

# Psychological Factors in L2 Learning and Effective Classroom Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

Language is not just a mere process of information transmission, but a way people use to communicate their own experiences, thoughts, meanings, intentions, feelings and identity. Dimensions such as motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy affect both the personal and linguistic ability to effectively manage these interactions. The paper offers a theoretical framework for a deeper knowledge and understanding of specific psychological and personal factors affecting second language acquisition and the ability to manage them effectively in educational settings.

**Keywords:** language, acquisition, psychology, education

## INTRODUCTION

In an era where global connectivity is the key to professional success, language competences have a strategic role both to establish social relations and favour mental processes and logical/cognitive capacities. Mastering a foreign language is considered as a key element for people to be more flexible and "linguistically" adaptable, to gain new perspectives and benefit from language diversity. In fact, language has several cultural, communal and societal functions and through it people communicate their own experiences, thoughts, meanings, intentions, and identity. Anyway, a significant number of factors, variables, and dimensions affect our own personal and linguistic ability to effectively manage these interactions. In this sense, specific psychological factors such as personality, motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy, play an important role in a learner's success or failure in acquiring and using a second language. What we consider "a learner" is also a person, a member of a group, carrying specific personal and character traits that make them able or not to deal with a particular situation resorting to a unique and personal style. In view of this, the paper provides a theoretical framework for a deeper knowledge and understanding of those specific psychological and personal factors affecting second language acquisition and the ability to manage them effectively, especially in educational settings.

## THEORIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Learning is "global", that is, it involves the cognitive, emotional, affective and social spheres [1], that are in a situation of constant influence, being also determined from a social and cultural point of view. Consequently, a certain attention to the affective/emotional aspect also involves an effect on the more specifically cognitive aspect, especially when considering the acquisition of an L2. Second language acquisition is a natural and spontaneous process triggered by the communicative needs that a speaker must face but also marked by a strong association between social and psychological aspects, and personal well-being. Several theories over the years have focused on how individuals learn a second language, concentrating their attention on the various dimensions involved in the process: social, motivational, affective, cognitive, biological factors that can affect, positively or negatively, the learners' linguistic performance.

As for the social dimension [2]:

"(...) social factors conspire to ease the effort to learn by providing a nurturing environment, simplified input, educational opportunities, cooperative peers, and other supporting aspects of a social context that facilitate the acquisition of any language".

Considering the motivational factors, through a process of stimulus, response and positive or negative reinforcement individuals are affected in the way they learn a language. According to Skinner [3], therefore, positive reinforcement would increase the probability that the reinforced response will be repeated, making it a predominant response; negative reinforcement would cause the inhibition of behaviour. In other words, language learning occurs through trial and error, with responses that lead to positive outcomes (e.g. reinforcement, praise) being repeated, while those that do not lead to desired outcomes are gradually discouraged. This process of reinforcement and correction guides the individual towards learning and mastering the second language. A few years later, Chomsky's critique appears which was fatal to behaviourism, and which stimulates a series of new studies on language. Chomsky [4] states that individuals use a language appropriately and expressively. The author focuses on generative phonology and transformational grammar, stressing the deep structure of individuals' native language. In other words, the mechanism that he calls the "language acquisition device" (LAD), governs all human languages, and determines what possible form human language may take. Anyway, languages do not just change: they evolve [5]. Chomsky's theory of innate grammatical rules has been criticized for having almost flattened the irreducible process of biological-cultural evolution into a static formal structure. Consequently, other groups of linguists decide to focus on the "social" role of language and in "how learners use their linguistic environment to build their knowledge of the second language" [6]. In fact, learners need to acquire a second language for their interaction and adjustment to real-life situations: both innate and environmental factors can explain language learning. In this sense, learning can be conceptualized as participation and not just a cognitive process to acquire linguistic rules and forms [7]. In fact, language learning is the development of "ways of acting and different kinds of participation". It is other than the mere acquisition of linguistic codes and structures but is a "struggle to reconstruct a self" with the aim of actively participating within a given context [8]. Learning a new language has a strong impact on the construction of self, influencing self-esteem, self-confidence and self-perception, promoting a sense of accomplishment, and increasing mental flexibility and the development of personal identity, turning into a deeply meaningful experience. Therefore, learning a language is not only an individual process, but has also important social implications, which can enrich one's life and personal relationships. The social context, the external environment and social relationships play a very important role in the learning process and are extremely decisive for it. The socio-cultural theory, based on Vygotskian considerations, defines language learning as a socially mediated process where language itself is a cultural artifact mediating and supporting social and psychological activities. Krashen [9] states that specific factors and variables play a crucial role in second language acquisition. He argues that an Affective filter acts as a barrier to language input and is responsible for the extent to which the learner's acquisition is affected by specific factors such as motivation and affective variables such as anger or anxiety. In fact, it is easier to learn a language and be able to produce orally in an L2 when they are relaxed, because the brain is receptive when it is relaxed. It is not easy to learn a language when they are tense or anxious, because stress hormones affect memory, making it unproductive. According to Krashen, learners easily acquire a language when they are not tense, angry or anxious. Discussing Krashen's theory, Brown [10] argues that some factors acting on L2 acquisition can be also beneficial, depending on the styles and strategies the learners apply during the process.

Learning a new language, as previously stated, is not only a cognitive process, but also deeply involves the social, cultural and psychological sphere of the individual. Dimensions such as motivation, anxiety, self-esteem and cultural identity play a crucial role in the success of language acquisition. Therefore, a significant number of factors need to be considered in the process of acquiring a second language.

### **Psychological Factors Affecting Second Language Acquisition**

The personality of every person is a mix of psychological traits. Even if it is a complex factor, there is a lack of structured research – if compared with affective aspects, such as psychological behavior and motivation – because personality is the result of genetic and environmental factors [11]. Nonetheless, personality traits can significantly influence second language learning, particularly in terms of motivation, engagement, and achievement. Referring to the Big-Five construct, dimensions like extroversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness may be considered to positively impact on the process: however, research has shown that not

always these last are naturally related to effective L2 learning process but much more on the learners' performance or their preferred practice strategies [12].

Motivation is an internal or external impulse that drives a person to act and achieve their goals. It is a psychological process that directs behavior and supports psychological well-being, giving meaning to actions. The research on the acquisition of the second language conceives motivation as a key psychological factor in the acquisition of L2. In language learning, motivation plays the primary role of the driving force that pushes towards a language and a culture different from one's own, the goal of which includes the global enrichment of the person. A reference point in this sense is the model used by many language pedagogists, that is the model by Balboni [13], where *dovere*, *bisogno* and *piacere* (in English *obligation*, *need* and *pleasure*) are pivotal elements of the learning process, which are tightly linked to the learning process itself. According to Balboni, in the learning process, *duty* represents an extrinsic motivation, *need* an instrumental motivation, and *pleasure* an intrinsic motivation. *Duty*, like the obligation to study, leads to learning but not to acquisition (the contents are in fact stored in short-term memory and quickly forgotten); *need*, linked to a specific need, is effective if it is satisfied (the student is aware of needing to develop specific knowledge to achieve a goal). *Pleasure*, on the other hand, is the most lasting, powerful and significant motivation, as it derives from intrinsic interest in the subject. The model explains how learners decide whether the actions they have undertaken confirm their long-term strategy, reinforcing the idea that learning a foreign language is a useful thing ("need") and unpredictably stimulating ("pleasure") even in cases where it is imposed by the education system ("duty").

According to Gardner and Lambert's research [14], two types of motivation can be distinguished:

Integrative, i.e. the motivation of those who *wish* (intrinsic integrative motivation) or *must* (extrinsic integrative motivation) integrate into a culture different from their own.

Instrumental, when language learning can have positive repercussions in the educational and professional fields.

The intensity of integrative and instrumental motivation corresponds to the valorization of their role in the learning process, which is equally determined by the language, the speakers, the linguistic characteristics, the components of the second language and the socio-psychological traits of the speakers of that language. Therefore, the intensity of the two types of motivation certainly leads, determines and influences the attitude of the learners towards the second language. These should not always be considered as opposed to each other, but they can be seen as complementary, according to the objectives and desires of the learners [15]. Therefore, this apparently clear distinction between integrative orientation and instrumental orientation has gradually lost much of its value. First, it has been recognized that people can be motivated by multiple factors that are also very different from each other. Second, the concept of "integrative orientation" takes on different meanings when related to specific learning contexts [16].

Ryan and Deci [17] elaborate the theory of self-determination, which posits that all behavior always involves a combination of internal and external regulatory factors. It is possible to envisage a continuum that includes an extreme external regulation, which acts to get a reward or avoid a punishment, then switches to an intrinsic regulation, which means that it carries out an activity because it is motivating, then it is driven by curiosity and personal interest. Language learning can be seen as an example of an activity that can be motivated both intrinsically (for the pleasure of learning) and extrinsically (for a specific goal, such as a job). Deci and Ryan emphasize the role of self-determination as the ability to act on the basis of one's own interests and values, influencing the direction of learning. Their theory finds application in the management of learning environments that fosters autonomy and choice, allowing students to choose topics and activities that are in line with their interests.

The model of Dörnyei and Ottó [18] present the motivation process divided into different temporal segments organized according to a certain progression. According to the model, initial desires are transformed into goals which subsequently become intentions on the basis of which an individual acts. The model also describes how such intentions are carried out, in the hope that they will lead to the achievement of the goal. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System proposes that second language (L2) motivation is driven by three key components: the ideal L2 self (promotion-focused motivation, driven by hopes and desires to achieve proficiency), the ought-to-

L2 self (prevention-focused, motivated by a desire to avoid negative consequences or meet expectations), and the L2 learning experience (can significantly impact both the ideal and ought-to L2 selves, either strengthening or diminishing motivation). These components interact to shape a learner's motivation and behavior in the L2 learning process. The model suggests that motivation is not simply a matter of personal desires, but also a complex interplay between internal self-images, external expectations, and the immediate learning environment.

Maturation toward higher levels of motivation also involves a development of self-perceptions in terms of competence and self-efficacy, that is, the perception of being able to perform tasks and achieve goals in certain areas, of self-esteem, a more general sense of self-worth, and of autonomy, that is, the perception of being able to make choices and therefore experience ever-increasing levels of self-determination [19]. Self-efficacy, specifically, is the belief that a person has about his or her ability to organize and execute the actions necessary to achieve a given goal. In other words, it is the confidence in one's own abilities to face and overcome specific challenges. The beliefs of self-efficacy influence the components of cognitive, emotional and motivational learning and human actions, involving decisions, aspirations, the endurance and perseverance in completing a task, resistance to stress and fatigue. Considering the process of L2 learning the sense of self-efficacy significantly influences the feeling of being competent and capable in learning a foreign language. Students with high self-efficacy in learning a language are more motivated to work hard and persevere and to face difficulties without becoming discouraged. The sense of self-efficacy can be positively encouraged by seeing others achieve their goals, by receiving encouragement and appreciation for their progress. Managing emotions, such as anxiety, is essential to maintaining a positive sense of self-efficacy [20].

Expectations of success are conditioned by cognitive and affective structures (beliefs and attitudes) relating to the perception of the causes of one's successes and failures. Attributions are, though, the explanations that people find, trying to understand the reason, or the reasons why they failed in doing something or, on the contrary, did something correctly. Attributions correspond to those attitudes regarding one's role as a learner and one's abilities involved in the learning process. They are strictly connected with a sense of self-efficacy: people who possess a high level of self-efficacy will attribute more to personal success or failure, while people who have a low level of self-efficacy will attribute success or failure to a lack of skill. On the one hand, these attributions can be external and unstable, as when referring to luck or uncontrollable factors. On the other hand, personal abilities or skills constitute factors internal to the individual and relatively stable. Moreover, the evaluation of the importance of personal effort and commitment constitutes an attribution to an internal but unstable factor, therefore controllable because the individual can modify their effort and commitment, stressing the fundamental role of personal will. For example, the belief that people lack a certain aptitude towards learning a language may develop a perception of uncontrollability of the process, with a consequent decrease in their sense of self-efficacy. On the contrary, the belief that their abilities can be improved through effort and commitment will lead them to believe that they can have some control over their actions [21]. Attributions are relevant for the acquisition of L2 and the expectation of people's future behaviors: if an individual reports a failure, and attributes it to their poor skills (because stable), the expectation of future success decreases compared to the situation in which they attribute the result to causes unstable, as luck and the mood of the moment. Similarly, the success attributed to luck (because unstable) does not increase the expectation of future success than the situation in which this is attributed to causes as stable as the ability or the ease of the task [22].

In the context of language learning, anxiety is also a recurrent emotional condition. Anxiety can negatively affect language learning, causing difficulty in concentrating, fear of making mistakes, and a general feeling of frustration. This anxiety can interfere with the acquisition of new words, the understanding and use of grammar, and the ability to communicate. Anxiety is generally considered a negative emotion that can interfere with learning, generating a sense of incompetence and uselessness. The emotional sphere of learners and the way in which they activate positive emotions and manage negative ones therefore play a decisive role in the language learning process. The feeling of inadequacy perceived in relation to linguistic performance as well as the fear of the judgement of others are some of the factors that can be linked to psychological blocks and that may generate low self-esteem and compromise the learning process. Language anxiety is a common experience and part of the "internal" affective factors that affects most second language speakers [23], but it is also a state linked to the context in which it is triggered and develops [24]. Language anxiety is closely linked to an underestimation of



one's own abilities as well as the perception of a low level of self-efficacy: this may generate a performance that is far from the learner's real potential. The effects of language anxiety are: linguistic/cognitive (effects on communicative performance in L2); social/interpersonal (avoidance of risk in order not to compromise one's social image); emotional/affective (effects on confidence in one's abilities and self-confidence) [25]. Language anxiety is generally negative as it slows down the process of L2 acquisition [26].

### Strategies To Deal With Psychological Factors In The Classroom

Effective learning requires sharing and negotiating methodologies and practices to renew the challenge of transversal linguistic education. Teaching strategies to promote language learning should focus on methods that promote the learning and understanding of a second language, considering the psychological principles of learning. This includes the use of comprehensible teaching materials, encouragement of communication and interaction, the use of playful activities and the active involvement of students, stimulation, motivation, and constant feedback [27].

The learning input that is transmitted by the teacher should meet five requirements [28]: constitute an element of novelty; be attractive, i.e. pleasant; be functional to the student's needs; be achievable, i.e. not considered too difficult; be socially safe, so that the fear of "losing face" does not trigger the affective filter. Consequently, a focus on the motivational factor cannot be separated from an analysis of the teacher's methodological approach, the choice of materials and activities that constitute the linguistic input to which students are exposed. A highly motivated learner is more receptive to any type of input, especially if it is expertly prepared and calibrated by the teacher based on the characteristics, whether individual or related to learning, of their students. Acting on the input by meeting the students' expectations could in fact stimulate their motivation and facilitate their learning [29].

During the acquisition of a foreign language, motivation can occur at (at least) three levels, L. Jung [30] states. As far as the first level is concerned, the choice of topics, which should supposedly consider the age, the experience and the interests of the students, whereas the topics are to be connected and reference points created, so that their use is clear and comprehensible. The second level is the one considering didactics and methodology, during which phases of the learning activities should be defined, meaning that also a clear begin and end of a didactic unit ("*Einstieg*" and "*Ausstieg*") is important. In this context different learning methods and practices are important, so that the different types of learning (visual, the auditory, the haptic and the intellectual learning type [31]) are considered. And, finally, the third level is the one behavioral level. The student is not just a "pitcher" to be filled with information and data and the teacher should represent a role model by means of their knowledge and their behavior.

As for motivation, also language anxiety can be addressed with several strategies, both individually and for the class. These include gradual exposure to anxiety-provoking situations, the ability to manage specific emotions, or practicing relaxation and mindful techniques. Furthermore, encouraging constructive self-narration, sharing personal feelings or moods can help reduce anxiety and face difficulties with more serenity, as well as introducing communicative activities in the classroom, such as reading aloud or role-playing real-life situations, helps manage anxiety during interactions [32]. Another strategy is the creation of a "safe-speaking environment", that is, an environment where students feel comfortable and can contribute without fear of the judgment of others [33].

Among the factors previously listed, self-efficacy and self-esteem seem to be dependent on internal and external factors, especially the relationship with the teacher and with classmates. While self-efficacy is related to skills, self-esteem refers to the value and perception of oneself as a person. Both are significantly influenced by feedback, possible negative results, and beliefs. It is therefore essential to create a learning environment free from conditioning, positive and proactive, which does not punish, condemn individual shortcomings and defects, but rather enhances their potential [34]. Activities that stimulate learners to critically reflect are more necessary than ever to make them autonomous and aware, as well as to make the learning experience self-constructed, stimulating, significant in reinforcing the sense of self-efficacy [35].

Finally, starting from a careful analysis of all these factors, it will be appropriate to select and possibly adapt teaching strategies, methodologies and techniques to involve cognitive, didactic, communication and emotional needs. Moreover, preparing and managing a positive and stimulating learning environment can have positive effects on the learning processes of an L2.

## Final Remarks

The process of second language acquisition is complex and depends on both the learners' ability to adapt to the external environment and to manage their own personal traits according to the specific communicative situation. The theoretical framework suggests that there is a strong association among psychological aspects, psychological well-being and second language learning, and that it is not just a matter of the learners, but also of those involved in this process: teachers, educators, classmates, who should try to resort to motivating and effective strategies and methodologies in order to manage the psychological dimensions of language learning. The more positively motivated and self-confident learners are, the more they might be able to control or balance their inevitable level of anxiety and low self-esteem that could come up during the process. There is a reciprocal influence that learners should try to equalize to have a balanced level of all dimensions that can, in one way or the other, intervene in the process. However, psychological factors interact with each other and with the social and the educational context making them, sometimes, unpredictable. Specific teaching strategies and methodologies could create an effective learning environment and support the learners in becoming "linguistically" successful and competent within the actual globalized and multicultural world.

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