

The Perspective of the Learner and Its Position Regarding the Acquisition of a Second Target Language

Ms. S. Umamaheswari^{1*}, Mr. S. Pradeep Kumar²

ABSTRACT

The acquisition of a second language (L2) is a multidimensional process that extends far beyond grammar instruction and vocabulary memorization. This research paper critically examines the central role of the learner's perspective in second language acquisition (SLA), emphasizing how personal, social, psychological, and cultural dimensions shape language learning outcomes. Traditional SLA theories have largely prioritized external input, pedagogical strategies, and structural features of the target language. However, recent scholarship highlights that learners' internal perceptions—such as their motivation, identity, beliefs, attitudes, and emotional experiences—are equally vital in determining the effectiveness and depth of language acquisition. The paper explores how learners construct meaning through interaction with their sociocultural environment and how their sense of agency, self-efficacy, and identity negotiation impact their engagement and success. Through a synthesis of theoretical frameworks and recent empirical studies, this paper advocates for a more learner-centered approach in SLA research and practice. The findings reinforce the argument that understanding the learner's viewpoint is not only complementary to instructional design but foundational to building effective, inclusive, and transformative language learning experiences.

Keywords: *multidimensional process, vocabulary memorization, language acquisition, pedagogical strategies*

The acquisition of a second or foreign language has long been a topic of scholarly interest in the fields of linguistics, psychology, education, and applied linguistics. Traditionally, second language acquisition (SLA) research focused on linguistic input, cognitive processing, teaching methods, and environmental factors. While these dimensions remain crucial, a growing body of literature now emphasizes the need to re-examine the process of language learning from the learner's point of view. This paradigm shift reflects the realization that learners are not passive recipients of linguistic input, but active agents who interpret, internalize, and interact with language in deeply personal and socially embedded ways.

Understanding the learner's perspective encompasses examining their motivations, goals, emotional responses, self-concept, learning styles, and socio-cultural identities. These

¹Assistant Professor of English, PSR college of Engineering, Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu

²Assistant Professor of English, Kamaraj college of Engineering and Technology, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu

*Corresponding Author

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internal variables significantly influence how a learner engages with the language, responds to instruction, overcomes challenges, and maintains or loses interest in the learning process. A learner's prior educational experiences, beliefs about language, attitudes toward the target language culture, and social positioning within their learning environment all contribute to shaping their acquisition journey.

In multilingual and multicultural societies, especially in postcolonial and globalized contexts, language learning is also tied to broader questions of identity, access, mobility, and power. For some learners, acquiring an L2 may be a means of socioeconomic advancement, while for others, it may represent cultural alienation or a threat to their linguistic heritage. Hence, the learner's perspective is not merely psychological, but deeply intertwined with personal histories and social realities.

This paper argues that a nuanced understanding of second language learning requires a shift from a purely teacher- or curriculum-centric model to one that places the learner at the center of inquiry. It draws on theoretical insights from cognitive, sociocultural, and critical frameworks, as well as recent empirical findings, to explore how learners perceive, experience, and shape their own language learning processes. By doing so, this research aims to illuminate the diverse and complex factors that drive or hinder language acquisition and to advocate for pedagogical practices that are more responsive to the lived realities of learners.

2. Theoretical Background:

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) has been shaped by a range of theoretical frameworks, each contributing unique insights into how individuals acquire additional languages. While earlier models focused largely on the role of input, instruction, and cognitive processes, contemporary perspectives have increasingly emphasized the significance of the learner's subjective experiences, beliefs, and sociocultural context. Understanding how these theories conceptualize the learner's role is critical to situating the learner's perspective within the broader SLA discourse.

2.1 Krashen's Monitor Model and Input Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model proposed five key hypotheses about SLA, most notably the *Input Hypothesis*, which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level ($i+1$). While groundbreaking at the time, Krashen's model primarily treats learners as passive receivers of language input. Critics argue that it underemphasizes the learner's agency, emotional state, and learning environment. However, the *Affective Filter Hypothesis* within this model acknowledges that emotional variables such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence can facilitate or block acquisition—providing early recognition of the learner's internal state.

2.2 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory offers a learner-centered approach by situating learning within social interaction and cultural context. Central to this theory is the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Language learning, from this view, is a socially mediated activity, shaped by dialogue, scaffolding, and collaborative learning. The learner is seen as an active participant, not merely in acquiring linguistic structures, but in constructing meaning through interaction. This theory underlines the importance of the learner's background, community practices, and the sociocultural meanings attached to language.

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Synthesis:

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks underscore the shift from viewing language acquisition as an external process driven by teaching and input, to understanding it as an internally influenced, socially embedded, and identity-driven process. The learner is no longer a background figure in the SLA narrative but a central protagonist whose perceptions, goals, and experiences are vital to any meaningful understanding of how second languages are learned. Recognizing this theoretical evolution is essential for aligning language pedagogy with the real, complex needs of diverse learners.

3. Motivation and Affective Factors:

Among the myriad influences on second language acquisition (SLA), motivation and affective factors stand out as some of the most powerful and complex. The emotional and psychological dimensions of language learning are not peripheral—they lie at the very heart of a learner's success or struggle. While cognitive ability and exposure to input are essential, they are often mediated by the learner's willingness, enthusiasm, and emotional resilience. Motivation is what drives learners to initiate learning, persist through challenges, and invest time and effort in acquiring a second language (L2). Affective factors—such as anxiety, self-esteem, attitudes, and emotional climate—directly shape how learners experience and process linguistic input.

3.1 Types of Motivation: Integrative and Instrumental

Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert's (1972) classic distinction between *integrative* and *instrumental* motivation continues to serve as a foundational framework. **Integrative motivation** involves a genuine interest in the target language community, culture, and people. Learners with integrative goals tend to engage more deeply with the language, participate in cultural immersion, and demonstrate long-term commitment. In contrast, **instrumental motivation** is utilitarian, driven by specific outcomes such as employment, academic achievement, or migration. While both types of motivation are valid, research suggests that integrative motivation often leads to more sustained language development and communicative competence.

3.2 Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Drawing from educational psychology, **intrinsic motivation** refers to the learner's internal desire to learn for the sake of personal satisfaction, curiosity, or self-growth. **Extrinsic motivation**, on the other hand, is driven by external rewards or pressures, such as grades, parental expectations, or visa requirements. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985), learners who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to take initiative, maintain long-term learning habits, and derive greater satisfaction from the learning process. Teachers and institutions that foster autonomy, relevance, and learner choice help cultivate this kind of motivation.

3.3 The Role of the Affective Filter

Stephen Krashen's (1982) *Affective Filter Hypothesis* proposes that learners with high levels of anxiety, low motivation, or poor self-esteem create psychological barriers to input processing. These affective filters reduce the brain's capacity to absorb and internalize new language. In contrast, a positive affective environment—marked by low anxiety, encouragement, and trust—lowers this filter, facilitating smoother acquisition. The learner's emotional readiness is thus a crucial factor, especially in early stages of SLA.

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3.4 Language Anxiety and Performance

Language anxiety—defined as apprehension or fear experienced when learning or using a second language—can significantly impair language performance. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Learners with high anxiety levels may avoid speaking opportunities, underperform in assessments, or disengage from class activities. Addressing anxiety through supportive classroom practices, peer collaboration, and confidence-building exercises is essential for reducing affective barriers.

Motivation and affective factors are deeply intertwined with learners' identities, experiences, and perceptions. An emotionally supportive and motivationally rich learning environment not only enhances language acquisition but also empowers learners to take ownership of their progress. Therefore, any meaningful exploration of second language acquisition must center on these internal drivers, recognizing that they often determine the difference between surface-level learning and transformative linguistic growth.

4. Identity and Sociocultural Positioning:

Language is not merely a system of signs and grammar—it is deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and social contexts. As such, learning a second or foreign language involves more than acquiring vocabulary and syntax; it is a process of engaging with new identities, norms, and ways of being in the world. For the learner, this often means navigating a shifting sense of self and social role. Identity and sociocultural positioning are therefore critical dimensions in second language acquisition (SLA), shaping how learners access, use, and internalize a target language.

4.1 Language Learning as Identity Work

Acquiring a new language is often a transformative experience, one that requires learners to reposition themselves within new discourses and communities. As Bonny Norton (1995, 2000) argues, language learners are not neutral or universal subjects; they are socially situated individuals whose identities are constructed and negotiated in relation to power, access, and recognition. Learning a second language can lead to the construction of new identities, but it can also bring about tension between the learner's existing identity and the one associated with the target language. For instance, a Tamil-speaking student learning English in an Indian university may embrace English for academic and global mobility, yet feel conflicted about the perceived devaluation of their mother tongue and cultural roots.

4.2 Language and Power Relations

Language acquisition is inextricably linked to power structures. Certain languages, such as English, are often positioned as "prestigious" or "global," offering social and economic advantages. Learners of such languages may be motivated by aspirations for mobility or upward social positioning. However, this also means that speakers of less dominant languages can feel linguistically and culturally marginalized. As Pierre Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes, linguistic capital—like economic capital—is unequally distributed, and proficiency in a dominant language often translates to symbolic power. Learners are thus not only acquiring linguistic skills but also navigating complex hierarchies of value and legitimacy.

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4.3 The Role of Race, Gender, and Class in Language Learning

Learners' identities are also shaped by broader social markers such as race, gender, caste, religion, and class. These markers can influence how learners are perceived in educational contexts and how they perceive themselves as legitimate or illegitimate users of the target language. For example, female learners in patriarchal societies may face restricted access to language education or limited participation in public discourse. Similarly, lower-caste or economically disadvantaged students may feel alienated in English-medium institutions that uphold upper-class norms of communication. Such forms of sociocultural positioning directly affect learner motivation, confidence, and participation.

4.4 Investment vs. Motivation

While traditional SLA theories have discussed “motivation” as a key driver of learning, Norton introduced the concept of *investment* to highlight the deeper, often socio-politically grounded, reasons why learners engage with language. Investment implies that learners make strategic, emotionally charged decisions about whether the language learning process is worth their time and energy, based on whether it aligns with their goals, identities, and imagined futures. A learner may be highly motivated but choose not to “invest” in language learning if the social context is hostile, discriminatory, or undermines their self-worth.

The process of acquiring a second language is intimately connected to who the learner is, how they see themselves, and how they are seen by others. Identity and sociocultural positioning are not side aspects of language learning but lie at its very core. By recognizing the learner as a socially situated and emotionally complex individual, SLA research and pedagogy can better respond to the real-world experiences of learners and foster more equitable, engaging, and transformative educational practices.

5. Learner Beliefs and Attitudes

Learner beliefs and attitudes are central to the process of second language acquisition (SLA). These cognitive and affective dispositions shape how learners approach language learning tasks, how they respond to challenges, and how they make sense of progress or failure. Unlike externally imposed instructional strategies or curriculum frameworks, beliefs and attitudes are internally constructed and deeply personal—rooted in prior experiences, cultural background, social influences, and educational contexts. Understanding these internal dynamics is essential for effective teaching and for fostering learner autonomy, motivation, and long-term success.

5.1 Defining Learner Beliefs

Learner beliefs refer to the assumptions, expectations, and convictions that individuals hold about the nature of language learning, their own abilities, and the conditions that lead to success or failure. These beliefs may relate to grammar rules, vocabulary acquisition, language aptitude, the importance of memorization, the necessity of speaking like a native speaker, or even the speed at which one should learn. Some learners may believe that language is best learned through formal instruction, while others may favor immersion or interaction. These beliefs can be empowering but may also become obstacles if they are rigid, unrealistic, or misaligned with effective pedagogical approaches.

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5.2 Sources of Beliefs and Attitudes

Learner beliefs are not innate—they are formed through a complex interplay of:

- **Past learning experiences** (positive or negative experiences with language teachers, classrooms, or exams),
- **Cultural values and norms** (collectivist vs. individualist approaches to education, attitudes toward foreign languages),
- **Family and peer influence** (pressure to succeed in English-medium education or avoid certain languages),
- **Media exposure** (idealized portrayals of language users or native speakers),
- **Teacher beliefs and institutional discourse** (e.g., emphasis on grammar accuracy vs. communication).

For instance, a learner raised in a rote-learning academic culture may believe that grammar mastery is the ultimate goal of language learning, neglecting the importance of fluency or communicative competence.

5.3 Positive vs. Negative Beliefs

Positive beliefs—such as the conviction that mistakes are part of learning, or that consistent effort leads to improvement—promote resilience and engagement. On the other hand, negative beliefs—such as the idea that adults cannot learn languages effectively, or that only people with a “gift for languages” can succeed—create psychological barriers and may contribute to language learning anxiety or avoidance. These beliefs often function as self-fulfilling prophecies.

5.4 Attitudes Toward the Target Language and Culture

Attitudes refer to learners’ evaluative feelings—favorable or unfavorable—toward the target language, its speakers, and the culture it represents. Learners with positive attitudes toward the target language community are more likely to seek interaction, be open to feedback, and engage in authentic use. In contrast, learners who associate the target language with colonialism, cultural loss, or elitism may resist its acquisition despite external motivation. This is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts like India, where English is both a gateway to opportunity and a symbol of historical and linguistic displacement.

5.5 Beliefs About Language Aptitude and Learning Strategies

Beliefs about one’s own language aptitude—whether fixed or malleable—profoundly affect learner persistence. Carol Dweck’s (2006) concept of **growth vs. fixed mindset** applies directly to SLA. Learners who believe that language ability can be developed are more likely to experiment, take risks, and persevere. Conversely, those with a fixed mindset may attribute failure to lack of innate talent and withdraw from the learning process.

Similarly, learners hold diverse beliefs about effective learning strategies. Some prefer visual aids, others rely on repetition, some avoid group work due to fear of judgment, and some overuse translation instead of engaging with meaning. When these beliefs are unsupported by evidence, they may lead to inefficient or frustrating learning habits.

Learner beliefs and attitudes are not trivial or secondary concerns in SLA—they are central determinants of engagement, progress, and achievement. These internal frameworks mediate the learner’s relationship with language, identity, community, and self-worth. Teachers,

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researchers, and policymakers must attend to this invisible curriculum of beliefs and attitudes if language learning is to be truly transformative, inclusive, and sustainable.

6. Learning Styles and Autonomy

In second language acquisition (SLA), learners are not a homogeneous group—they bring with them diverse preferences, strategies, and degrees of independence in how they engage with language learning. The concepts of *learning styles* and *learner autonomy* are central to understanding the individualized nature of the learning process. Recognizing and supporting these dimensions enhances motivation, engagement, and long-term linguistic competence.

6.1 Understanding Learning Styles in SLA

Learning styles refer to the preferred ways individuals absorb, process, and retain information. While the concept has evolved over time—and remains debated in terms of rigid classifications—many learners do exhibit tendencies toward certain modalities, such as:

- **Visual learners** (prefer images, charts, videos)
- **Auditory learners** (retain information better through listening)
- **Kinesthetic learners** (learn through physical activity or hands-on tasks)
- **Analytical/reflective learners** (prefer rules, structure, and deep thinking)
- **Global/holistic learners** (prefer context, stories, and interaction)

In language learning, these styles influence how a learner responds to instruction. A visually oriented learner may benefit more from mind maps and vocabulary charts, while an auditory learner might thrive in speaking and listening activities. However, effective language acquisition typically requires multimodal input, and learners must often move beyond their comfort zones to develop comprehensive language skills.

6.2 The Myth of Fixed Styles

Modern SLA research cautions against over-reliance on fixed learning style labels, advocating instead for *learning flexibility* and *strategy training*. Learners who adapt their approaches based on task demands tend to perform better. For example, a learner who usually prefers reading may need to develop auditory discrimination skills to improve pronunciation or listening comprehension. Thus, the goal is not to teach to a single style but to empower learners to recognize and diversify their strategies.

6.3 Learner Autonomy: Definition and Importance

Learner autonomy refers to the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning process. This involves setting goals, selecting resources, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes. In the context of second language learning, autonomy is particularly vital because language acquisition often extends beyond the classroom—into homes, communities, media, and digital spaces.

Henri Holec (1981), often credited with popularizing the concept, defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning.” Autonomous learners are proactive, self-motivated, and capable of critical decision-making. They view learning as a personal responsibility rather than something that is entirely directed by a teacher or institution.

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6.4 Factors Influencing Learner Autonomy

Several interrelated factors shape a learner's capacity for autonomy:

- **Cultural background:** In some cultures, learners are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and may initially resist or struggle with autonomous practices.
- **Educational history:** Learners with exposure to inquiry-based or experiential education may show more readiness for self-directed learning.
- **Personality traits:** Confidence, resilience, and openness to new experiences support the development of autonomy.
- **Technology access:** Digital tools and online resources offer unprecedented opportunities for self-paced, learner-driven exploration and practice.

6.5 Fostering Autonomy in the Language Classroom

Developing autonomy is not an isolated event but a gradual process that teachers can facilitate through:

- **Strategy training:** Teaching learners how to use dictionaries, take notes, summarize texts, and track vocabulary development.
- **Goal-setting activities:** Encouraging learners to set short- and long-term linguistic goals and plan steps to reach them.
- **Portfolio and journal writing:** Helping learners reflect on their growth, setbacks, and strategies used.
- **Self-assessment and peer feedback:** Promoting responsibility and awareness of learning progress.
- **Project-based learning:** Allowing learners to explore language through creative, self-chosen tasks.

Learning styles and learner autonomy are two sides of the same coin: understanding how one learns and having the ability to manage that process effectively. By nurturing both awareness and independence, educators can empower learners to take ownership of their language journey. In turn, learners become more motivated, resourceful, and resilient, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts where adaptability and self-direction are key to success.

7. Implications for Language Teaching

Recognizing the learner's perspective in second language acquisition (SLA) is not just an academic concern—it has profound pedagogical implications. A deeper understanding of learners' beliefs, identities, motivations, styles, and sociocultural positioning allows educators to design more responsive, inclusive, and effective language teaching methodologies. By acknowledging the diversity and agency of learners, educators can transform language classrooms into empowering spaces where all students, regardless of background, have a meaningful opportunity to succeed.

7.1 Learner-Centered Pedagogy

One of the most significant shifts required in language teaching is moving from a teacher-centered to a *learner-centered* approach. This involves:

- Valuing students' prior knowledge and language experiences.
- Designing tasks that connect with learners' goals and identities.
- Encouraging active participation and co-construction of knowledge.
- Providing opportunities for learners to make choices in learning content and strategies.

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A learner-centered model supports autonomy, reduces anxiety, and builds ownership over the learning process. It also allows teachers to differentiate instruction and respond more effectively to individual learner needs.

7.2 Addressing Learner Beliefs and Misconceptions

Teachers must actively engage with the beliefs learners hold about language learning. This can be done through:

- **Classroom discussions** about what it means to learn a language.
- **Reflection activities** where learners assess their own learning strategies.
- **Corrective feedback** that helps adjust unrealistic expectations (e.g., about perfection or fluency).
- **Exposure to diverse language users**, including non-native speakers with high proficiency, to challenge the native-speaker bias.

By doing so, educators can reshape unhelpful or limiting beliefs and foster more empowering attitudes.

7.3 Creating an Inclusive and Affirming Environment

Language classrooms must become spaces where learners feel safe to express themselves and take risks. Teachers can foster inclusivity by:

- Acknowledging and celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity.
- Allowing code-switching or translanguaging where appropriate.
- Designing activities that validate students' identities, such as autobiographical narratives or cultural storytelling.
- Avoiding deficit views of students who speak "non-standard" varieties or come from marginalized backgrounds.

Inclusivity helps learners build linguistic confidence and reinforces the idea that all varieties of English (or any L2) are legitimate and valuable.

7.4 Supporting Motivation and Emotional Engagement

Language learning is both cognitive and emotional. Teachers should:

- Help learners connect personally and emotionally with the language.
- Use content that is engaging, relevant, and meaningful (e.g., songs, films, stories, social issues).
- Foster intrinsic motivation by giving learners more control and purpose.
- Address language anxiety through small group work, positive reinforcement, and flexible assessment strategies.

Motivated and emotionally secure learners are more likely to persevere and succeed.

7.5 Encouraging Autonomy and Lifelong Learning

Given that language acquisition is a lifelong process, learners must be equipped with the skills to continue learning independently. Teachers can:

- Teach metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning, self-monitoring, reflection).
- Introduce learners to language learning tools (apps, podcasts, websites).
- Set up individual goal-setting and self-evaluation tasks.
- Promote project-based and inquiry-based learning approaches.

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Autonomy allows learners to continue learning beyond the classroom, in real-world, authentic contexts.

The implications of learner perspectives are wide-reaching and deeply transformative for language teaching. Effective language pedagogy must move beyond transmission models to embrace co-construction, empathy, and learner empowerment. By responding to the individuality, culture, emotions, and aspirations of each learner, teachers can create dynamic environments where language learning becomes not only successful, but personally meaningful and socially relevant.

CONCLUSION

The acquisition of a second or foreign language is not merely a cognitive or instructional endeavor—it is an intimate, complex, and deeply personal journey shaped by the learner's identity, motivation, beliefs, emotions, and social positioning. This paper has demonstrated that the learner's perspective is central to the success of language acquisition and must be placed at the heart of pedagogical planning, classroom interaction, and curriculum design. Through the exploration of theoretical frameworks and learner-focused variables such as motivation, affective factors, cultural identity, autonomy, and learning styles, it becomes evident that no single method or teaching strategy can universally apply to all learners. Each learner brings a unique set of experiences, preferences, and sociocultural influences that mediate how they interact with the language learning process. Acknowledging these individual differences enables teachers to foster a more responsive, inclusive, and supportive environment.

The implications for language teaching are profound. Educators must shift away from rigid, monolithic models of instruction and move toward dynamic, learner-centered approaches. This includes validating learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, promoting learner autonomy, creating emotionally supportive classrooms, and leveraging technology and multimodal resources to personalize instruction. Moreover, teachers must be equipped to handle the affective and identity-related challenges that learners may encounter, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Ultimately, placing the learner's perspective at the center of SLA research and practice is not only a theoretical necessity but an ethical imperative. It respects the agency and humanity of each learner and redefines language education as a collaborative, empowering, and transformative process. As the global linguistic landscape continues to evolve—marked by mobility, digital communication, and cultural hybridity—language educators must remain adaptive, reflective, and committed to understanding the learner's voice as the true cornerstone of successful language learning.

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