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## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ATTRITION IN ESL AMONG NAMIBIAN LEARNERS

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### Abstract

This study aimed to examine factors contributing to attrition in ESL among learners in Namibia. This study used the convergent parallel mixed methods. There were 50 participants randomly selected to participate in this research. The data was analyzed and merged to validate the findings. The findings indicated that most of the teachers have agreed that their learners do not use ESL often, lack motivation, and have an undesirable attitude towards learning ESL. There was no clear indication of whether age factors affect young learners from losing ESL. The study suggests further studies to validate the findings. The findings of this study is expected to assist curriculum designers in Namibia and other neighbouring countries.

**Keywords:** *Attrition, attitude, ESL, language use, motivation, Namibia*

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## Introduction

Namibia is home to up to 30 indigenous languages of which only 14 have full orthography (Kadodo & Muzira, 2019)<sup>1</sup>. English second language ESL was chosen as an official language soon after independence in 1990. According to Nghipunya (2013)<sup>2</sup>, the main reason English was chosen as an official language is that, it is an international language and that it is a unifying force for promoting national integration, unity, and intellectual understanding. However, the literature showed low proficiency and poor performance in English second language among the learners in Namibia (Hamakali & Mbenzi, 2016<sup>4</sup>; Simasiku, Kasanda, & Smit, 2015)<sup>3</sup>.

According to Bardovi-Harlig & Burghardt (2020)<sup>5</sup> the loss of proficiency in a second language due to the lack of use over time, is a natural part of the cycle of language acquisition called “second language attrition”. There are several definitions of language attrition. According to Kupske (2019)<sup>6</sup>, language attrition may be defined as the partial or complete decline of any language (L1, L2, etc.) or language ability in a healthy speaker. Park (2018) refers to language attrition as a gradual reduction or loss of linguistic knowledge and skills in an individual. To Ecke (2004), language attrition is connected to forgetting, which usually follows failure in one of the basic elements of remembering. According to (Zhonggen & Heng, 2009)<sup>7</sup>, language attrition, whether in a first language or a second, is increasingly recognized as a normal part of changes in proficiency over time.

Kupske (2019)<sup>6</sup> explained that language attrition, in general, occurs in the following threefold:

- (1) L1 loss in L2 settings, when the contact with the L1 is limited or interrupted, or when there is a great competition with other linguistic systems, as in the case of first-generation immigrants immersed in an L2-dominant setting.
- (2) L1 loss in L1-dominant environment, when highly proficient bilinguals are frequently in contact with an L2 such as language teachers.
- (3) L2 loss in L1 settings when learners of an additional language or L1-migrant returnees discontinue contact with the L2.

The literature revealed several factors contribute to language attrition such as age at onset, contact with L1/L2, background and education, motivation and attitude, language proficiency, personality and aptitude, and LoR (Köpke & Genevskaja-Hanke, 2018; Schmid & Yilmaz, 2018; Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016). The current study examined language use, motivation, attitudes towards ESL, and age as factors that contribute to attrition in ESL.

Language use plays a major role in language acquisition and language attrition. The previous studies revealed that individuals who make little use of a language suffer more from attrition than speakers who use the language more frequently (Schmid & Köpke, 2017)<sup>8</sup>. This is supported by Schmid & Dusseldorp (2010)<sup>9</sup> who indicated that the less often a bilingual use one of the languages, the more difficult it will be to retrieve the correct lexical and grammatical information from memory. Lalonde & Gardner (2006)<sup>10</sup>, used a retrospective design on 79 students for 6 months to study the effects of attitudes, motivation and reported language use on second language attrition. The findings demonstrated a loss of speaking and understanding skills as a function of attitudes as students with less favorable attitudes and motivation evidenced significant language loss on language skills. According to Asgari (2012)<sup>11</sup> age, lack of motivation, and negative attitude toward learning and speaking are some of the factors leading to attrition. He added that there is a correlation between age and language attrition. According to Bardovi-Harlig<sup>5</sup>

& Stringer (2010), older children retain more than younger children because older children have L2 literacy skills. “A learner’s age, and motivation all influence the outcome of the periods both for acquisition and attrition. Child learners have a good chance of acquiring the L2, especially in host environments at levels appropriate to their age and peers, but they also have a greater chance of experiencing attrition” (Bardovi-Harlig & Burghardt, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

A study was carried out in Namibia to investigate the factors that influenced the grade 12 learners’ performance in ESL in one poor-performing school and one better-performing school in ESL in the OER (Nkandi, 2015)<sup>12</sup>, and the findings revealed that lack of motivation and negative attitude towards ESL are some of the factors that influenced the learners’ poor performance in ESL. However, although there is low proficiency in ESL among the learners, there is no literature on attrition in ESL among the learners in Namibia. Therefore, this study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods to examine factors contributing to attrition in ESL among learners in Namibia.

The following are the research objectives of this study:

1. To examine factors contributing to attrition in ESL among learners in Namibia.
2. To suggest ways of dealing with attrition in ESL among learners.

Studying language attrition is important because according to Zhonggen & Heng (2009)<sup>7</sup>, factors that contribute to attrition in ESL determine the success of language acquisition. In addition, according to (Köpke, 2014)<sup>14</sup>, studying language attrition sheds light on the dynamics of bilingual and multilingual language competence and processing. Moreover, examining these factors will provide insight into the issue of low proficiency ESL experienced by the learners in the Northern part of Namibia. Studies on language attrition are valuable for the study of language retention and maintenance and it can contribute to language teaching with long-lasting results, more effective planning, and syllabus design (Kupske, 2019)<sup>6</sup>.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Sociocultural Theory**

According to (McLeod, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, 2018)<sup>15</sup>, Vygotsky explained that language is not merely an expression of the knowledge the child has acquired, but it is a correspondence between thought and speech. In addition, he states the importance of cultural and social context for learning as well as indicates that the environment in which children grow up will influence how they think and what they think about.

### **Decay theory**

Decay theory is a theory by Brown 1958 (Ricker, Vergauwe, & Cowan, 2014)<sup>16</sup>. According to decay theory, if some parts are not used a great deal of time, it may be the cause of extinction in memory traces (Köpke B., 2004)<sup>13</sup>. According to the decay theory, the memory trace can fade away as time passage without use. This theory is connected to this study because the study is looking into losing the language.

### **Methods**

The study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. A convergent parallel approach is a concurrent approach that involves the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data

(usually both QUAL and QUAN are the emphasis), followed by the combination and comparisons of these multiple data sources” (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously using a web-based questionnaire and an interview. The link to the web-based questionnaire was randomly sent through WhatsApp to ESL teachers (N=50) from the northern part of Namibia. The researcher used descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

## Results and Discussion

### Quantitative Data

The quantitative data answered the research question (RQ1): What are the causes of attrition in ESL among Namibian learners? The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results are presented according to the main four factors (language use/frequency, attitude towards the language, motivation, and age) identified from the review. The questionnaire with the Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree) was used to collect the data.

### General Questions

1. In general, how would you rate your learners’ English language proficiency?

The figure below shows the general findings on language proficiency

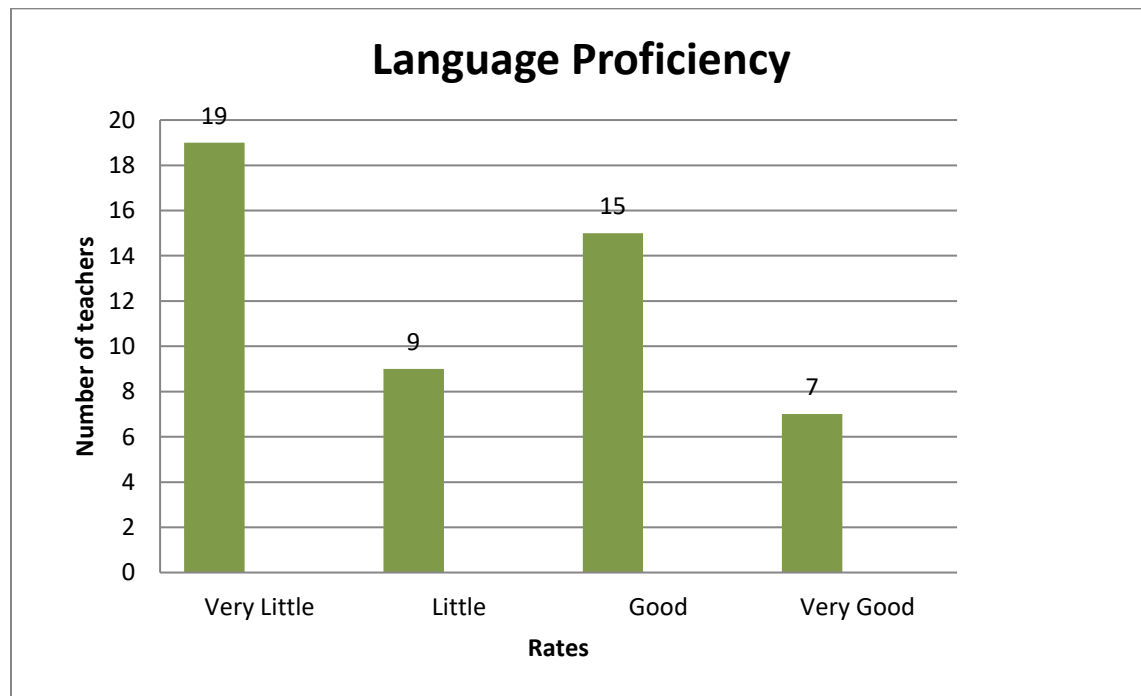


Figure 1 Language Proficiency

2. Which language do your learners prefer to use in the English classroom?

Table 1  
*Language Preference*

<b>Language</b>	<b>Amount / Number</b>
English	21
Oshiwambo	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

Table 1 shows that out of 50 participants only 21 participants indicated that their learners use English while 29 indicate their learners prefer using Oshiwambo in English classrooms.

### Factors contributing to attrition in ESL

This section presents the data on factors contributing to ESL learners' attrition. Please note that even though participants were 50 in total, the researcher found that some participants did not complete all the questions. This is the reason why some participants are not 50 in total.

### Language Use

The following section presents the findings on language use/frequency as a factor that contributes to attrition among ESL learners.

Table 3  
*Language Use*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>S.A</i>	<i>Total</i>
	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	
Most of my learners use English as the home language	16	13	9	7	2	47
Learners use English the in classroom.	3	10	13	15	6	47
Most of my learners' parents/ guardians speak English.	11	14	6	15	2	48
Most of my learners do not use English in the school environment	3	14	9	18	4	48

Key: Fr = Frequency; SD=Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= Neither; SA= Strong Agree; A= Agree

In Table 3 out of 47 participants, the total number of twenty-nine participants indicated that most of their learners do not use English as a home language. Only a total number of nine participants indicated that their learners use English as a home language while six participants neither disagree nor agree. Out of 47 participants, the total number of 21 participants indicated that

their learners do not use ESL in the classroom, compared to 13 participants who indicated their learners use English in the classroom. While another 13 participants neither agree nor disagree. Language use among parents and guardians, out of 48 participants, 25 indicated that most of the learners' parents/ guardians cannot speak English and only 17 participants indicated that their learners' parents /guardians speak English. Out of 48 participants, 22 indicated that their learners do not use ESL in the school environment and only 17 indicated that learners can use ESL in the school environment.

### Attitudes towards ESL

The table below summarizes the results on learners' attitudes towards ESL.

Table 4

Attitudes towards ESL

<i>Statements</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>S.A</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>Fr</i>	<i>Fr</i>	<i>Fr</i>	<i>Fr</i>	<i>Fr</i>	
Most of my learners show no interest in learning English second language.	0	8	7	27	7	49
My learners prefer learning in Oshiwambo to learning in English.	1	8	16	18	6	49
Learners feel English is a difficult language.	1	6	8	19	16	50
My learners don't have a positive attitude towards studying English second language compared to other subjects.	0	8	7	16	19	50

Key: Fr = Frequency; SD=Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= Neither; SA= Strong Agree; A= Agree

According to the table data in table 4, out of 49 participants 34 agreed that their learners show no towards learning ESL, 8 disagreed while 7 neither agreed nor disagreed. Looking at the learners' attitude towards ESL as a language preference, 24 participants agreed that learners prefer learning Oshiwambo to learning in English, 9 disagreed with the statement while 16 neither agreed nor disagreed. Moreover, out of 50 participants, 35 participants agreed that learners have the attitude that ESL is a difficult language, seven disagreed while eight neither agree nor disagree. Lastly, the attitude towards studying ESL as a subject, 35 participants agreed that learners do not show interest in studying compared to other subjects, 8 disagreed, while 7 neither agree nor disagree.

## Motivation

The next table presents the results on motivation as a factor that contribute to attrition in ESL among learners.

Table 5

Motivation

<i>Statements</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>S.A</i>	<i>Total</i>
	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	
Learners do not feel motivated to learn English second language.	0	8	7	27	7	49
Learners cannot express themselves freely in English second language	1	8	16	18	6	49
Learners feel shy when expressing themselves in English second language.	1	6	8	19	16	50
Learners communicate with confidence in English Second language.	13	8	7	20	0	48

Key: Fr = Frequency; SD=Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= Neither; SA= Strong Agree; A= Agree

According to the data in table 5, out of 49 participants, 34 agree with the statement that learners do not feel motivated to learn ESL. Eight feel disagree while seven neither agree nor disagree. Regarding learners' motivation to express themselves in ESL, twenty-four participants agree that their learners cannot express themselves n ESL, nine disagree while eighteen neither agree nor disagree. On the statement whether learners feel shy when expressing themselves in ESL, 35 participants agree, 7 disagree while 8 neither agree nor disagree. Out of 48 participants, 21indicated that learners lack the confidence to communicate in ESL, 20 indicated that learners have confidence in communicating in ESL while 7 neither agree nor disagree.

## Age

This section discussed age as a factor that contributes to attrition in ESL.

Table 6

Age

<i>Statements</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>S.A</i>	<i>Total</i>
	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	
Young learners forget the English language fast compared to older learners.	2	15	16	11	6	50

Young learners struggle with English second language.	0	6	11	24	8	49
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Key: Fr = Frequency; SD=Strongly Disagree; D= Disagree; N= Neither; SA= Strong Agree; A= Agree

In table 6 out of a total number of 50 participants, seventeen agreed and at the same time, the same number of participants disagree that young learners forget the language fast compared to the older ones. On the other hand, 16 could not agree nor disagree. Moreover, out of 49 participants, 32 agreed that young learners struggle with ESL, 6 disagreed while 11 could not agree nor disagree.

### Reasons for losing ESL

To validate the data from the 5 Likert scale the researcher used a 4 Likert scale asked the participant to rate the four factors to answer the question “what are the reasons for losing ESL. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 7

Reason for losing ESL

<i>Reason for losing ESL</i>	Not a reason	A slight reason	A moderate reason	strongly a reason	<i>Total</i>
	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	
They don't use the language often	12	10	7	21	50
Because they are young they forget the language fast compared to the older ones.	27	13	4	5	49
Their negative attitude towards English Second Language.	8	11	11	19	49
They don't feel the need to learn English second language.	14	10	9	15	48

Key: Fr = Frequency

In Table 7 out of 50 participants, 28 indicated that the reason learners are losing ESL is that they don't use the language often. Out of 49 participants, 40 of them believe that just because the learners are young does not mean they are forgetting ESL fast compared to the older learners. However, 30 participants out of 49 participants indicated that the learners' negative attitude towards ESL is one of the reasons they are losing ESL. Lastly, out of 48 participants that responded half of the participants believe that the reason learners are losing ESL is that learners don't feel the need to learn English second language, while another half indicated that it is not the reason.



## Qualitative Data

To answer RQ2 “What are the suggestions for managing attrition in ESL among learners?” an interview was given to five participants who were drawn from the same sample that participated in the survey. Data were analyzed and interpreted into 3 themes (language use, attitude towards ESL, and motivation). The table below summarizes the suggestions on how to manage attrition in ESL among learners.

Table 8

Suggestions on attrition in ESL

Participants	Responses
P1	Motivation is the key.
P2	Give interesting storybooks they can read on holidays
P3	Explain the importance of learning English second language
P4	Encourage more reading
P5	More class discussions and getting involved in mural activities such as school debate clubs

Table 8 gives a summary of the suggestion on how to manage attrition in ESL among the learners.

### Language use

Concerning losing ESL due to language use, four teachers explained a scenario of learners that move from the Southern regions where the setting is multicultural to Northern regions where native languages are more dominant. They, therefore, suggest class discussions, encouraging learners to participate in debate clubs, and giving storybooks for holidays as some of the ways they use to help these learners from losing ESL.

### Motivation

All of the respondents highlighted motivation as a powerful weapon to manage attrition in ESL among the learners.

*“Sometimes learners just lack motivation and one of the things I do daily is, I motivate my learners to use language quite often because when they go home there is a possibility that parents might not know how to speak English.”*

### Attitude towards ESL

Most of the participants point out that teachers need to explain the importance of learning ESL to change learners’ negative attitudes towards ESL.

*“Mostly I emphasize the importance of learning English because some learners have dreams of studying abroad.”*

### Summary of qualitative results

Participants’ suggestions were categorized into themes and presented in table 4.9. Participants confirmed that language use, motivation, attitudes toward ESL, and age can contribute to losing

ESL among the learners. Moreover, the results show how motivation and attitudes towards ESL are likely to affect how learners use the language.

## DISCUSSION

### Research Question 1:

“What are the reasons learners are losing ESL in Namibian?”

### Interpreting the results

This section first discusses the research findings. The joint display ‘side by side’ was used to interpret the results from the quantitative (questionnaire) and the qualitative (interview). The table below answers the question “To what extent do the qualitative results confirm the quantitative results as a way merging the results.

*Table 9*

The joint display of the interpretation of findings

Themes and Sub-themes	Quantitative data (Questionnaire)	Qualitative data (Interview)
<b>Factors contributing to attrition in ESL</b>		
Language use	Most of the learners do not use English second language often.	Most of the teachers agreed that lack of language is the major contributor to losing the language.
Motivation	Most of the teachers indicated that learners lack the motivation to express themselves, to learn ESL, and are shy.	“Sometimes learners just need motivation” “They fear being bullied for making mistakes.”
Attitude towards ESL	Learners perceive ESL negatively.	“Some of my learners have a belief that people don’t study English”.
Age	No clear indication of whether young learners’ age causes them to forget the language fast. However, the young ones struggle with learning ESL.	“Young learners struggle with ESL.”

To answer this question, ‘What are the reasons for attrition in ESL among learners?’ the following factors highlighted were converged or were agreed upon from the side-by-side table (see table 5.1). These findings are very resilient points as they converged meaning that is valid and reliable.

## **Language Use**

Both quantitative and qualitative results agreed that if the ESL is not used often learners can lose the language. This has been supported by (Schmid & Köpke, 2017)<sup>8</sup> who indicated that individuals who make little use of a language suffer more from attrition than speakers who use the language more frequently.

Moreover, the results show that most of the learners do not use English as their home language as well as most of the parents/guardians do not speak and this means the environment is not supportive compared to the scenario of learners that are schooling in the Southern part of Namibia where the multicultural environment forced them to use ESL. This relates to Vygotsky, 1978 theory which explained that much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor (teacher/parents/knowledgeable peer) and the social interaction plays a major role in children's learning (McLeod, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, 2018)<sup>15</sup>.

## **Motivation**

Both quantitative and qualitative agreed that motivation contributes to attrition in ESL. The results support the review by (Asgari, 2012)<sup>11</sup> that lack of motivation toward learning and speaking can be major factors leading to attrition. Furthermore, quantitative results show that as a sign of lack of motivation learners are shy and this was confirmed through qualitative results revealed that learners cannot express themselves freely because they are scared to be bullied for making mistakes. Therefore, the study concluded that lack of motivation could lead to attrition.

## **Attitude towards ESL**

According to the results, both quantitative and qualitative agreed that learners have negative attitudes towards ESL by the learners. The interesting finding is that most teachers revealed that their learners have a belief that people do not study ESL. This clearly shows while they are losing ESL. These findings approved the Decay theory which is believed that if some parts of the language are not used a great deal of time, it may cause extinction in memory traces (Köpke, 2004)<sup>13</sup>.

## **Age**

Both results agree that young learners struggle with ESL. However, the teachers indicate that losing ESL is not due to the age of the learners.

## **Research Question 2:**

**“How to deal with attrition in ESL among learners?”**

- ❖ Emphasis on the importance of English.
- ❖ Motivation is the key. “I motivate my learners daily”.
- ❖ Encourage learners to participate in discussions, whether it is in the classroom, debate clubs.
- ❖ Encourage learners to make use of the library

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed to examine factors contributing to attrition in ESL among learners in Namibia. The results showed that most of the teachers indicated that their learners have low proficiency in ESL. Moreover, most of the teachers agreed that language use, motivation, and attitude towards ESL contribute to attrition in ESL. Therefore, the researcher concluded that language proficiency in ESL could be an indication of attrition in ESL. This justifies the explanation of attrition by (Federico & et al, 2021)<sup>17</sup> they indicated that attrition could be a reflection of a situation whereby a speaker is losing proficiency in a language he or she previously mastered, not due to any brain degeneration or an age-related cognitive impairment but as a result of “a change in linguistic behavior due to a severance of the contact with the community in which the language is spoken”. In addition, the findings highlighted the importance of motivation and attitude towards ESL in the study of ESL attrition maintenance and retention. The literature revealed that students/learners with less favorable attitudes towards ESL and motivation were evidenced significant language loss on the loss of speaking and understanding skills (Mahrooqi & Sultana<sup>18</sup>, 2012; Lalonde & Gardner, 2006<sup>10</sup>). Therefore, the researcher caution teachers to take motivation seriously because it is one of the ways of changing learners’ negative attitudes towards ESL.

The findings of this research could provide the policymakers (NIED) with a framework on how to design better teaching methods and techniques to deal with attrition in ESL among the learners. In addition, the findings will not only provide language teachers with directions on how to deal with attrition in ESL, but it also raises awareness on the red flags (factors) that teachers need to keep an eye on.

To date, there is no literature on attrition in ESL in Namibia, and findings revealed that most of the teachers indicated that their learners are being subjected to factors that contribute to attrition in ESL. The current study is limited to the northern parts of Namibia only. Therefore, this call for future researchers to carry out empirical studies to validate the findings of these studies and to explore further the field of language attrition.

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