

THE BEST AND WORST SCHOOL MEMORIES AND THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article provides an extensive psycho-pedagogical analysis of students' most positive and negative school memories, the psychological and social factors shaping these memories, and the linguistic and cognitive challenges encountered in learning English as a foreign language. The paper examines how emotional school experiences influence motivation, self-perception, and academic attitudes in later stages of education. The research reveals that positive memories are often associated with supportive teachers, successful academic or social experiences, and a psychologically safe environment. Negative memories frequently arise from high academic pressure, social anxiety, peer conflicts, and emotional stress. The challenges in learning English are linked to phonetic differences, vocabulary acquisition problems, grammatical complexity, listening difficulties, and psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety.

Keywords: *school memories, emotional development, teacher–student relations, foreign language acquisition, motivation, listening comprehension, vocabulary development.*

Introduction

School is one of the most influential social institutions that shapes students' intellectual, emotional, and social development. During school years, learners not only acquire academic knowledge but also form emotional memories, life experiences, and interpersonal skills. Because of this, the quality of school memories—whether positive or negative—plays a significant role in shaping students' future attitudes toward learning, confidence, and motivation.

In the context of globalization, English language proficiency has become a critical component of modern education. However, learners often experience numerous difficulties caused by linguistic, psychological, and methodological factors. This article provides an integrated scientific analysis of the connection between emotional school experiences and the challenges faced in acquiring English.

Methodology

Literature Review. More than 70 scholarly sources in educational psychology, linguodidactics, second-language acquisition, and cognitive development were examined.

Empirical Research. Surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 120 students aged 12–18.

Observation. Teacher–student interactions, classroom environment, communication patterns, and behavioral responses were observed in real learning settings.

Analysis and Synthesis. Collected data were compared with existing theoretical frameworks and summarized into conceptual conclusions.

Factors Shaping Positive School Memories

Teacher Personality and Pedagogical Competence. The analysis indicates that students' most positive memories are linked to supportive, empathetic, and engaging teachers. The emotional climate created by the teacher significantly influences students' interest in learning. A simple smile, clear explanation of difficult topics, or timely encouragement can strongly enhance motivation and emotional well-being.

Social Experiences and Integrative Activities. School trips, competitions, group projects, clubs, and celebrations leave lasting positive impressions. Such activities develop teamwork, friendship, communication skills, and a sense of belonging—key components of healthy social development.

The Feeling of Success and Self-Expression. Even minor achievements—good grades, recognition, awards, or verbal praise—reinforce self-confidence. From a psychological perspective, the feeling of success stimulates dopamine release, which naturally increases a learner's desire to engage further in academic activity.

Factors Shaping Negative School Memories

Academic Stress and Assessment Pressure. Frequent tests, strict grading, perfectionist expectations, and parental pressure create emotional tension. Many students associate their worst school memories with exam anxiety, fear of failure, and the psychological burden of high expectations.

Social Anxiety and Public Embarrassment. Answering questions in front of the class, making mistakes, or receiving harsh criticism from a teacher can create long-term emotional trauma. These experiences often trigger social anxiety, which affects overall academic performance.

Bullying and Peer Conflicts. Bullying, mockery, exclusion, or social isolation are among the most damaging school experiences. Such events negatively influence self-esteem, mental health, and the student's emotional relationship with school.

Expanded Analysis of English Learning Challenges

Challenges in Vocabulary Development

Polysemy (multiple meanings). Many English words have numerous meanings (e.g., *run, set, take*). Distinguishing these meanings requires well-developed semantic maps, which are often not fully formed in learners.

Idiomatic Expressions and Cultural References. Idioms (e.g., *break the ice, hit the books*) cannot be understood through literal translation. Understanding them requires cultural awareness, which increases the cognitive load on students.

Difficulty with Collocations

Words in English often appear together in fixed combinations:

1. **make a decision**, not *do a decision*
2. **heavy rain**, not *strong rain*

Incorrect transfer from native language leads to errors.

Synonyms and Register Differences

English has numerous synonyms with different stylistic levels:

1. *child* (neutral)
2. *kid* (informal)
3. *offspring* (scientific)
4. *minor* (legal)

Selecting the correct register requires advanced linguistic awareness.

Word-Formation Complexity. English uses many prefixes and suffixes that modify meaning (*un-, mis-, -tion, -able*). Students with weak morphological awareness struggle with decoding new words.

Memorization and Long-Term Retention Difficulty. Memorizing isolated word lists is ineffective because long-term retention requires contextualized, emotionally meaningful, and practical usage.

Passive vs. Active Vocabulary Gap. Many learners recognize far more words (passive vocabulary) than they actively use. This gap limits fluency and communicative competence.

Expanded Challenges in Listening Comprehension

Fast Speech and Connected Speech. Native speakers often link words together:

1. *want to* → *wanna*
2. *going to* → *gonna*

Classroom pronunciation rarely reflects these natural patterns, creating listening gaps.

Accent Variety. English is spoken in numerous accents—American, British, Australian, Indian, African, etc.—each with different phonetic features. This requires a flexible auditory perception system.

Phonetic Reductions and Elisions. Common spoken reductions include:

1. *I would have* → *I'd've*
2. *give me* → *gimme*

Recognizing such reductions demands strong prosodic awareness.

Context-Dependent Lexical Changes. Word stress or grammatical function changes meaning:

record (noun) vs. **record** (verb)

Learners must process such differences instantly while listening.

High Cognitive Load During Listening. The listener must simultaneously:

1. decode sounds
2. recognize words
3. interpret grammar
4. translate or infer meaning
5. store information in working memory

This places a heavy burden on mental processing.

Lack of Background Knowledge. Listening tasks often include cultural references, humor, idioms, or historical context that foreign learners may not know. This limits comprehension regardless of language proficiency.

Listening Anxiety. Fear of misunderstanding increases stress and disrupts attention. Anxiety reduces working-memory capacity, directly harming listening performance.

Environmental Noise. Real-life listening conditions often include background noise, overlapping speech, and distractions, making comprehension more difficult than textbook listening exercises.

Discussion

The findings suggest that positive and negative school memories significantly influence learners' psychological readiness to acquire foreign languages. Supportive teachers and emotionally secure classrooms reduce language anxiety and enhance participation. Stressful or socially threatening environments increase avoidance

behaviors, reduce motivation, and produce weaker academic outcomes. A well-structured pedagogical environment using communicative methods, scaffolding, and emotional support can effectively reduce the linguistic and psychological challenges described above.

In conclusion, School memories play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional development, self-esteem, and long-term attitudes toward learning. Positive school memories, often linked to supportive teacher behavior, collaborative activities, and successful academic experiences, promote intrinsic motivation and lifelong learning. Negative school memories, including exam stress, social anxiety, and bullying, can create emotional barriers that hinder academic engagement and overall psychological well-being. English language learning difficulties arise from complex linguistic features (phonetics, grammar, vocabulary), cultural and contextual differences, cognitive overload, and psychological barriers such as speaking and listening anxiety. A supportive, student-centered educational environment significantly reduces these challenges and fosters greater success in language acquisition. Combining modern instructional strategies (communicative approach, task-based learning, multisensory input) with an emotionally safe classroom climate is essential for improving vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and overall language proficiency.

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