

**Success and struggles  
in English language proficiency:  
A close examination**

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**Abstract**

Several elements shape language learners' ability to achieve either high or low levels of English proficiency. However, these factors may change over time due to evolving educational trends, technological advancements, and shifting social movements and learner needs. Many studies have been conducted in order to identify and categorise the determinants of language development.

This study investigates the key elements that contribute to both the contemporary development of high-level English language competence and those that hamper progress among secondary school students. This research provides insights that may help educators become aware of what improves language proficiency and what hinders it and challenges learners.

**Keywords**

language proficiency, learning English, language development

## **Sukcesy i trudności w posługiwaniu się językiem angielskim: Bliższa analiza**

### **Abstrakt**

Kilka czynników kształtuje zdolność osób uczących się języka do osiągnięcia wysokiego lub niskiego poziomu znajomości języka angielskiego. Czynniki te mogą jednak zmieniać się w czasie ze względu na ewoluujące trendy edukacyjne, postęp technologiczny oraz zmieniające się tendencje społeczne i potrzeby osób uczących się. Przeprowadzono wiele badań w celu zidentyfikowania i skategoryzowania czynników determinujących rozwój językowy.

Niniejsze badanie dotyczy kluczowych elementów, które przyczyniają się zarówno do współczesnego rozwoju kompetencji językowych na wysokim poziomie, jak i tych, które utrudniają postępy wśród uczniów szkół średnich. Badanie to dostarcza spostrzeżeń, które mogą pomóc nauczycielom uświadomić sobie, co poprawia biegłość językową, a co ją utrudnia i stanowi wyzwanie dla uczniów.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

biegłość językowa, nauka języka angielskiego, rozwój językowy

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a shift in the level of English language proficiency among students, with a noticeable number achieving high levels of competence. This trend requires closer examination of the factors that contribute to this linguistic improvement. At the same time, despite widespread exposure to English through formal education at schools, digital media and other easily accessible sources, some students still struggle to attain even an average level of proficiency. It seems valuable to gain insight into the underlying reasons for both high achievement and lower performance in English language learning.

The general factors have been widely examined by many linguists and researchers in the field of second language acquisition. Ellis (1985) indicates seven major determinants of language learning success and they are: age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality. Brown (2007) classifies the factors into several wide domains, such as individual learner traits, linguistic considerations, learning processes, age and acquisition, instructional methods, contextual influences, and the learner's purpose for studying the language. Similarly, Renandya (2013) has created eight critical elements, which are the following: the role of input and output, the development of fluency, the use of formulaic expressions, motivation, grammar, vocabulary, as well as the amount and intensity of instruction received. Lightbown and Spada (1999) identify additional influential components, including personal attributes and experiences of the learner, their cultural and social background, differences between the native and target languages, the extent of exposure to native speakers, and access to corrective feedback and instruction focused on language form.

Some of the most frequently indicated factors influencing a learner's language competence are learner motivation, teacher-related factors, personal characteristics, instructional strategies, learning exposure, the social environment. These components appear to form a common foundation across multiple studies exploring language acquisition. Given their recurring significance in the literature, it is worth examining these key factors in detail to understand how they contribute to learners' attainment of a high level of English language proficiency.

One of the most common factors often pointed is learner motivation and positive attitudes towards English. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), learners who possess a high level of motivation, particularly when it stems from a positive attitude toward the target language, are more likely to be successful in second language acquisition. Such motivated students are goal-oriented and willing to invest their time and effort beyond the classroom in order to reach their language learning objectives.

It is important to emphasize that motivation bears a reciprocal relation to learning and performance, which means that it influences learning and performance and, in turn, what students learn and do impacts their motivation (Schunk and Zimmerman 2008). When learners accomplish their goals, they gain a sense of competence, success and self-confidence, which enhances their willingness to pursue further challenges. This process reinforces their engagement and encourages them to set new objectives, accordingly sustaining their long-term commitment to language learning. Motivation plays a vital role in learning and, as Dörnyei (1994: 273) states, “[it] is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language learning achievement”.

It seems evident that reaching a high level of English language competence is not possible without teacher’s actions. Those educators who not only show their linguistic competence but also use varied and meaningful materials, create opportunities for speaking practice, provide clear instructions and conduct their lessons in an organized way contribute greatly to learners’ language proficiency. Borg (2006) emphasizes that teachers’ beliefs about language learning influence their instructional choices and classroom practices. When teachers maintain high expectations and provide constructive feedback, they help build students’ confidence. Educators who employ reflective teaching practices and systematically adapt their methods by, for example, incorporating student feedback and emerging technologies, are better positioned to support diverse learning styles and abilities (Harmer 2015). However, teachers’ influence extends beyond providing instructions and learning materials or controlling the lessons. Harmer (2007) underlines that effective educators not only deliver content but also create a supportive and stimulating environment, which facilitates fostering language acquisition. Teachers’ enthusiasm, patience, positive approach and dedication can considerably improve learners’ motivation, which, as has been stated, is a key component in successful language learning.

Students' personality traits, much like those of teachers, play a substantial role in the attainment of high English language competence. Qualities such as openness to experience, extroversion, risk-taking, self-confidence, and conscientiousness significantly contribute to language development. Learner's openness encourages intellectual curiosity and risk-taking, vital for experimenting with new language structures, while extroversion is connected with increased verbal interaction and reduced anxiety (Dewaele and Furnham 1999). As Biedroń (2011: 484) states openness to experience, due to its association with intellectual functioning and significantly affected by genetic factors "seems to be the most powerful modifying personality variable that affects foreign language aptitude". Conscientious students are more likely to adopt effective strategies and steadily apply themselves to language practice and revision. Self-confidence is central to developing communicative skills as it enables learners to engage in speaking activities without unnecessary fear of making mistakes and, thereby, promoting learning through trial and error.

Additionally, metacognition – the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's learning – also correlates with better outcomes (Oxford 1990). Reflective and strategic learners tend to make consistent and effective progress. Equally important is a student's belief in his or her own capabilities. Learners with high self-efficacy are more inclined to deal with challenging tasks and persist through difficulties they encounter while learning the language. According to Bandura (1997) individuals with strong sense of self-belief are more resilient to setbacks and are more likely to achieve higher levels of performance. All these traits collectively support learners in reaching advanced levels of English proficiency.

The use of effective learning strategies has been perceived as another integral factor influencing students' language competence. Research shows that proficient language learners employ a broader and more refined range of strategies than their less skilled peers (Oxford 1990, Griffiths 2008). These strategies

include cognitive strategies such as summarizing texts, analysing language patterns or taking notes; metacognitive strategies like setting goals, planning, monitoring and evaluating progress; social strategies involving interaction with others (for example, practising with peers, participating in discussion groups, or having language exchange partners); affective strategies, which focus on managing emotions; memory strategies aiming at helping students to remember vocabulary and rules; compensation strategies which can be used when a gap in knowledge appears (for example, guessing meaning from context, using synonyms or gestures when vocabulary fails). These strategic behaviours not only support the development of language skills but also increase learners' autonomy and motivation. As Rubin (1975) and later Griffiths (2013) emphasize, successful learners are not necessarily more intelligent but rather more aware of and committed to using strategies that support their individual learning styles and goals.

Students' exposure to English outside the classroom also significantly affects achieving high level of the language competence. Richards (2015) emphasizes the importance of exposure to the English language through real-life usage, asserting that learners who use English media regularly tend to be more confident and fluent. Sockett (2014) highlights the critical role of digital tools and entertainment platforms in enhancing students' competence and confidence in language use. This type of exposure to a foreign language helps learners to reinforce their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in authentic contexts. Kuppens (2010) points out that watching subtitled English-language television programs, films or serials substantially contributes to listening comprehension and language awareness. Digital media are a useful tool in achieving higher levels of the English language. Peters et al. (2016) emphasize that incidental vocabulary learning is notably effective when learners are engaged in interactive and meaningful content, such as video games or YouTube channels. Furthermore, Reinders and Benson (2017) highlight that this type of informal exposure together with

learner autonomy enable students to take control of their language development. Therefore, learners who immerse themselves in English through varied, independent means build both competence and confidence, which in turn results in better language performance. Accordingly, providing opportunities and encouragement for students to engage with English beyond typically structured lessons is essential for obtaining advanced language skills.

Socioeconomic status and demographic factors affect language learning outcomes as well. Students from economically advantaged backgrounds frequently have access to a wider range of resources that can support English language learning. These include private lessons, language courses, technology and additionally travel opportunities to English-speaking countries. Socially, students raised in environments that value learning and support academic achievement are more likely to develop high English proficiency. This includes parental care and attitudes, where encouragement and involvement in a child's education can greatly impact their motivation and engagement (Gardner 2007). Furthermore, students who have access to English-speaking peers, whether through international communities, or online platforms, are provided with more frequent opportunities to practise English in informal and communicative contexts. These interactions not only reinforce vocabulary and fluency but also enhance confidence and cultural understanding (Lamb 2011). It shows that access to different resources, parental care and support, a stimulating environment, and educational opportunities often correlate with higher proficiency levels.

When examining various factors contributing to low levels of English language proficiency, it becomes evident that many of them stand in direct contrast to those that foster high language achievement. The main obstacles that language learners face include a lack of student motivation, heightened language learning anxiety, and a lack of exposure to authentic linguistic input. Furthermore, the use of ineffective teaching methods,

such as overreliance on rote memorization rather than communicative or interactive approaches, significantly hinders language development. Additional challenges involve the absence of strategic learning behaviors, limited parental involvement, and a social environment that does not promote language acquisition. Structural issues within the educational system, such as overcrowded classrooms, scarcity of individualized feedback, and restricted access to modern resources such as up-to-date coursebooks or digital learning tools, further compound these difficulties.

Collectively, these factors create a learning environment that is neither engaging nor supportive, making it demanding for students to meaningfully interact with the language. As a result, learners struggle to make sustained progress, which often leads to persistently low proficiency levels.

An important question arises as to whether the contemporary factors influencing both high and low English language proficiency align with those previously identified, or whether evolving educational, technological, and sociocultural contexts have introduced new influencing factors.

## **2. Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research design and procedures employed to investigate the factors that contribute to or hinder English language proficiency among learners. It presents the main aims of the study, provides a description of the participants of the questionnaire and analyses the research questions and responses. The goal is to identify specific elements that contribute to students' success or struggles in acquiring English proficiency.

### **2.1. The aim of the study**

The main objective of this study is to explore and verify the key factors that contribute to upper-secondary school students'



high or low proficiency in English as a foreign language. Understanding the diversity in students' language competence, the research aims to examine which elements support or hinder learners' language development from their own perspective. To achieve this, a group of students were asked to reflect on their personal experiences with language learning and identify the factors they believe have helped them attain a strong command of English, as well as those that have obstructed their progress.

The study also seeks to determine whether the factors indicated by students correspond with those presented in existing literature. By collecting direct feedback from learners, the research tries to provide practical insights into how to support English language learning. It can serve as a foundation for developing more effective strategies and learning environments tailored to present students' needs.

## **2.2. Participants**

The study was conducted in Poland at a highly reputable upper secondary school in Gdansk. A total number of 167 teenagers (89 girls and 78 boys) aged from 15 to 17 participated in the questionnaire. They were second- and third-grade students, who had already been learning English for 7 to 11 years. The data show that the respondents have wide experience regarding learning English. At the moment when the questionnaire was conducted, the students were learning the language at either an upper-intermediate or early-advanced level. They had from 3 to 5 hours of the foreign language a week depending on whether they attended basic or extended language classes. The majority of the students successfully achieved the requisite level of the English language in order to pass the final upper-secondary school examination (*Matura*) with either a very good or an outstanding result.

### 2.3. Questionnaire

The students were provided with a survey, which included questions related to various aspects of both motivation to learn English and the factors influencing a high and low level of the language proficiency. The research presented here consists of selected 3 questions in total<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning, the respondents were requested to self-assess their knowledge of the language and they could choose from 5 options (from a poor to very good level of the English language). Additional questions explored the methods or techniques through which the students had attained their high level of proficiency, alternatively, the factors that may have impeded their language progress. The respondents were encouraged to provide their own insights and reflections related to the questions asked.

The part of the questionnaire which was completed by the upper-secondary school students is presented in Appendix 1 along with its corresponding English translation (Appendix 2).

### 3. Results

Table 1 presents the results of students' self-assessment of their language proficiency.

**Table 1.** Rate of the knowledge of the English language

Rate of the knowledge of the English language	Number of students	Percentage
good	79	47%
very good	57	34%
relatively good	20	12%
average	10	6%
poor	1	1%
Total	167	100%

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents a part of a larger study which was conducted in an upper-secondary school.

As illustrated, out of the 167 upper-secondary school students, the largest proportion (47%) rated their English proficiency as *good*, followed by 34% who considered it *very good*. In total, 92% of the respondents assessed their language skills as at least *relatively good*. Only a small percentage, 7% of the learners, described their proficiency as *average* or *poor*. These self-evaluations appear to be consistent with the results of the diagnostic test<sup>2</sup> conducted at the beginning of the first year in this upper-secondary school, which measures students' English language competence.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the elements that contribute to students' high proficiency in English, the survey included a follow-up question directed at those who rated their language skills as *good*, *very good*, or *excellent*. These learners were asked to identify the most influential factors that, in their opinion, played a significant role in their English language development. The respondents were given an opportunity to select multiple options from a list, provide their own input if they felt additional factors were relevant and add any significant information. The data gathered from their responses are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Factors contributing to the achievement of a high level of English proficiency

Factors contributing to the achievement of a high level of English proficiency	Number of answers	Percentage
films, series, YouTube videos, and social media	136	40%
private English lessons	97	28%
high level of English in primary schools	58	17%
other factors:		
- playing computer games	11	3%
- reading books in English	10	3%

<sup>2</sup> The first-year students of this upper-secondary school take a language level test at the beginning of the school year and the results show that on average 22% of the learners start education at this school with B2 or higher level of English, 69% with B1 level, and the rest of the students below B1 level.

- self-learning	7	2%
- trips abroad	6	2%
- conversations with native speakers	5	1%
- living in an English-speaking country	3	1%
- visiting family who live in the UK	2	1%
- language camps	2	1%
- a parent as a language teacher	2	1%
Total	339	100%

The data in Table 2 demonstrate that entertainment-related digital media, including series, films, You Tube videos, and social media platforms, are the most influential factors contributing to the high English language proficiency among the upper-secondary school students. A significant number of the examined learners (136 out of 156 students<sup>3</sup>) reported that their language skills were improved informally through frequent exposure to English-language content outside the classroom. Private English lessons were identified as the second most influential factor, with 62% (97 out of 156) of the respondents attributing their success to this form of support. A high level and quality of English lessons in primary schools ranked third.<sup>4</sup>

Other contributing elements mentioned by the examined students relate to leisure activities such as playing computer games (3% of all the answers) and reading books in English (3% of all the answers). Self-directed learning was chosen by 7 students, while 6 respondents indicated that travelling abroad and an opportunity to practise English in a foreign country (in real-life contexts) played an important role in their language development. Less commonly mentioned factors include interactions with native speakers, living in an English-speaking country, visiting family abroad, attending language camps, and having a parent who is an English teacher – each accounting for 1% of

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<sup>3</sup> This is the total number of students who claimed that their level of English is at least good.

<sup>4</sup> It should be highlighted that around a third of the students of this particular secondary school attended private primary schools.

all the responses. Each of these 1% factors represents a relatively rare circumstance and reflects less commonly occurring motivations for learning English.

A more in-depth analysis, focusing on combinations of elements selected by the respondents, reveals that a collaboration of entertainment-related digital media and a good teacher, either at private lessons or at primary schools, made the learners achieve a high level of proficiency. Notably, 89 students marked both entertainment-related digital media and a good English teacher as crucial to reaching high English language competence. A group of 37 students chose digital media (without marking classes with a good teacher) as the key factor which helped them improve their language skills, and 30 respondents selected lessons with a competent language teacher (without indicating digital media) as the main element of their good command of English.

The students could also provide additional reflections to this question. A group of 27 respondents offered different types of explanations. 13 students stated that the combination of social media exposure and teacher guidance is highly beneficial. They explained that digital media offer a wide spectrum of engaging content and the English language is treated as a tool to understand this information. English teachers are needed as they clarify vague, complex or unknown language aspects, and then the students feel cared for. However, these are not the only roles which are significant. Some of the respondents mentioned that teachers' attitude to the subject and their students is of paramount importance. Their engagement, pleasant disposition, praise and eagerness to help make students more willing to learn and achieve better results. However, some of the respondents (9 students) criticized the school curriculum indicating that the language taught in classrooms is overly formal, sometimes "artificial" and disconnected from the "real" English which can be encountered in digital media.

In a follow-up question, the students who self-assessed their English proficiency as low or insufficient (11 respondents)

were asked to identify the reasons for that situation. The participants could select more than one option, and additional open responses (classified as “other factors”) were grouped into 3 categories, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Factors contributing to an average or low level of English proficiency

Factors contributing to an average or low level of English proficiency	Number of answers	Percentage
inefficient way of conducting lessons in primary school	13	46%
lack of willingness to learn the language	7	25%
other factors: - difficulties in learning English	5	18%
- dyslexia	2	7%
- the pressure connected with marks and final exams	1	4%
Total	28	100%

The results indicate that the most common reason for a relatively low level of English proficiency is the unsatisfactory quality of English lessons in primary schools (46% of all the responses). Furthermore, reluctance to learn the language was reported by 7 respondents as a major barrier to make further progress. Having difficulty in learning English is presented as another aspect contributing to low level of the language. Among the 5 students who elaborated on this issue, 2 reported that “they have been trying to learn English but they have not succeeded”, while another 2 students admitted that they “don’t know how to learn effectively”. 1 student stated that “there is a lack of ideas how to improve his learning”. These answers demonstrate the learners’ limited knowledge concerning learning strategies, which could help them support their progress. 2 respondents identified dyslexia as one of the key elements impeding their language development, highlighting the need for additional teacher’s support. 1 student stated that the pressure

related to the Matura examination and the emphasis on grades contributed to a stressful learning environment, which negatively affected their ability to develop language skills.

Interestingly, 13 respondents pointed to poor teaching in primary school as a hindrance which surpasses the number of the students rating their language as low. This discrepancy can be easily explained since some students who demonstrate good English skills also indicated poor command of English at school as a factor which hindered their linguistic development.

The respondents could also provide their comments connected with the low level of the language. They frequently criticized school-based English instructions, noting issues such as the overuse of Polish during lessons, an excessive focus on grammar, limited speaking opportunities, lack of classroom management, and a generally disorganized teaching environment. A few students explained that in their primary school their level of English was good in comparison with the rest of the students, but when they continued their education in secondary school, with a new group of students, they realized that their knowledge of the language is poor. Other reflections indicated students' laziness as the factor influencing a poor command of English.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study offers a comprehensive examination at the factors that influence the high or low level of the English language among upper-secondary school students.

One of the most significant findings is the change in sources of language acquisition. While both teachers at school and private tutors are still reported as important contributors to students' English proficiency, digital media platforms such as films, TV series, YouTube videos, and social media now play an equally or even more prominent role. This indicates a broader transformation in the way students acquire and practise English, with independent, technology-driven exposure comple-

menting or, in some cases, surpassing traditional classroom instruction. The growing role of informal learning environments should prompt educators to rethink their roles and adapt their teaching methods to the realities of learners' digital engagement with English. It might be beneficial to encourage educators to use these elements of media in their teaching practice to make lessons more attractive and adjusted to students' needs and interests.

The research also shows that, in the era of intensive technological development, teachers of English are still an essential source of information and guidance in the process of learning the language. However, the respondents' reflections suggest that educators should show their students various techniques and strategies how to learn the language as it can lead to easier and faster acquisition of a foreign language. It can also help promote student autonomy, making them more responsible for their own learning.

The small percentage of students who assessed their language level as average or low pointed to such factors as ineffective school instruction, lack of learning strategies, and personal disinterest. This highlights a need for early intervention, particularly in equipping students with explicit strategy training and learner support. It also underlines the long-term impact of early language education quality. As students gain awareness of how to learn, they are more likely to apply effective strategies consistently, ultimately leading to better language competence.

Supporting students in becoming autonomous, motivated, and reflective learners, while ensuring quality instruction, may be the key leading to high levels of language competence in today's evolving educational environment.



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