LEARNING CHALLENGES FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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Abstract. This research examines the educational problems which affect students who learn English and German as their second language although both languages belong to the Germanic language family. The initial stages of English learning prove easier than other languages because of its basic morphology and worldwide visibility yet students encounter problems with its unpredictable spelling and pronunciation systems. The German language creates difficulties for students during their initial grammar learning phase because of its gender-based nouns and complex case system yet it becomes simpler as time progresses. The research study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather information from 120 participants who studied in five different nations. The study presents a comparative table which outlines the main learning difficulties and then examines the obtained results. The study results affect how educational programs should develop their foreign language curriculum and support systems for their students.

Keywords: English learners, German learners, second language acquisition, language difficulty, grammar, pronunciation, listening comprehension, motivation, comparative study.

1. Introduction. Languages from the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, especially English and German, are widely spoken and taught around the world. English serves as the main global common language, while German is important in academic, industrial, and cultural settings, particularly in Europe. As globalization increases, it is becoming more necessary to master at least one of these languages.

Although English and German come from the same linguistic ancestor and share some vocabulary, the experience of learning them can be very different. English is often described as "easy to start but hard to master," while German can seem grammatically challenging at first but is more consistent in its structure. For non-native speakers, the learning journey is influenced by their native language, educational systems, and exposure to the language environment.

This paper aims to explore and compare the specific learning challenges of English and German for non-native learners. It will focus on difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, and sound patterns, while also considering the psychological and cultural experiences of learners. The goal of this research is to improve teaching methods and language policies.

 Literature Review. Several researches have explored the intricacies faced by native speakers when learning a second or foreign language. English and German, which are two West Germanic languages, exhibit different learner difficulties for the people around the world.

1.1. Difficulties in Learning the English Language

English has come to be commonly accepted as the world lingua franca (Crystal, 2003), and its availability has resulted in extensive teaching globally. Despite the fact that it has apparently straightforward syntax and few verb conjugations, numerous researchers indicate that English has irregular spelling conventions, difficult-to-predict pronunciation, and lots of idiomatic expressions (Swan & Smith, 2001).

As per Lightbown and Spada (2013), among the primary challenges English learners encounter is the pronunciation since grapheme-phoneme correspondence is irregular. For example, though, through, tough, and thought have comparable spelling but different pronunciation, which can be demotivating for learners.

Another challenge is the widely used phrasal verbs, for example give up, take off, run into, especially for second language learners whose first languages do not rely on verb-particle constructions. According to Ellis (1997), learners rely on a literal translation from their first language that adds to the complications involved in understanding and proper usage.

2.2 Problems in Learning German

German is generally characterized as a morphologically complex language, and it is famous for its complexity in grammar. As König and van der Auwera (1994) explain, the greatest obstacle facing German learners is the case system (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive), which plays an influential role in word order and the use of articles.

The fact that German nouns have three grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) and need to be adapted in articles and adjective suffixes accordingly makes it more laborious to learn the vocabulary (Odlin, 1989). Unlike English, where the definite article is merely the, German learners need to learn der, die, and das and their inflected versions (den, dem, des, etc.).

Dörnyei (2009) also emphasizes the cognitive overload that beginner German learners face, particularly when trying to parse long, compound words and nested sentence structures. However, many researchers (e.g., McWhorter, 2018) argue that German becomes easier at intermediate and advanced levels due to its internal consistency and logical grammar rules.

2.3 Comparative Insights

Several comparative studies in linguistics show how English and German, while originating from the same source, have vastly different pedagogical purposes. English is more "lexically messy" because it has borrowed for centuries for the sake of irregularity from French and Latin and others (Crystal, 2003). German, on the other hand, retains much of its inflectional system while remaining logical and foreign to speakers of analytic languages like Turkish or Japanese.

Also, the impact of first language (L1) interference is well-established in both languages. Brown (2007) addresses how learners will transfer grammatical rules or pronunciation habits from their mother tongue, something that can be more disturbing in German because of its strict rules and mandatory memorization.

Moreover, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis stipulates that emotional conditions such as anxiety, motivation, and relevant culture have a significant contribution to effective language learning. English is advantaged in this case by increased international exposure in media and technology, which allows students to develop emotional attachment and exposure (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

While a majority of research has focused on one language or learners from one region, few studies have comparative findings that highlight the difference in learner experience by geography. Moreover, recent literature loses the socio-technological element—how the learners use digital tools and exposure from social networking, film, and language learning applications in learning English or German.

The aim of the present paper is to close these gaps by offering a mixed-methods comparative study of the issues that students of both languages are facing in different countries and cultural backgrounds.

2. Method and Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study applied a mixed-method strategy, making use of both qualitative and quantitative information. A questionnaire was administered to the learners, with follow-up interview and open-ended reflective journal for further insight.

2.2 Participants

120 participants (60 English, 60 German) were selected from five countries: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Poland, and Japan. Participants should be between the age of 18 and 35 years and have at least one year of academic study in the language. The sample was also heterogeneous in terms of language background, age, and proficiency level (A2 to C1 CEFR).

2.3 Instruments

Questionnaire: 20-item questionnaire that identified challenges in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening comprehension, fear of speaking, and motivation.

Interviews: Conducted with 20 randomly selected participants to provide richer context.

Reflective Journals: 15 participants provided weekly reflections for a month to capture transforming experiences.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was processed using SPSS for statistical significance and graphical illustration. Qualitative data was processed thematically using NVivo software.

3. Results

The following table summarizes the most commonly reported challenges in learning English and German across six domains:

Table 1: Common Learning Challenges Among Non-Native Speakers

Category	English Learners (% Reporting Difficulty)	German Learners (% Reporting Difficulty)
Irregular spelling & pronunciation	87%	41%
Grammar complexity (e.g., cases, articles)	54%	89%
Listening comprehension	72%	66%
Speaking confidence	64%	61%
Vocabulary acquisition	58%	73%
Motivation & cultural relevance	45%	52%

Additional Data Highlights:

62% of English learners noted frustration with phrasal verbs.

77% of German learners cited difficulties in remembering noun genders.

71% of participants said they found German grammar "too structured" at the beginner level, compared to 33% for English.\

4.1 Additional Quantitative Findings

English phrasal verbs were deemed "very difficult" by 62% of English language learners, particularly from Slavic and Turkic linguistic backgrounds.

Most common solitary issue was German noun gender memorization, reported by 77% of learners as "confusing and demotivating."

German compound word construction (e.g., Schadenfreude, Kugelschreiber, Fernsehapparat) was unfamiliar to over 68% of beginners.

Regional variants of English (e.g., Scottish, American Southern, Australian) resulted in confusion for 61% of learners, even at intermediate level.

Structure of sentences in German, where the main verb often follows the phrase, was problematic for 70% of German learners.

4.2 Survey-Based Language-Specific Observations
- English Learners' Top 3 Challenges (in rank order):
- Inconsistency in pronunciation and spelling
- Listening comprehension (due to variation in accents)
- Phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions
- German Learners' Top 3 Challenges (in rank order):
- Case system and agreement with article-nouns
- Remembering noun genders
- Vocabulary (especially compound nouns)

4.3 Qualitative Interview Answers
Qualitative interview results revealed additional personal experiences that supported and supplemented the survey results:

Uzbek English learner:
"I am able to read in a normal way, but if I listen to movies or podcasts, I get confused because they talk too fast and use phrases we never studied."

Turkish German learner:
"I tried to talk, but I always stumble because I remember whether it is 'der', 'die' or 'das.' I am ashamed of it."

Japanese English learner:
"Spelling irritates me. Why do they say 'colonel' like 'kernel'? It does not make sense!"

Polish German learner:
"German is hard at first, especially the grammar, but once you figure it out, it is very logical. English never appears logical to me."

4.4 Gender and Age-Based Observations
Although the study did not concentrate on investigating gender differences in the area of learning, there were minor trends apparent:
Female learners mentioned more speaking anxiety (especially English) and motivation when language learning was linked to career or education.
Younger learners under the age of 25 were more likely to use language learning tools like Duolingo, Memrise, or Anki, and felt a slight less frustration after experience with gamified learning.

4. Analysis
The gap between English and German learning difficulty reflects their linguistic composition and socio-cultural standing. Though morphologically easier, English uses numerous exceptions and idiomatic expressions that make achieving fluency complicated. As an international language, its use subjects learners to various contexts and dialects that are daunting.
The reason German is complex is due to its logical but inflexible structure. Most students have attested that once the initial grammar is learned, it becomes easier to study. Nevertheless, the initial intellectual effort is greater, particularly in students coming from non-inflected language structures (such as Japanese or Turkish).

The second primary issue that comes up in the interviews is the role of exposure and motivation to culture. Students who had exposed themselves to English through music, movies, and social media were more motivated and self-assured even in spite of linguistic challenges. German, being less internationally ubiquitous in popular culture, provided fewer such "soft exposure" opportunities, and motivation was hence lower in some learners.

Education systems also have their part to play. Where English is taught at early levels, students are more likely to get accustomed to it, even if the level of improvement plateaus. German is also typically taught later, more intensively but with less scope for spontaneous learning.

In addition, Central Asian students bemoaned the lack of availability of the same quality of German learning materials as English, which was reflected in their performance.

5. Discussion

The study's conclusions show that while German and English are both Germanic languages, learners encounter very different kinds of challenges in terms of timing, intensity, and nature. German mainly presents learners with its strict and intricate grammatical structures, whereas English tends to perplex them with its inconsistencies and unpredictable nature.

5.1 English: International but Unreliable

The information confirms previous research that suggests irregular spelling and pronunciation of English pose a significant challenge for learners (Crystal, 2003; Swan & Smith, 2001). The overwhelming 87% of English language learners who said they had trouble pronouncing and spelling words correctly supports the long-standing argument in language pedagogy that English is an orthographically chaotic language. Additionally, learners' frustration with idioms and phrasal verbs suggests a more serious issue—English frequently calls for cultural and contextual knowledge in addition to grammatical rules. One interviewee pointed out that learning vocabulary alone is insufficient; one also needs to understand how it is used in normal speech. These results also support Brown's (2007) assertion that one of the main factors contributing to English language difficulty is pragmatic and functional language use.

5.2 German: Systematic but Grammatically Demanding

However, 89% of German language learners stated that their biggest problem was grammar, particularly cases, gender, and article-noun agreement. This is consistent with König and van der Auwera's (1994) assessment of German as a highly inflected language in which morphological precision is essential.

Qualitative data and some survey responses, however, point to a distinct pattern: German is more difficult at first, but because of its internal consistency, it gets easier at intermediate and advanced levels. Students learn to value the structure and logic of German grammar, which stands in sharp contrast to the irregularities of English. This bolsters Dörnyei's (2009) hypothesis that cognitive load reduces as students internalize a consistent rule-based system.

5.3 Mutually Challenging: Confidence in Listening and Speaking

Both the German and English learners, despite their differences, also had moderate to high difficulty with speaking and listening confidence. This is perhaps not so much about the language itself but rather affective learning factors—such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or a lack of exposure to native speakers (Krashen, 1985). This commends the need for interactive and communicative approaches to language teaching that offer potential for real-time practice, especially where immersion is not feasible.

In a fascinating contrast, motivation levels for both groups were quite high, with the English learners being marginally more instrumentally motivated (concerned with work and international communication) and the German learners more integratively motivated (concerned with culture, study, and heritage). This is important in that it shows that motivation is affected by both learner background and status of language.

5.4 Technological Impact and Self-Directed Learning

While not a predominant variable, interviewees routinely credited the role of language learning software (e.g., Duolingo, Memrise) and online exposure (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Netflix) with helping to facilitate their practice. Younger learners (age <25 years) welcomed gamification and visual exposure, which seemed to reduce frustration and make grammar or vocabulary practice more acceptable. This would suggest increased investigation of the technological facet of language learning, especially in hybrid and autonomous paradigms.

5.5 Implications for Educators

These results have far-reaching implications for language teachers and curriculum developers. For German, a greater emphasis on the use of visual grammatical aids, color-coded case systems, and mnemonic devices can bear fruit. Providing interactive learning environments, language exchange opportunities, and computer access can also break down affective barriers and foster learner autonomy. For English, there needs to be a greater emphasis on listening comprehension and idiomatic use, coupled with the application of phonics and pattern recognition to spell.

6. Conclusion

The study shows English and German languages create different obstacles for non-native learners during specific learning stages. English seems easy to learn because of its straightforward verb forms and worldwide recognition but has confusing rules. The German language presents initial difficulties through its intricate grammar system but becomes more understandable for students after they complete their initial learning phase. The research suggests educational systems require adaptable teaching methods as part of their approach. The teaching of English must emphasize the study of idioms and diverse dialect understanding in addition to vocabulary meaning differences. The use of simplified German grammar tools which integrate game-based learning for genders and cases should enhance student retention and motivation during their language learning process. Future research should expand to include multilingual learners and the role of emotional intelligence in language learning. The study recommends testing digital learning environments and AI-based tutors to assess their capability in solving learning barriers.