

# Investigating the Factors Causing EFL Attrition among Learners

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## Abstract :

The study aimed to investigate the factors that cause EFL attrition among learners; it was applied in university of Dongola faculty of education – Merowe – English department second & third level in the academic year 2021-2022. (30) Students of (47) were selected randomly; primary data was collected via a questionnaire consisted of 13 items, the researchers used the descriptive analytic method and the results of statistical analysis found that: Without practicing learners' loss the language as they progressed in age, it also proved that frequency of using the language, learners' environment and motivation are effected factors of losing the language. The researchers recommend that: preparing suitable environment to enable learners to practice the language frequently and boost their motivation and establish a permanent to meet learners' needs.

**Key Words:** Language attrition, factors, L1, L2, EFL, Collegian

استقصاء العوامل المتسببة في تساقط اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وسط الطلاب

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المستخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى تقصي العوامل التي تؤثر في فقدان اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وسط دارسيها. أُجريت الدراسة على عينة من طلاب جامعة دنقلا كلية التربية مروى - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية المستويان الثاني والثالث (للعام الدراسي 2021-2022)، تم اختيار عدد (30) طالب وطالبة عشوائيا من جملة (47)

طالب وطالبة، تم جمع البيانات الأولية بواسطة استبانة مكونة من 13 سؤال. استخدم الباحثان المنهج التحليلي الوصفي القائم على التفسير مع مراعاة الفترة الزمنية. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن الدارسين يفقدون اللغة مع التقدم في العمر مع عدم الممارسة، كما أثبتت أيضاً أن الاستخدام المتكرر، الدافعية، والبيئة، من العوامل المؤثرة في فقدان اللغة. أوصى الباحثان بضرورة تهيئة بيئة تمكن الدارسين من استخدام اللغة وزيادة دافعيتهم، وإنشاء منصة دائمة تلبي احتياجات الدارسين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عوامل، فقدان اللغة، الطلاب الجامعيين

## 1. Introduction

Language attrition has been viewed as the inverse process of language acquisition. In 1980, the conference on the Attrition of Language Skill held at University of Pennsylvania opened the prelude to language attrition research, which then has been developed into a hot topic in the area of language research. Vocabulary acquisition is not a tidy linear affair, with only incremental advancement and no backsliding. All teachers recognize that learners easily forget material as well. This forgetting is a natural phenomenon of learning, which has been described as the bilingual or multi-lingual's ability of using one specific language regresses with time due to reduction or cease of use (Wang Mi 2016 p75).

Language attrition is the process of losing a native or first language. This process is generally caused by both isolation from speakers of the first language "L1" and the acquisition and use of a second language «L2», which interferes with the correct production and comprehension of the first language. Such interference from a second language is probably experienced to some extent by all bilinguals, but is most evident among speakers for whom a language other than their first has started to play an important role, if not dominant, role in everyday life; these speakers are more likely to experience language attrition.

Language attrition is the most common term used for any "Loss of language skills" that occurs after some years of non-exposure (Moorcraft & Gardner, 1987). Attrition refers to the non-pathological loss of a language in bilinguals; generally speaking, changes in the linguistic environment and termination of an

instructional program may lead to attrition” (Kopke & Schmid, 2004, Marefat & Rohshad, 2007).

Language attrition (language loss) is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which has been studied from a variety of perspectives e.g. Psycholinguistics, Neuro-linguistics, and Sociolinguistics (Gurel, 2004, p.53).

## **2.Objectives of the Study:**

Identifying factors that cause language attrition including psychological and environmental influences.

Evaluating how language attrition affects individuals’ communication abilities and culture identity.

Examining the effective strategies for maintaining language proficiency.

Enhancing the understanding of language processing and cognitive functions in relation to language loss.

Understanding how language attrition varies across different age, groups, and geographical location.

## **3.Questions of the Study:**

To what extent do progress in age and environment affect in language attrition?

How far students’ motivation and frequency of use caused in language attrition?

## **4. Literature Review and the Previous Studies:**

### **4.1 Language Attrition**

According to (Wang Mi 2016) language attrition may refer to the loss of any language or any portion of a language by an individual or a speech community. It may refer to the declining use of mother tongue skills by those in bilingual situations or among ethnic minorities in (some) language contact situations where one language, for political or social reasons, comes to replace another. Language attrition also refers to the deterioration of language skills in neurologically impaired patients and to the decline of certain types of language usage by the elderly. Likewise, language attri-

tion may be used to describe the death of an entire language. There is yet another sense in which the term language skill attrition is used which has received considerably less attention. That is the loss of language skills by those who have studied and then discontinued the use it as a second language

Attrition is the loss or reduces of one aspect or many aspects of language of individuals or speech community. (Zhong Shuneng 2003. Cited by Wang Mi 2016). Language attrition is the most common term used for any “Loss of language skills” that occurs after some years of non-exposure (Moorcraft & Gardner, 1987). Attrition refers to the non-pathological loss of a language in bilinguals; generally speaking, changes in the linguistic environment and termination of an instructional program may lead to attrition” (Marefat & Rohshad, 2007).

Attrition can be described in two ways, as a process or as a phenomenon. The definition of the process is deceptively simple: When we are looking at attrition, we are dealing with “the non-pathological decrease in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual” (Köpke & Schmid, 2004:5). In other words, attrition investigates the situation where a speaker (of L1 or a later learned second or foreign language) can no longer do something which s/he had previously been able to do, and this loss of proficiency is not caused by a deterioration of the brain due to age, illness or injury, but by a change in linguistic behaviour due to a severance of the contact with the community in which the language is spoken.

## 4.2 Categorization of Language Attrition

### 4.2.1 Short-term Attrition

Short-term attrition is an important issue for second language acquisition and vocabulary in particular. The key issue is how long a memory trace from an exposure can endure, so that it can be subsequently built upon. If this period is exceeded, then the next exposure will merely be starting over with no incremental gain. (Norbert Schmitt 2009)

Syllabuses should be designed so that vocabulary recycling occurs within the “retention period”. Another example is the incidental learning from reading. A learner must read enough so that a new lexical item will be met again before its memory trace disappears. The length of the retention period will dictate the maximum number of pages which can be read before the item needs to occur again. The high level language learners would benefit from this kind of information particularly. Thus, the retention period may vary in systematic ways. A related issue about which little is known is the number of exposures which are necessary to make vocabulary knowledge durable. (Wang Mi 2016)

#### **4.2.2 Long-term Attrition**

It appears that learners who achieved relatively high levels of proficiency are more resistant to the initial attrition, and maintain a steady stage before attrition begins (Hansen, Umeda, and McKinney, 2002).

### **5. Influenced Factors of Attrition:**

There are several factors which affect the process. Frequent exposure and use of a particular language is often assumed adequate to maintain the native language system intact. However, researches have often failed to confirm this prediction, Schmid (2008). A positive attitude towards the potentially losing language or its speech community and motivation to retain the language are other factors which may reduce attrition. These factors are too difficult to confirm by research, Elise and Schmid (2010). However, a person’s age can well predict the likelihood of attrition; children are demonstrably more likely to lose their first language than adults, Bylund (2009).

These factors are similar to those that affect second-language acquisition and the two processes are sometimes compared. However, the overall impact of these factors is far less than that for second language acquisition. According to Reilly, Tarey (1988): “Language acquisition and maintenance depend on instructional

factors, relating to the way it which the language is initially acquired; cultural factors, relating to the status and usefulness of the language in a particular society; and personality factors, relating to individual characteristic of the speaker”. Therefore, exploring these factors could help learners and teachers to seek the effective methods to prevent the loss of language skills.

Factors that affect language attrition can be divided into two categories: internal and external.

## **5.1 Internal Factors**

### **5.1.1 Age Effect**

Children are more susceptible to (first) language attrition than adults. Research shows an age effect around the ages of 8 through 13 Bylund (2009). Before this time period, a first language can attrite under certain circumstances, the most prominent being a sudden decline in exposure to the first language. Various case studies show that children who emigrate before puberty and have little to no exposure to their first language end up losing the first language. Attrition of a first language does not guarantee an advantage in learning a second language, Park, H. etal (2009).

On the other hand, L1 attrition may also occur if the overall effort to maintain the first language is insufficient while exposed to a dominant L2 environment. Another recent investigation, focusing on the development of language in late bilinguals (i.e. adults past puberty), has claimed that maintenance of the mother tongue in an L1 environment requires little to no maintenance for individuals, whereas those in the L2 environment have an additive requirement for the maintenance of the L1 and the development of the L2 (Opitz, 2013).

### **5.1.2 Motivation**

Archibald (1997) defined motivation as the willingness and desire to learn a second language, or, in the case of attrition, the incentive to maintain a language. Motivation can be split into four categories, but it is often simply split into two distinct forms: the

instrumental and the integrative. Naseri N etal (2011), Instrumental motivation, in the case of attrition, is the desire to maintain a language in order to complete a specific goal, i.e. maintaining a language to maintain a job. Integrative motivation, however, is motivation that comes from a desire to fit in or maintain one's cultural ties. These inferences can be drawn, as strategies for knowledge maintenance will, by definition, precisely oppose actions that lead to forgetting.

Archibald (1997) there are differences in attrition related to motivation depending on the type at hand. Instrumental motivation is often less potent than integrative motivation, but, given sufficient incentives, it can be equally as powerful. A 1972 study by Gardner and Lambert emphasized the importance of integrative motivation in particular in regards to factors relating to language acquisition, and, by extension, language attrition. Al Rifai N (2010).

### **5.1.3 Engagement**

According to Wang Mi (2016) Engagement is one of the important factors in vocabulary acquisition. It is a commonsense that the more a learner engages with a new word, the more likely he/she is to learn it. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) guessed that the total involvement of vocabulary acquisition contains three components: need, search, and evaluation. Need is the requirement for a linguistic feature in order to achieve some desired task. Search is the attempt to find the required information, e.g. looking up the meaning of that word in a dictionary. Evaluation refers to the information of a word or with the context of use.

### **5.1.4 Foreign Language Proficiency Prior to the Attrition**

Foreign language proficiency prior to the attrition is one of the most influential factors resulting to the foreign language attrition. When the foreign language learners stop learning, they will not be affected so much. Some prestigious scholars aboard do many researches in this field. Receptive skills have a significant correlation with language proficiency prior to attrition. Liu Wei

(2010) indicated that initial proficiency is proved to be negatively related to the attrition of language skills.

## 5.2 External Factors

### 5.2.1 Frequency of Use

Yeh & Lin (2015). Frequency of use has been shown to be an important factor in language attrition. Decline in use of a given language leads to gradual loss of that language Domínguez (2013).

In the face of much evidence to the contrary, one study is often cited to suggest that frequency of use does not correlate strongly with language attrition. Their methodology, however, can be called into question, especially concerning the small sample size and the reliance on self-reported data. The researchers themselves state that their findings may be inaccurate. The overall evidence suggests that frequency of use is a strong indicator of language attrition Yeh & Lin (2015).

### 5.2.2 Language Learning Environment

The degree of foreign language attrition is closely related to language environment. That is, if one stops learning and there is no language learning environment, then the foreign language learners will suffer foreign language attrition; If learners acquire foreign language at school, then a period of attrition in foreign language also can lead to attrition.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 The questionnaire

The researchers designed a questionnaire that consists of (13) items. The questionnaire was distributed into two main questions, as in Table (1).

Table (1) shows the distribution of the questionnaire to the Axes.

Questions		Items
First	To what extent do progress in age and Environment affect in language attrition?	5
Second	How far students' motivation and frequency of use caused in language attrition?	8

## 6.2 Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

### 6.2.1 Questionnaire Validity

To achieve the face validity, the researchers showed the instruments to experts who added some amendments on the questionnaire.

To measure the subjective validity and the fitness with the research population, the researchers did a pilot study, and then the researcher used Alpha Cronbach correlation to measure the validity of the axes. The analyses resulted as in the table below:

Table (2) the instrument validity

Axes	N	Questions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig
First	30	5	7.9	.83	0.000
Second	30	8	12.6	1.40	0.000

### 6.2.2 Questionnaire Reliability

The researchers used the two ways (Spearman) and (Pearson) to check the reliability of the measurement.

Table (3) Pearson and Spearman's Correlations of the measurement reliability

Axes	N	Pearson Correlation	Spearman's correlation	Sig
First	30	0.71**	0.65**	0.000
Second	30	0.91**	0.92**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 7. Data Analysis and Discussion

### 7.1 Testing Hypotheses Result

Table (4) first hypotheses result

No	Statement No	Mean	Std. Dev.	T.t value	Df	Sig
30	5	7.90	0.83	52.05	29	0.000

The first question is "To what extent do progress in age and Environment affect in language attrition?", the T. test value for the difference between the mean and students' opinions, and the affection of their progress in age and environment on vocabulary attri-

tion is (52.50), It is statistically significant, this indicates indicate that the factors of progress in age and environment play a great role in vocabulary attrition the. This agreed with (Burke 1997) “Age can affect some cognitive processes, which will lead to impaired performance on some tasks”

**Table (5) second hypothesis result**

No	Statement No	Mean	Std. Dev.	T.t value	Df	Sig
30	8	12.60	1.40	50.02	29	0.000

The second question is “ How far students’ motivation and frequency of use caused in language attrition?” the results showed that the T-test value for the difference between the mean and students’ answers and the impact of how far students’ motivation and frequency of use caused is (50.02), It’s statistically significant, i.e. students’ standards on a certain subject, background, and knowledge cause mainly in test anxiety.

### **8.Conclusion and Main Findings:**

The study found that the vocabulary attrition spread among learners due to their environment, because they aren’t surrounded by English speakers, the matter that reduce their opportunity of practicing, when learners move on without practicing they will lose the language as long they progressed in age, this agreed with the study of Burke (1997) “age can affect some cognitive processes which will lead to impaired performance in some tasks” .the result proved that one main major of vocabulary attrition is low frequency, motivation as – proved statistically- plays great role in losing vocabularies because, when they escape their class and sleep or even feel sleepy, this can decline their chance in revising old vocabulary or learning new one.

Since the term language attrition refers to the gradual decline in FL proficiency, as speaker use L1requently and became more proficient (or even dominate) in it, some aspect of L1 can deteriorate or become subject to FL influence.

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