

The Affective Turn in Second Language Acquisition and the Role of Intellectual Curiosity

Dr. Jainish Roy¹ and Dr. Rajesh Sehgal²

¹Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

E-mail: ku.jainishroy@kalingauniversity.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7116-9137>

²Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

E-mail: ku.rajeshseghal@kalingauniversity.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0344-403X>

Abstract: This study explores the “affective turn” in SLA will be analyzed with particular attention paid to the interrelation between emotional and cognitive factors affecting learning results. Going further from the cognitive-centred approach to second language acquisition, the current paper makes use of ideas of the Affective Filter Hypothesis and Positive Psychology, demonstrating the importance of emotional parameters of motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, attitude, and interest when trying to analyse the process of language acquisition. Based on the findings obtained through theoretical analysis, the paper suggests that positive emotions help learners acquire and master the second language through reducing the effect of affective filter and increasing their activity while learning. At the same time, such negative emotions as anxiety become the factors hindering comprehension, participation, and learning performance. One of the aspects that require detailed examination in this context is intellectual curiosity, specifically, epistemic curiosity, which is considered to be an important motivational factor in second language acquisition because of its impact on language exploration and understanding of its culture. Moreover, practical pedagogical approaches to be used include authentic materials, collaborative learning situations, positive reinforcement techniques, and learner autonomy that help create a classroom atmosphere where curiosity can thrive and be stimulated by an emotionally safe environment. The findings indicate the significance of the integration of both emotional and cognitive aspects in language instruction practice in order to enhance overall educational success. Additionally, the study emphasizes the necessity for the future research to take place with a longitudinal perspective along with cross-cultural implications to be able to examine how these issues emerge and evolve over time in various cultural contexts. In particular, the role played by digital media and innovative technology-based educational tools should not be ignored as well.

Key Words: second language acquisition (sla), affective filter hypothesis, intellectual curiosity, motivation, emotional factors, language proficiency

(Received: 09 September 2025; Revised: 21 October 2025; Accepted: 18 November 2025; Published: 31 December 2025)

Introduction

An affective turn in second language acquisition (SLA) can be defined as the transition from solely concentrating on the cognitive side of the matter to embracing emotional elements (Wang, 2021; Li & Zhang, 2023; Tin, 2009). Historically, all SLA theories were primarily concentrated on cognitive features of language such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax (Ibrahim, 2020; Hong et al., 2022). However, through time, it has become evident that the emotions, attitudes, and motivation of a person play a very significant role in acquiring language skills (Gilakjani et al., 2012). One of the most important theories that underlies this assumption is the affective filter hypothesis, according to which a person's emotional state (anxiety,

motivation, etc.) directly impacts one's success in learning languages (Paradowski & Jelińska, 2024; Seven, 2020).

Intellectual curiosity, or the passion to learn something new, is the main driver behind the mentioned affective turn (Von Stumm et al., 2011). Firstly, it pushes a person to actively engage in the process of studying languages and not simply gain certain language skills. Secondly, intellectual curiosity leads to constant engagement in language-related activities, which not only allows learning language structure but also develops an interest in cultural and intellectual spheres associated with this language (Mercer & Pawlak, 2024; Jirout & Matthews, 2022). The latter becomes especially important since intellectual curiosity often becomes epistemic, that is, aimed at gaining knowledge rather than practical skills.

The goal of the current research paper is to discuss the connection between the affective turn in SLA and the importance of intellectual curiosity in language learning, focusing on its impact on emotional state and motivation, as well as learners' language competency (Kęłowska, 2012). This research paper aims to discuss how the interaction between affective components and intellectual curiosity affects the efficiency of language learning.

The current research paper is focused on the connection between the affective turn in SLA and intellectual curiosity in language learning. Section II discusses relevant literature on the Affective Filter Hypothesis and curiosity in general. Section III provides an overview of the theoretical background of the research. Section IV describes relevant empirical studies on intellectual curiosity. Section V suggests practical suggestions for educators.

Literature Review

The term “affective turn” in second language acquisition (SLA) was introduced as an answer to the prevailing cognitive-oriented paradigm of SLA. Historically, studies focused on the cognitive component of language learning, such as syntax, semantics, and vocabulary. Still, researchers started to pay attention to the impact of emotional variables, such as motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem, on language acquisition (Dewaele et al., 2019). The theory of the Affective Filter suggests that affective factors affect the acquisition of language input (Getie, 2020). Positive emotional conditions, when learners are motivated and comfortable, promote better interaction and learning of linguistic material (Shao et al., 2020). Negative affective factors, including anxiety, form a “filter,” preventing language acquisition and comprehension.

However, in the past few decades, researchers studying SLA have started paying attention to the role played by the affective and psychological dimensions of the learning process. Researchers now refer to this trend as the “affective turn.” The “affective turn” is characterized by the inclusion of emotions and social context in language learning theories. Initially, researchers explored the influence that certain positive emotions, such as enthusiasm and curiosity, had on the process of acquiring a new language (Liu et al., 2025). These positive emotions were seen to increase learners’ willingness to participate actively in the learning process.

It has been established that intellectual curiosity is a vital force behind language acquisition. Intellectual curiosity drives language learners to investigate the language not only from a communicative perspective but also from other linguistic and cultural dimensions. There are two kinds of curiosity: epistemic and perceptual. Epistemic curiosity pertains to the need-to-know new information, whereas perceptual curiosity is characterized by curiosity about new experiences. It is clear that epistemic curiosity is particularly useful in the process of acquiring a second language because it encourages people to explore

the language and its culture (Witte, 2023; Sophie, 2019; Wang & Wu, 2020). The innate drive to learn the language pushes learners to search for more information and opportunities for language development.

According to the literature, the key aspects of SLA include emotions and intellectual curiosity. In terms of emotions, positive feelings such as motivation are important facilitators of SLA, while negative emotions, such as anxiety, may impede the process. As far as the move toward the affective turn in SLA is concerned, emotions and psychology become critical in creating the necessary environment for the learning process. In addition, intellectual curiosity, especially epistemic curiosity, is one of the most important motivators for language learning.

Theoretical Framework

Affective Factors in Language Learning

The affective factors are the psychological and social factors that have an effect on the process of acquiring a second language. The affective factors are related to motivational factors, confidence, attitudes, and anxiety. A high level of these factors will help the learner acquire the new language effectively, while a low level will hinder it. A high level of motivation, confidence, and positive attitudes will ensure a low level of the affective filter, which will ensure successful language acquisition. On the other hand, negative emotions will increase the level of the affective filter, thus making language acquisition difficult.

The Role of Motivation and Interest in Second Language Acquisition

Motivation acts as a critical factor in SLA, as it influences the level of enthusiasm and persistence on the part of the learner. The theory of self-determination states that there are two types of motivations intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation results from the learner's own interests in the topic being learned. It promotes deep learning and effective language acquisition. Interest is associated with motivation and helps create a learner's curiosity towards engaging with the language. Highly motivated learners with an interest in language exhibit high levels of initiative and consistent practice in language engagement. Therefore, their language skills improve dramatically over time.

The Connection Between Intellectual Curiosity and Language Learning

Intellectual curiosity is one of the key affective variables in SLA, which motivates students to delve deeper into the language beyond its communicative purposes. Epistemic curiosity, the need to learn and know, inspires individuals to interact more with the language's linguistic and cultural components.

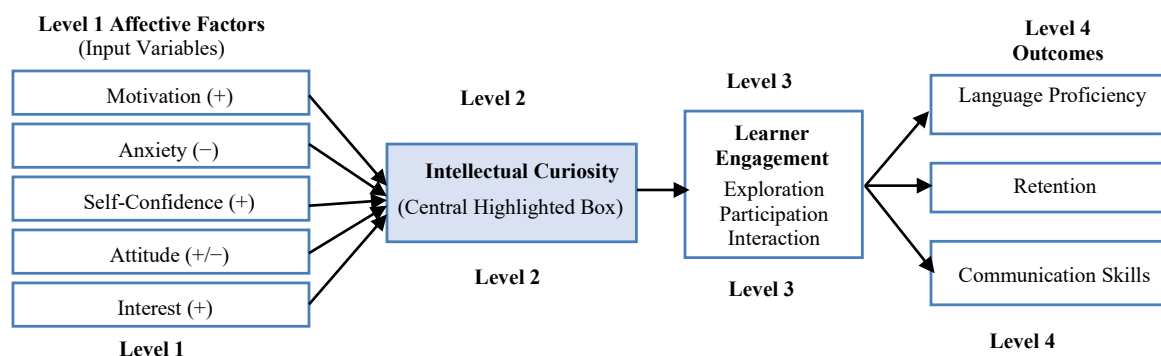


Figure 1: Integrated Model of Affective Factors, Intellectual Curiosity, and Language Proficiency

The intellectually curious learners have a greater tendency to expose themselves to new language environments, take part in debates, and investigate various cultures in which the target language exists. In

this regard, intellectual curiosity plays an important role in helping individuals acquire higher levels of language proficiency because they will be able to gain more insights about the language structure and culture.

Figure 1 is an integrative conceptual model showing how affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, attitude, and interest affect intellectual curiosity among second language learners. Intellectual curiosity is a mediating factor that will boost engagement among learners by exploring, participating, and interacting. Engagement, on the other hand, will promote good language performance, better retention, and improved communication skills.

Empirical Studies

Impact of Intellectual Curiosity on Language Learning

Several case studies have focused on the impact of intellectual curiosity on language acquisition. There has been evidence proving that language learners who have high intellectual curiosity generally tend to participate more in language learning exercises. Such learners tend to be highly interested in exploring different elements related to language learning, apart from just vocabulary and grammatical structures. The significance of having an interest in comprehending different cognitive and cultural elements of language learning has been pointed out by several researchers. This has led to the understanding that intellectual curiosity plays an important role in enhancing language skills.

Affective Factors and Language Proficiency

Motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence are some affective factors that influence language proficiency. It has been found through research that when individuals are less motivated and anxious, their performance improves during activities such as speaking and writing. On the other hand, when learners are highly anxious, it negatively affects their language proficiency. This is because high anxiety increases the affective filter in the brain of the individual, making them unable to learn and process language information. Therefore, these affective factors must be considered in order to achieve language proficiency.

Table 1: Summary of Affective Factors and Their Impact on Language Proficiency

Affective Factor	Impact on Language Proficiency	Explanation
Motivation	Positive Impact	Highly motivated learners engage more in language tasks, persist longer, and tend to achieve higher proficiency.
Anxiety	Negative Impact	High anxiety raises the affective filter, making it difficult for learners to absorb language input, thus impeding progress.
Self-Confidence	Positive Impact	Learners with high self-confidence tend to take more risks in language use, increasing their opportunities for practice and improvement.
Attitude	Positive or Negative Impact	Positive attitudes towards the language and culture lead to greater engagement, while negative attitudes can hinder learning by raising the affective filter.
Interest	Positive Impact	Learners who find the language interesting are more likely to engage deeply, which boosts retention and proficiency.

Table 1 shows, there are several affective components that include motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, attitude, and interest, along with the effect of such affective elements on language abilities. It

is clear from the table that emotions are vital in the process of acquiring language skills, and positive emotions facilitate the process, while negative emotions like anxiety hamper the process.

Successful Learners and Intellectual Curiosity

Research on language learners shows that being intellectually curious is among the traits that contribute significantly to success in language learning. Language learners who exhibit high degrees of intellectual curiosity usually have an adventurous attitude when approaching their learning process, which allows them to see the problems face as a way of growing. Such language learners normally take initiatives to experience the language in authentic ways, including speaking with native speakers and studying cultural materials in the language. Curiosity is a very significant quality that ensures success in learning and acquiring fluency in the target language.

Practical Implications

Fostering Intellectual Curiosity in Language Learners

In order to arouse curiosity on the part of learners of languages, it could be necessary for educators to create a stimulating environment for students to make them explore those areas that lie outside the scope of textbook learning. This might involve activities like exposure to authentic resources written in the foreign language, such as movies, music, literature, conducting conversations in the foreign language with the people who speak that language natively, and enabling students to choose a topic they are passionate about themselves.

Incorporating Affective Factors into Language Teaching

The affective factors in language teaching can be brought about through providing a favorable environment that helps the learners feel comfortable emotionally. It is important that teachers provide a non-threatening atmosphere for the learners to experiment and try out for themselves in the language. Methods like engaging the learners in collaborative exercises, having good teacher-student relationships, and positive reinforcement will help lower the affective filter. Also, integrating the cultural component in language lessons makes the learner build an emotional connection to the language.

Table 2: Practical Teaching Strategies for Incorporating Affective Factors

Strategy	Affective Factor Addressed	Description
Collaborative Learning	Motivation, Self-Confidence	Working in pairs or groups fosters a supportive environment, reducing anxiety and increasing motivation.
Positive Reinforcement	Self-Confidence, Motivation	Encouraging students for effort and success builds confidence and boosts intrinsic motivation.
Authentic Materials	Interest, Motivation	Using real-life texts (movies, songs, articles) in the target language enhances learner engagement.
Autonomous Learning Projects	Intellectual Curiosity	Allowing students to choose topics or projects encourages self-driven exploration and deepens curiosity.
Peer Feedback and Support	Anxiety, Self-Confidence	Providing opportunities for learners to give and receive feedback helps reduce anxiety and builds confidence.

Table 2 describes techniques that can be used to integrate affective variables into language learning. These include strategies like group work, positive reinforcement, and realia to enhance motivation and stimulate self-confidence and intellectual curiosity in learners.

Recommendations for Educators to Enhance Intellectual Curiosity

Intellectual curiosity among students can be promoted by creating opportunities for independent learning for them. Allowing students to work on assignments that involve researching a topic of personal interest is one example of promoting intellectual curiosity. Additionally, educators can create an environment within the class where students can ask questions, thus stimulating their curiosity. Intellectual curiosity among students can be furthered when educators encourage students to think about how the knowledge gained from language classes could be applied to their lives and personal interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the significance of affective and intellectual aspects in the process of SLA. The main takeaways are that emotions, including motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, have a tremendous impact on language learning. When positive emotions prevail, the affective filter is lowered, making the language learning process easier, whereas negative emotions, such as high anxiety, contribute to raising the affective filter, thus preventing learners from acquiring a new language. Moreover, intellectual curiosity, and more specifically epistemic curiosity, has been identified as one of the key drivers of SLA. Intellectual curiosity motivates students to delve into the language, not just learn it superficially, but also discover the culture associated with it. Considering the nature of affective factors and their relation to curiosity, it would be beneficial to concentrate research efforts on longitudinal studies and cross-cultural approaches, allowing for an examination of the development of such factors over time in various contexts. A comparative study of motivation, anxiety, and curiosity among different groups of people with distinct cultural backgrounds can provide interesting information for applying appropriate approaches to the process of language learning. Moreover, technological advances open up possibilities to research new methods of engaging learners through the use of innovative educational platforms and the Internet in general. Understanding the significance of both factors and ways to work with them, modern educators have started paying attention to incorporating them into language education practices.

References

- Dewaele, J. M., Chen, X., Padilla, A. M., & Lake, J. (2019). The flowering of positive psychology in foreign language teaching and acquisition research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 2128. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02128>
- Getie, A. S. (2020). Factors affecting the attitudes of students towards learning English as a foreign language. *Cogent education*, 7(1), 1738184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184>
- Gilakjani, A. P., Lai-Mei, L., & Sabouri, N. B. (2012). A study on the role of motivation in foreign language learning and teaching. *International Journal of Modern Education and Computer Science*, 4(7), 9. <https://doi.org/10.5815/ijmecs.2012.07.02>
- Hong, J. C., Hwang, M. Y., Liu, Y. H., & Tai, K. H. (2022). Effects of gamifying questions on English grammar learning mediated by epistemic curiosity and language anxiety. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(7), 1458-1482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2020.1803361>
- Ibrahim, Z. (2020). Sustained flow: Affective obsession in second language learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2963. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02963>

- Jirout, J. J., & Matthews, S. E. (2022). Developing intellectual character: An educational perspective on how uncertainty-driven curiosity can support learning. In *Uncertainty: A catalyst for creativity, learning and development* (pp. 253-268). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98729-9_14
- Kębłowska, M. (2012). The place of affect in second language acquisition. In *New perspectives on individual differences in language learning and teaching* (pp. 157-167). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-20850-8_10
- Li, D., & Zhang, L. (2023). Exploring EFL learners' cognitive/emotional dissonance in content-based foreign language instruction: An ecological perspective. *System*, 114, 103019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103019>
- Liu, H., Li, T., Zheng, H., Li, Y., & Fan, J. (2025). Exploring the relationship between students' language learning curiosity and academic achievement: The mediating role of foreign language anxiety. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(8), 1133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15081133>
- Mercer, S., & Pawlak, M. (2024). Language teacher professional curiosity: Understanding the drive for professional development. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 14(3), 393-420. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.39293>
- Paradowski, M. B., & Jelińska, M. (2024). The predictors of L2 grit and their complex interactions in online foreign language learning: Motivation, self-directed learning, autonomy, curiosity, and language mindsets. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 37(8), 2320-2358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.2192762>
- Seven, M. A. (2020). Motivation in Language Learning and Teaching. *African Educational Research Journal*, 8, 62-71.
- Shao, K., Nicholson, L. J., Kutuk, G., & Lei, F. (2020). Emotions and instructed language learning: Proposing a second language emotions and positive psychology model. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 2142. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02142>
- Sophie, T. I. (2019). Can a sociolinguistic perspective of Second Language Acquisition solve 'the longstanding human curiosity' of learning languages?. *Training, Language and Culture*, 3(3), 36-55. <https://doi.org/10.29366/2019tlc.3.3.3>
- Tin, T. B. (2009). Features of the most interesting and the least interesting postgraduate second language acquisition lectures offered by three lecturers. *Language and Education*, 23(2), 117-135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780802152770>
- Von Stumm, S., Hell, B., & Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2011). The hungry mind: Intellectual curiosity is the third pillar of academic performance. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 6(6), 574-588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691611421204>
- Wang, L., & Wu, X. (2020). Influence of affective factors on learning ability in second language acquisition. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 29(2), 1232. <https://doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.365>
- Wang, X. (2021). Cognitive and affective learning in English as a foreign language/English as a second language instructional-learning contexts: Does teacher immediacy matter?. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 759784. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.759784>
- Witte, A. (2023). Bringing the body into play: The corporeal aspect in second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 107(3), 693-712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12861>