Environmental constraints (Time/Exposure)
- C** Psychological factors (Affect/Anxiety)
- D** Cognitive advantages

19 Adult learners may avoid speaking because fear of embarrassment raises an internal barrier to participation.

20 Learners can increase clarity when they receive perception-focused training and detailed corrective input.

21 Adults can plan, monitor effectiveness, and adjust study routines to improve progress.

22 Short lessons separated by long periods without use can prevent knowledge from becoming automatic.

Questions 23–26

Answer the questions below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text for each answer.

23 What type of feedback is mentioned alongside targeted perception training as helping adults improve intelligibility?

24 What ability is said to speed vocabulary growth through reading?

25 Cross-linguistic influence is sometimes described by what other term?.....

26 The passage says effective technology use combines what with sustained communication, guided reflection, and authentic exposure?

Answer Key



14. B

15. A

16. C

17. D

18. B

19. C

20. A

21. D

22. B

23. high-quality feedback

24. reading skills

25. transfer

26. brief drills