

Foreign Language Acquisition Research from the Perspective of Educational Linguistics

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Abstract: Research on foreign language acquisition has long focused on elucidating cognitive mechanisms of language learning, frequently overlooking the profound implications that sociocultural contexts hold for pedagogical practice. Grounded in the integrative perspective of Educational Linguistics (EL), this study systematically examines the fundamental nature of language learning as a complex sociocultural, cultural, and cognitive practice. Findings reveal that sociocultural contexts critically shape learning meaning and identity formation, classroom micro-social interactions constitute tangible conduits for acquisition, and fluid multicultural identities generate intricate contradictions in linguistic choices. The EL perspective facilitates the integration of cognitive language acquisition theories with sociocultural frameworks, actualized through pedagogical approaches including Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-Based Instruction (CBI), and Translingual Resource Integration (TRI). However, this integrative approach confronts critical challenges such as inadequate teacher preparation, reductionist assessment systems, scarce curricular resources, and the influence of micropower structures. Consequently, this study advocates: advancing the transformation of foreign language teachers into “critical context designers”; developing multidimensional frameworks for evaluating cultural competence; reforming curriculum policies to recognize linguistic resource diversity; and optimizing classroom micro-social structures to empower all learners. Only by genuinely situating and addressing the linguistic dimensions of education within their constitutive sociocultural environments can foreign language acquisition research transcend cognitively-centered limitations and achieve deeply effective learning within dynamic educational contexts.

Keywords—educational linguistics; foreign language acquisition; sociocultural context; identity formation; multicultural identities

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning has never occurred as a cognitive activity within a vacuum. Since the mid-to-late twentieth century, the field of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA), significantly shaped by paradigms rooted in cognitive psychology and formal linguistics, has flourished. It has yielded profound insights into key internal mechanisms such as input processing, interlanguage development, and Universal Grammar (UG) constraints (Gass & Selinker, 2008). However, while the cognitive perspective intensely illuminates the processing mechanisms within the individual mind, it has often insufficiently and unsystematically examined the rich societal substrates, cultural nourishment, and intricate textures of educational practice in which language learning is fundamentally embedded. The identity of the foreign language learner as an agentive social actor frequently becomes eclipsed by their perceived role as a mere language processing machine, rendering the meaning and purpose of learning potentially suspended within an existential vacuum (Lin & Huang, 2025). This cognitivist research paradigm, albeit sophisticated and profound, potentially risks reducing language pedagogy instrumentally to a matter of skills transmission while allowing deeper dimensions inherent in educational practice, such as value orientations, power relations, cultural adaptation, and identity formation, to remain neglected territories.

Educational Linguistics (EL) emerges precisely as a critical response to these tensions and an endeavour at integrated reconceptualization. Founded by Bernard Spolsky

(1978), EL constitutes, at its core, an applied field of research oriented towards the ultimate goal of “solving language-related problems in educational practice”. It rejects isolated academic silos and steadfastly argues that the fundamental purpose of language research is to understand and improve linguistic practices in educational contexts, encompassing but extending significantly beyond language teaching itself (Lyle, 2008). EL conceptualizes language phenomena within educational settings as a multi-layered, interactive ecosystem. This system spans a multidimensional network of understanding, ranging from macro-level policy formulation and the flux of language ideologies down to micro-level classroom interactions, teacher beliefs, and individual identity negotiation. The theoretical core of EL lies in its commitment to critically examining, integrating, and transforming insights derived from various branches of linguistics, all while grounding this knowledge in the educational context and from the perspectives of pedagogy and learners. As advocated by Van Lier (2004), EL centers on “actors in context”, actively seeking to bridge the gap between knowledge about language and language in action within learning processes.

From this integrative stance, a critical examination of the current FLA landscape reveals an urgent need for a significant expansion and reconstitution of its research scope. This entails a holistic framework that genuinely integrates three dimensions: the formal linguistic system, the cognitive-psychological processing mechanisms, and the meaning-making processes within the socio-cultural context. Herein, Educational Linguistics offers a unique capacity for integrating perspectives: it simultaneously grounds itself in the

cognitive realities of language acquisition while critically interrogating the complex socio-cultural matrices within which learning occurs.

Against this backdrop, drawing upon the theoretical and empirical foundations of EL, this paper aims to systematically examine three fundamental questions inherent in FLA as a complex educational practice: How is language learning constructed by the external socio-cultural context? How do classroom interactional structures shape the micro-sociological processes of learning? How do learners' agentive identities and their inherent tensions in multilingual environments drive or inhibit language practice?

Through this analytical framework, the paper seeks to elucidate the dynamic interpenetration and mutual shaping of cognitive processes and socio-cultural structures within FLA. It further aims to explore the innovative value of Educational Linguistics for advancing both practical reforms in foreign language pedagogy and theoretical research paradigms.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

To explore the theoretical implications of educational linguistics for foreign language acquisition, it is first necessary to clarify its key theoretical anchor points and their significance for perspective within foreign language education. Educational linguistics rejects the conceptualization of language learning as a purely cognitive encoding process, instead viewing it as a social practice deeply embedded within social structures.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) serves as the cornerstone for understanding this process. Lev Vygotsky's revolutionary contribution was the revelation of the fundamental origin of higher mental functions: they do not merely occur within the isolated individual but are constructed through social interaction between participants (Vygotsky, 1978). The value of educational linguistics lies in its highly practical application of this core idea, positing language learning as an active process mediated by social interaction, wherein learners achieve significant transitions in capability through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This theoretical stance directly challenges the fallacy of unidirectional knowledge transmission inherent in traditional teaching. Within the foreign language classroom, this necessitates that teachers act as expert guides, designing scaffolding tasks and creating collaborative dialogic platforms. This facilitates learners in verifying, reflecting upon, and internalizing new linguistic knowledge through interaction, rather than positioning the teacher merely as a source of information.

An inseparable dimension intertwined with social structure is the insight into the contextualized nature of language. Hymes (1972)' theory of communicative competence establishes that language mastery extends far beyond grammatical accuracy. It encompasses a network of abilities enabling appropriate and effective language use within specific social situations, including linguistic possibility,

feasibility, appropriateness, and probability (Canale & Swain, 1980). This theory fundamentally disrupts Chomsky's abstract notion of "linguistic competence", emphasizing that the actual contexts of language use and the norms of the speech community constitute the core elements of competence. For foreign language pedagogy, this breakthrough compels instructional design to transcend sole reliance on grammatical paradigms. Instead, it must integrate sociolinguistic conventions, discourse strategies, cultural scripts, and interactional structures as central components of the curriculum (Cummins, 2008).

In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding language resources can no longer be constrained to viewing them as singular, isolated systems. Influenced by postmodern thought, significant shifts have occurred in conceptualizing language acquisition: multilingual practices are now recognized as normative resources rather than problematized deficit. The concept of Translanguaging aims to challenge rigid "separation-based bilingualism". It asserts that learners possess a dynamic, integrated "unitary repertoire". This theory emphasizes that proficient multilingual speakers naturally draw upon diverse linguistic features in comprehension and production, integrating language resources in their unique ways to meet communicative needs and personal expression styles (Blackledge et al., 2010). Consequently, the rigid separation of language input and output common in traditional classrooms may fragment learners' holistic language capacities, undermining their ability to use language for communication, cognitive function, and identity expression. Foreign language teaching informed by educational linguistics must critically examine the limitations of this outdated model and reimagine classroom environments to recognize, develop, and strategically leverage students' existing multilingual repertoires as a robust platform for advancing new language learning.

Building upon these theoretical foundations, the perspective of Critical Educational Linguistics provides analytical tools for examining the structural power dynamics inherent in language practices. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and sociological insights, it critically reveals the implicit ideologies, power asymmetries, and mechanisms of social reproduction embedded within language policies, curricula, textbook content, and classroom discourse (Fairclough, 2015). As Pennycook (2001) cautions that language teaching is never a neutral act. Choices regarding which language varieties to teach, which cultural references to include, and which pedagogical methods to privilege inherently valorize specific worldviews, the status of social groups, and systems of knowledge authority. The foreign language classroom thus functions as a microcosmic field of cultural politics. Educational linguistics therefore demands that researchers and teachers cultivate acute critical consciousness. They must analyze how their practices either actively or passively respond to, reinforce, or challenge sociolinguistic forces that perpetuate inequalities (Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

3. FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATIONAL LINGUISTICS

Based on the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, this study proposes to explore the unique understanding of foreign language acquisition in educational linguistics from three core dimensions.

3.1 The Socio-Cultural Context of Language Learning

Language acquisition does not occur in an abstract void; it is deeply embedded within multi-layered social and cultural terrains. Macro-level language policies, meso-level institutional resource allocations, and micro-level community settings are nested together, jointly establishing the “boundaries of possibility” for foreign language learning while imbuing it with a sense of purpose.

Educational language policy constitutes the primary framing mechanism of the environment. Policy choices impose fundamental and structural constraints on learners’ opportunities for target language exposure (Zhang et al., 2025). For instance, compared to the privileged status and substantial investment accorded to English within China’s core curriculum, many other strategically important yet “less-commonly taught languages” often occupy systemically disadvantaged positions within the educational resource structure. The content of learning materials accessible to learners is also circumscribed by policy orientation (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). This bias frequently renders discursive forms such as “expressing emotions, voicing social dissent, and engaging in profound cultural critique” as blind spots within teaching materials (Freeman, 2004). More fundamentally, the policy choices reflect an underlying linguistic value hierarchy, profoundly shaping learners’ motivational landscape. In a context where English possesses dominant global cultural capital, learning non-English languages often faces questioning regarding its “practical utility”. Consequently, instrumental motivation tends to predominate over integrative motivation within the Chinese context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). This structural dynamic steers classroom learning objectives towards short-term performance metrics rather than the development of deep cultural competence and identity connections.

Socio-economic capital serves as a critical source of inequality in opportunity among learner groups. Learners from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds typically possess multiple advantages. Research indicates that students in urban international-track schools in China not only demonstrate superior oral fluency compared to their peers in rural mainstream schools, but their linguistic expressions also manifest stronger cross-cultural critical thinking abilities. The latter, conversely, are often confined to memorizing and reproducing prescribed textbook content. This differentiation extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency; it fundamentally concerns the types of language practices learners can access and the differential scope of meanings they can potentially express.

Micro-level communities and social networks constitute the most immediate space for individual practice and the crucible for motivation development. Family attitudes exert a profound influence on early language learning experiences. For example, a home environment that encourages flexible bilingual communication provides invaluable opportunities for diverse language exposure and models an open attitude towards languages (Calafato, 2021); linguistic role models and popular culture constructed within adolescent peer groups often serve as key drivers of spontaneous learning enthusiasm (Norton & Toohey, 2001); virtual communities, moreover, have opened up entirely new fields for linguistic engagement and identity practice (Vinagre, 2022). At this level, learning transcends externally imposed goals; it becomes intrinsically linked to participating in communities, gaining recognition, and establishing valued self-identities.

3.2 Classroom Interaction as a Micro-Sociological Site for Foreign Language Acquisition

The classroom constitutes the focal site where language acquisition practices occur. From an educational linguistics perspective, significant attention is directed towards the internal structure of the classroom as a specialized discourse community and its constitutive impact on learners’ access to participation and the structures of cognitive challenge inherent in the process. Classroom interaction is neither naturally occurring casual conversation nor a wholly prescriptive training procedure; rather, it functions as a social activity frame (Walsh, 2011), systematically regulated by specific rules, interactional scripts, and assigned participant roles.

The most prevalent classroom exchange structure is the classic Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) triad. The efficacy of this model is highly contingent upon the teacher’s professional awareness: When teachers focus exclusively on closed-response questions during the initiation phase and habitually employ minimal feedback tokens in the feedback stage, students are hindered from producing elaborated linguistic units commensurate with meaningful communication, concurrently restricting their cognitive engagement (Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Conversely, teachers who craft open-ended questions in the initiation phase and demonstrate skill in revoicing student contributions during feedback to enhance accuracy and complexity can cultivate an interactional environment significantly more conducive to cognitive engagement and linguistic richness (Wells & Arauz, 2006). As the arbiter of discourse resources, the teacher’s allocation of response time and selection of participants also directly pertains to educational equity: Patterns such as habitually calling upon a cohort of “high-achieving” students or permitting a few students to dominate discussions inevitably deprive others of valuable practice opportunities, thereby engendering systemic inequities in language acquisition potential.

The design of collaborative learning tasks emerges as a pivotal lever within the educational linguistics framework for enhancing classroom interaction quality. Their effectiveness

stems from the foundational tenets of sociocultural theory, which posit that linguistic knowledge is fundamentally co-constructed. Joint work on complex problems within small groups, which requires students to articulate ideas, persuade peers, and formulate arguments, simultaneously scaffolds both cognitive abilities and linguistic competence: The negotiation of meaning compels greater explicitness in expression; language-related episodes (LREs) emerge organically (Swain, 2013); and challenges to perspectives fostered by peers deepen cognitive processing. Empirical research substantiates that deliberately structured collaborative classroom tasks can systematically facilitate advances in syntactic complexity and cognitive engagement (Storch & Aldosari, 2013).

The expansion of communicative affordances in contemporary classrooms through pragmatic technology warrants significant consideration. Multimodal resources now serve as crucial mediational tools for meaning-making between teachers and learners. Teacher strategies such as employing gestures to enact spatial deixis or utilizing concrete imagery to elucidate abstract terminology demonstrably reduce cognitive load and expedite form-meaning mapping processes. Conversely, online collaborative writing platforms, supporting asynchronous text-based discussion and commentary, furnish enriched scaffolding for reflective processes (Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Consequently, comprehending and effectively integrating multimodal resources within the classroom has become an essential dimension of contemporary foreign language teacher competence.

3.3 Identity Negotiation in Language Acquisition

Second language learning extends far beyond a mere process of accumulating knowledge. Every new attempt at language use constitutes an act of identity. An educational linguistic perspective clearly reveals that language learning and identity formation are dual aspects of a single, intertwined process, mutually constitutive of one another (Norton, 2013).

Within intercultural contexts, learners frequently navigate complex experiences of hybridity and fluid shifts in identity. Consider, for example, heritage learners of Chinese studying in China. Despite possessing a symbolic cultural lineage, their linguistic practices often hover between externally imposed labels, such as “inauthentic Chinese speakers” and “Chinese in a cultural sense”. This tension frequently precipitates the adoption of silence strategies, whereby learners withhold participation, anticipating that perceived “foreign accents” in their speech might undermine their perceived legitimacy within group identity (Morita, 2004). Agency emerges as a core concept explaining individual variations in responses. Learners are not passive recipients of environmental positioning; they can actively employ strategies of self-investment to renegotiate identity positions and expand their spheres of action. A crucial responsibility of educators lies in discerning the fluid dynamics of learner identities and their agentic possibilities, and in consciously designing pedagogical approaches that create multiple, safeguarded pathways for

students to exercise voice and find platforms for self-expression. This enables them to experiment with and reinforce new facets of a positive linguistic self.

The fluidity of linguistic identity challenges the traditional native speaker (NS) / non-native speaker (NNS) binary labeling system, prompting educators to reconceptualize their roles: the educator is not necessarily the idealized normative model, but should rather become a facilitator of competence (Weiner, 2020). Understanding and respecting the diversity of learners’ linguistic identities thereby constitutes the fundamental ethical imperative of language teaching.

4. PRACTICE-ORIENTED TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATIONAL LINGUISTICS

Traditional approaches to foreign language acquisition often suffer from a disconnect between cognitive and social dimensions. The core objective of Educational Linguistics (EL) is precisely to bridge this divide by proposing contextually integrated pedagogical strategies grounded in situated practices.

4.1 Contextual Reconfiguring of Cognitive Language Acquisition Frameworks

The EL perspective first necessitates a critical examination of the applicability of mainstream cognitive theories within specific contexts. Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985) posits comprehensible input as the primary driver of language acquisition, exerting extensive methodological influence. However, EL reveals a crucial blind spot: learners exhibit radically different definitions of “comprehensibility”, constrained by their pre-existing cultural schemata, lived experiences, motivation to engage with pedagogical tasks, and level of trust in the teacher. For instance, a student in a rural Chinese school might comprehend a BBC documentary narrative concerning urban middle-class life significantly less than urban-raised peers, even with equivalent linguistic complexity. The true efficacy of comprehension is highly dependent on activating the learner’s lifeworld to forge meaningful connections (Van Lier, 2004).

Similarly, Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1985) emphasizes the central role of language production for grammatical internalization and fluency development. Viewed through the critical lens of EL, traditional “speaking practice” often lacks authentic communicative motivation and socio-functional anchoring. When students merely fabricate rote dialogues to fulfill task requirements or mechanically recite borrowed viewpoints, cognitive processing remains superficial. Output genuinely conducive to language development must be rooted in authentic communicative needs. Such task performance embeds a dual impetus: cognitive engagement and affective investment.

4.2 Innovative Teaching Paradigms and Methods Promoted by Educational Linguistics

To achieve the organic integration of cognitive and social dimensions, Educational Linguistics (EL) drives the

innovation and development of several significant teaching paradigms.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) promoting contextual deepening. TBLT drives language practice through meaning-centered tasks. EL's contributions to TBLT are particularly evident in two aspects: Firstly, it advocates that task goal-setting and problem scenario design must fully consider learners' social backgrounds and authentic interests, demanding genuine "social authenticity" (Long, 2015). Secondly, it emphasizes the "construction of social support networks" during task implementation. This includes establishing detailed cooperative group frameworks, providing multimodal resource scaffolding, and teaching sociocognitive metalanguage to guarantee equitable participation rights for all learners (Skehan, 2014).

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) achieving integration with cultural understanding. In contexts integrating English with disciplinary content instruction, EL maintains that content selection must possess cultural relevance and a critical perspective. The teacher's role should transform into facilitating students' use of the target language for critical interrogation and deep negotiation based on textual content.

Harnessing multilingual resources through Translanguaging. EL fundamentally challenges the practice of linguistic separation in teaching, advocating for scientifically informed, flexible language policies in the classroom. Specific pedagogical strategies include: permitting students to use their first language (L1) or code-mixed expressions during initial task conceptualization or deep reflection stages (Galloway & Uccelli, 2024); providing multilingual reference materials and contrastive texts as cognitive scaffolding; guiding advanced students to make systematic comparisons of cultural concepts across languages; and designing project-based tasks enabling students to investigate the practical application of their community's multilingual resources in contexts such as advertising or religious events. Research indicates that such purposefully designed multilingual spaces enhance learning security and metalinguistic awareness.

Multimodal educational design facilitating technology-integration. Teachers can integrate diverse modes into the classroom, including gestures (embodied cognition), visual tools (mind maps), infographic design, short video production, and online forums. Examples encompass creating bilingual environmental reports using geographic knowledge platforms (e.g., ArcGIS) or crafting personal life narratives with digital storytelling software. These activities not only diversify language practice formats but also allow students with different learning strengths to fully leverage their individual capacities (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011).

5. CHALLENGES, REFLECTIONS, AND PATHWAYS

While Educational Linguistics (EL) has opened up more comprehensive theoretical perspectives and methodological pathways for foreign language education, the translation of this knowledge into practice encounters the resistance

characteristic of complex systems. Key bottlenecks include structural discontinuities in teacher development, the disjuncture between assessment systems and dimensions of cultural competence, a scarcity of curriculum resources, and the entrenchment of power structures within micro-level classroom dynamics.

To transcend these predicaments and drive the transformation toward a foreign language learning system genuinely aligned with EL principles, the following systemic initiatives are essential:

(1) Repositioning foreign language teachers as "critical context designers": we should reform the teacher education framework, placing the socio-cultural dimensions of language education at the core of the curriculum and integrating them throughout all pedagogical training; design "action research" course modules (Burns, 2010) to empower teachers to investigate the influence of socio-cultural factors within their own daily teaching; establish interdisciplinary platforms for collaboration.

(2) Developing a multi-dimensional cultural competence assessment framework and reforming assessment weighting: Authoritative testing bodies should lead in convening experts from various disciplines to develop operationalizable assessment metrics for cultural competence (Sinicrope et al., 2007); advocate for the incorporation of these scores in university admissions and degree granting processes; support K-12 schools in implementing "growth-oriented portfolio" systems to track the longitudinal development of students' multilingual and multicultural capabilities.

(3) Optimizing classroom power dynamics to empower student agency: teachers should implement structural mechanisms such as "negotiating classroom dialogue conventions" to increase students' discursive weight; teachers should consciously utilize Cooperative Learning strategies to refine group role assignments, ensuring balanced participation; design multiple channels of expression enabling students to establish their agency within different task contexts according to their own strengths.

6. CONCLUSION

Educational Linguistics (EL) offers a profound paradigmatic shift. Research into foreign language acquisition must move beyond the conventional paradigm that isolates learning as solely the operation of internal cognitive mechanisms within the individual mind. Instead, it must seek explanatory frameworks and the impetus for practical reform in learning's authentic milieu: the multiplicitous, complex socio-educational contexts, fraught with constraints yet brimming with possibilities. This research demonstrates that language learning is inherently a systemic, multi-layered process. The mission of Educational Linguistics lies precisely in synthesizing insights from socio-cultural analysis, understanding the complexity of cognitive mechanisms, and the effective design of micro-level pedagogical practices into a unified explanatory-intervention framework.

However, the path towards holistic education is strewn with structural impediments. Overcoming these bottlenecks necessitates systematic restructuring. Only when foreign language educators courageously embrace their multifaceted societal roles, which serves not solely as cultivators of linguistic proficiency, but also as facilitators of cultural understanding, catalysts for critical mind development, and agents of social equity, can educational practice unleash its full intellectual and humanistic potential. On this path, EL provides continuously evolving critical and methodological resources, offering an enduring intellectual pathway and the requisite tools to drive this transformation.

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