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Cultural Influence in the English Language Acquisition Process

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Abstract: The process of acquiring a second language is the subject of an ever-increasing number of academic studies that delve into its workings. Social Constructivism, an established theory that defines human development as the product of social interaction, also sees learning as an inherently social and cultural process. However, to date, there remains an insufficient number of academic reviews examining existing theories of language acquisition and cultural influence shaping language learning. This paper aims to fill this gap by reviewing the available scholarly literature and theories on the effects of culture and social context on language acquisition. Accordingly, three theories that address the subject have been chosen to be examined in this article, and the empirical studies that support or undermine their claims are presented as well. Based on the evidence, the analysed theories support the idea that a significant amount of cultural

and social information is embedded in language learning and that its effects are considerable. This study then complements its scholarly literature review by analysing, using bibliometric tools, the research on language acquisition currently accessible, particularly in the fields of linguistic relativity and intercultural communicative competence. The results of such statistical analysis reveal that, although still decent numerically, the formal study of these theories in relation to language acquisition is growing, both in numbers and in significance. This paper contributes to the field of English Language Teaching by providing a thorough review of theoretical and empirical knowledge relevant to language teachers who aim to improve their expertise and professional practice, while advancing and fostering research on the cultural and social impact on language acquisition by offering a quantitative review of available studies.

Keywords: English language acquisition, intercultural communicative competence, linguistic relativity, bibliometric analysis.

Introduction

Constructivism is one theory that attempts to explain how human development and meaning-making occur, particularly during the first years of life. This theory emphasises the process of finding knowledge and ideas in the environment, consequently defining learning as a process in which students build their own knowledge (Wibowo et al., 2025).

One of the advocates of constructivism, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, is widely recognised as the founder of Sociocultural Theory (Mahn, 1999). Vygotsky placed great emphasis on the social context of learning. As a result, he developed what is now known as social constructivism, which sees learning as a process that cannot occur in isolation but requires a social setting to be successful (Prakash Chand, 2023). One of the main postulates of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that the social environment of a child influences cognition through its social "tools", such as cultural objects, social institutions, and language (Schunk, 2012, p. 242), and such tools shape human development throughout the years. As stated by Shabani et al. (2010), Vygotsky indicated that "development cannot be separated from its social and cultural context" (p. 238).

Since language learning is a crucial constituent of human development and, according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, language acquisition is not "an individual cognitive process" but "a socially mediated activity where interaction and collaboration are essential" (Massa, 2024, p. 158), it is evident that any kind of language acquisition process is influenced by social and cultural factors present in the environment. However, despite the importance of acknowledging environmental influences on language acquisition, there currently seems to be a significant lack of appreciation for them in the educational world. While theoretical frameworks have developed extensive literature on what influences human development, such as Sociocultural Theory, there seems to be low awareness among language teachers, who, despite the available knowledge, may still hold outdated understandings of culture and its role in language teaching (Kidwell, 2024). This translates into language students performing poorly, not necessarily in language knowledge, but in intercultural sensitivity and competence.

Research Problem

The current study addresses the persistent gap between linguistic instruction and intercultural competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. While the globalisation of English has fostered greater linguistic exposure, learners often lack the intercultural sensitivity required to interpret cultural signals, adapt communication styles, and navigate diverse communicative contexts effectively. This limitation hinders their ability to achieve authentic communication and intercultural understanding.

It is important to analyse this problem now because intercultural competence is increasingly recognised as a core skill for global citizenship and professional success in multicultural environments. Understanding how interculturality influences English acquisition can help educators design teaching methodologies that integrate cultural learning with linguistic practice. The findings can benefit both society and the academic field by contributing to the development of inclusive, culturally responsive language education.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This research aims to analyse how interculturality influences the acquisition of English. Consequently, the authors have performed a brief analysis of bibliometric data, which allows us to assess the current state of this research, as this technique has become increasingly used in social studies to characterise the state of a research field (see Chehlarova et al., 2025; Zhu, 2025).

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does interculturality influence the acquisition of English as a foreign language?
2. What intercultural factors most significantly affect learners' linguistic and communicative performance?
3. How can the development of intercultural communicative competence be integrated into EFL teaching methodologies?

Literature Review

The term culture has been described as difficult to define, given its “broad scope and multifaceted nature” (Mitrulescu, 2023, p. 210). Culture is understood to be composed of essential presumptions, values, examples of conduct, mentalities, and convictions belonging to a specific group of people, usually confined to a certain area or region (Mitrulescu, 2023). Culture is also defined as a form of social inheritance transmitted from one generation to the next, whose forms, beliefs, ideas, knowledge, customs, and values are shaped by this social inheritance (Ali et al., 2015). In this sense, it seems that each culture establishes for its members a context of “cognitive and affective behaviour”, a framework for personal and social existence (Brown, 2007), within which members of such culture are intrinsically thought to, and even expected to, operate and behave.

What is the role that culture, an abstract concept that seemingly influences human behaviour and thought, plays in language acquisition? As Brown (2007) claims, the role that culture plays in language learning is:

It is apparent that culture, as an ingrained set of behaviours and modes of perception, is highly important in learning a second language. A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language: the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (p. 189).

Given this close connection, it is evident that learning cultural knowledge cannot be avoided when learning a second language. In a way, any language learner undergoes a process of enculturation, since “new cultural frames of reference” and a new view of the world have been embedded in the language by its speakers and its culture (Alptekin, 2002, p. 58). Such frames of reference and views of the world tend to vary widely across cultures. Take, as an example, the case of Western and Eastern cultures. As asserted by Pae (2020), the American culture is largely individualistic, in opposition to Chinese Culture, which is collectivistic; while collectivistic groups value group cohesion, moderation and discourage arising against authorities, individualistic people, like the Americans, value self-expression, freedom and independence, and are likely to resist those in power to call for equity and equal opportunities (p. 8).

Linguistically speaking, a group's culture is most evident in its lexical items. McKay (2004) identifies two levels at which language is shaped by culture: semantics and pragmatics. Regarding semantics, cultural information is present in common phrases or proverbs used by a group of people that are elicited in common speech or communication with no historical, cultural, or sociological explanation provided, nor needed. As for pragmatics, speech acts, such as giving and receiving compliments, asking for information, or making and refusing invitations are also shaped by culture; for instance, in Western cultures, individuals are likely to respond to a compliment with a "thank you", while, Eastern cultures prompt their members to kindly disagree with compliments and even undervalue their own actions as a response to a compliment (McKay, 2004, p. 6).

Such is the importance of cultural influence in language acquisition that several authors have advocated greater awareness of cultural knowledge, as in Baker's (2011) *Intercultural Awareness*. However, as it will be discussed soon, the study of other cultures in language learning goes beyond awareness and focuses on a competence deeply shaped by cultural knowledge.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Back in the 1960s, D. Hymes proposed the concept of Communicative Competence in language acquisition, which was his response to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018). Later, Canale and Swain presented a comprehensive model of the Communicative Competence proposed by Hymes, which consisted of four sub-competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence (Taş & Khan, 2020). The grammatical competence presented in this model deals extensively with the components of language, while the sociolinguistic competence is based on knowledge of the social contexts in which language is used; furthermore, discourse competence deals with the extended use of language, and finally, strategic competence is about coping or succeeding in authentic communicative situations (Alptekin, 2002).

It was M. Byram (1997) who proposed adding a much-needed cultural component to the concept of Communicative Competence in language learning. He defined this new competence as follows:

Someone with Intercultural Communicative Competence can interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. They can negotiate a mode of communication and interaction that is satisfactory to both themselves and the other, and they can act as mediators between people of different cultural origins. Their knowledge of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, and their awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of the language (Byram, 1997, p. 71).

Following his description of an intercultural speaker, Byram later asserted that intercultural competence is the ability to "ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 10). Intercultural competence, along with more traditional linguistic competence, forms the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) concept.

What Empirical Research has found

The cultural influence on language acquisition has attracted considerable interest in the last few decades within the field of Linguistics, and several studies have provided empirical evidence that reinforces the influence of culture on language. In one of such studies, Hurst (2022) conducted a survey which revealed that groups of French and American people recalled different prototypical words when asked

about 16 core language categories, such as *Professions* or *Sports*. The author conjectures that the difference in prototypical words for core language categories is due to the large variation in cultural backgrounds between the two groups. For instance, the French equivalent of *baker* only ranked highly as a prototypical word for the category of *Professions* among the French participants, and the word *butcher* -whose French equivalent ranked highly on the French list- did not appear at all on the list of American representative words for the same category (Hurst, 2022, p. 1073), hinting at the influence of France's gastronomic tradition and culture on its language.

Techniques to modify the content taught to include cultural knowledge in language classes have also been suggested and tested. One of such techniques proposed to teach culture is Text Nativisation, which Alptekin (2006) defines as "the pragmatic and semantic adaptation of the textual and contextual clues of the original story into the learner's own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact" (p. 497). Khataee and Dowlatabadi (2023) conducted a study using the Text Nativisation technique to adapt a text with a considerable presence of foreign cultural information to make it easier for Iranian English Language Teaching (ELT) students to understand. Their findings suggest that the higher reading performance and comprehension observed in the intervention group, compared to the control group, are the result of the Text Nativisation treatment as well as the extensive provision of relevant background knowledge before the text is applied.

In a more recent instance, a mixed-methods study by Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2016) first administered the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire to a sample of 120 international students at a Malaysian university and then conducted interviews with 12 students to obtain qualitative data. The authors found a strong correlation between proficiency in English and some attributes of the ICC, and, since English served as a lingua franca among the participants, their proficiency in English was said to play a significant role in their academic performance, social lives, and emotional state on campus. However, proficiency is not the only factor contributing to the ICC. Thongpan & Thumawongsa (2023) found that international ELT teachers working in Thailand had developed their ICC more effectively than their Thai counterparts, who were ELT professionals as well but had not been exposed to cultural diversity as often as the visiting teachers.

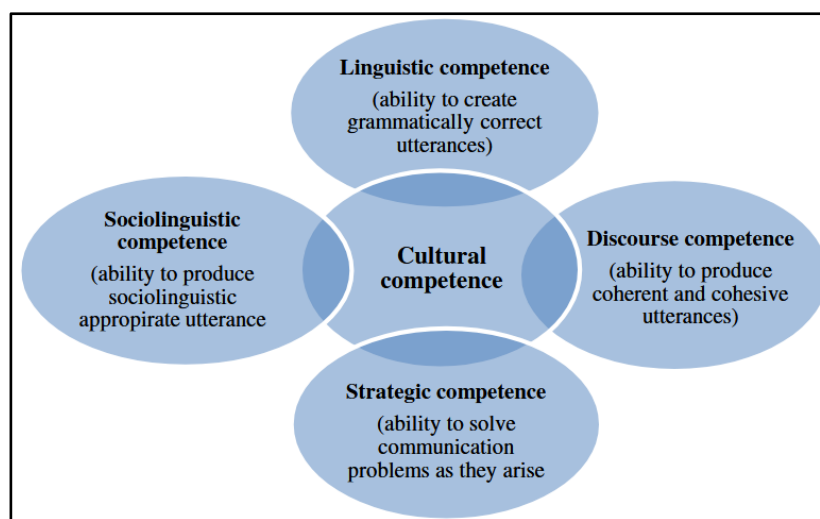
Culture as the Fifth Language Skill

After reviewing core concepts and some of the empirical evidence that underpins the role of culture in language learning, it makes all the more sense to consider the cultural component of language as an independent language skill. There seems to be a consensus among researchers that culture is the fifth skill, along with reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Lai, 2013). Interestingly, the currently available literature provides scarce information that thoroughly develops the fifth skill as a cultural one, and the empirical evidence supporting it is equally insufficient.

One of the few authors to develop the concept of culture as a separate yet relevant language skill was Kramsch (1993), who suggested that the cultural component was on a similar level of relevance to the other four language skills, rendering it too important to be discarded from language teaching. Following Kramsch's thinking, Mao (2009) asserted that cultural awareness should be considered as the fifth skill, and that the "ultimate goal of culture teaching is to nurture the intercultural communicative competence" (p. 145). Revisiting the four language sub-competencies developed by Canale and Swain, Bardós (2004, as cited in Altun, 2019) added the cultural component to the model, making it part of all other competencies, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The cultural competence in Canale and Swain's model



Source: Bardós (2004, p. 151), as cited in Altun (2019, p. 164)

The importance of cultural competence in language lies in what it allows language learners to do. Ghafor (2020) asserts that the fifth language skill, culture, helps learners realise and appreciate the sociocultural differences present in societies that speak a different language; additionally, Ghafor notes that linguistic competence is not sufficient without background knowledge about the people one is addressing. Özüorçun (2014) also claims that culture, as a separate language skill, prepares learners “to adapt their English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique specialities of other cultures”, resulting in successful communication (p. 682). However, despite the fact that culture evidently plays a crucial role among the language sub-competencies, its content seems to have been relegated to a lesser role. Oftentimes, language teachers and instructors assume that their students will acquire cultural knowledge through other means, only to devote their focus and time exclusively to developing the four main language skills (Vernier et al., 2008).

Linguistic Relativity

The notions about the culture-language connection were present within the Linguistics field as early as the 1930s, when the American linguist B. Whorf claimed that such a connection was so strong that “language structures were not only inseparable from cognition, but also culture” (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018, p. 8). Before his premature death, Whorf went on to make his most recognised contribution to language studies, namely, the Linguistic Relativity hypothesis.

Whorf’s short-lived linguistic career was heavily influenced by the work of his mentor, E. Sapir, which was centred on the influence of culture on language. However, it was not until Whorf’s research was published that the Linguistic Relativity hypothesis was formulated as a “cohesive, or nearly cohesive, set of ideas regarding the influence of language on the thoughts of their speakers” (Everett, 2013, p. 12). However, neither Whorf nor Sapir may be credited with introducing the premise that different languages imply different ways of thinking and perceiving the world. During the 19th century, the Prussian linguist W. von Humboldt claimed that the differences between languages lie not only in sounds and signs but also in worldview, and that habitual grammatical differences are a reflection of pre-existent differences in thought (Deutscher, 2010). Based on the authors’ ideas, Whorf proposed the following principle:

From this fact proceeds what I have called the “linguistic relativity principle”, which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by the grammars toward different types of observations and different equations of externally similar acts of observation, and

hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world (Whorf, 1956, p. 221, as cited in Everett, 2013, p. 13).

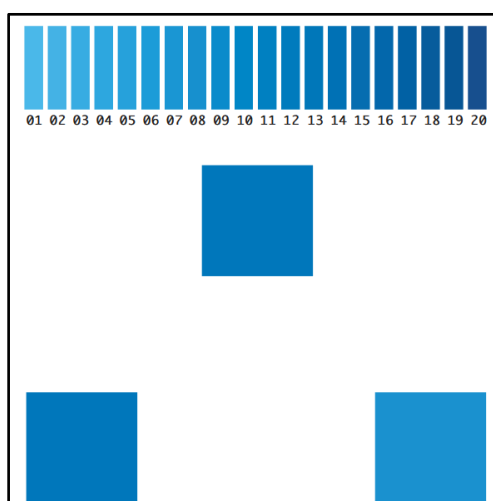
Such a position is now known as “linguistic determinism, which is understood to hold that differences in language cause differences in thinking, a result of how each language determines the basic categories of thought (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). This proposal, however, was largely neglected by the scientific community for decades, as the methodological evidence used by Whorf had considerable flaws (Lalumera, 2014; Deutscher, 2010); consequently, by 1990, the theory was considered an outdated idea (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). However, a recent resurgence of research has found interactions between language and thought, or the so-called Whorfian effects, across various domains, reviving the debate over whether language shapes thought (Wolff & Holmes, 2011; Lalumera, 2014). If then linguistic relativity is found to affect human thought, this would mean that language learning is constrained by native-language factors, and such constraints would probably shape, or even determine, how a second language is acquired (Liu, 2018). In the following paragraphs, studies on colour perception and gender assignment will be reviewed.

Colour Perception

A well-recognised study on colour perception is that of J. Winawer and colleagues. Since the Russian language makes a compulsory distinction between light blue (*goluboy* in Russian) and dark blue (*siniy* in Russian), the authors expected to obtain faster response times among Russian speakers when performing a colour discrimination task for blue colours (see Figure 2) than among English speakers, whose language does not make that distinction (Winawer et al., 2007). Such a hypothesis was found to be correct: the Russian participants obtained faster response times in the discrimination task without interference, but showed no advantage when there was verbal interference. These findings suggest that considerable linguistic information is present in the categories of colour among native Russian speakers. As the authors clarify, the results of their study do not mean that English speakers were unable to identify which blue hues were darker or lighter, but that Russian speakers were naturally faster because they simply cannot avoid making that distinction, as they must do so to speak their language properly. In a more recent study, He et al. (2019) obtained similar results after testing the differences in the colour perception of blue and green between Mongolian and Chinese speakers.

Figure 2.

A sample triad used in the study by Winawer et al.



Note: Participants had to choose which of the two bottom squares matched the top square.

Source: Winawer et al., 2007, p. 7781.

Medical studies have found that most language functions and processing are lateralized to the left hemisphere of the brain in most right-handed people, but such lateralisation occurs to the right hemisphere of the brain slightly more often in left-handed people (Knecht, Deppe et al., 2000; Knecht, Dräger et al., 2000). Additionally, both human visual fields are primarily processed by the opposite hemisphere of the brain (i.e., the Right Visual Field -RVF- is processed by the left hemisphere, and the Left Visual Field -LVF-, by the right hemisphere) (Pitcher, 2022). Based on these findings, Roberson et al. (2008) studied colour categorisation among Korean speakers, whose language moves them to distinguish between yellow-green (*yeondu* in Korean) and green (*chorok* in Korean). Their results affirm that Korean speakers were faster than English speakers at distinguishing between largely different green hues but were slower to distinguish the colour category when shown similar green hues, likely a result of the colour boundary present in the Korean language. Additionally, the authors found that faster response times were made possible by the lateralisation of language processing, as elements presented to the RVF were identified more quickly, suggesting the use of linguistic codes in that hemisphere to determine colour categories in a seemingly non-linguistic task.

In contrast, some languages seem to affect perception through their lexicalisation mechanisms. For instance, the Korean language vowel system encodes an elaborate system of sound symbolism, as reviewed by Rhee (2019). All Korean vowels fall within one of the three categories, namely, positive, negative, or neuter, a linguistic phenomenon known as vowel polarity. If vowels are used to refer to colours in this language, the category within which each vowel used falls “modulates the sensory perception with respect to size, brightness, and the emotion caused by the perception event” (Rhee, 2019, p. 117). Consequently, when vowels from the positive category are used to refer to a particular hue in Korean, the colour is understood to be bright. However, the same hue will be perceived as dark when combined with vowels from the negative category, evidently affecting colour perception through the connotations carried by the language.

Gender Assignment

Many languages have a formal grammatical system by which all their nouns are assigned to a grammatical gender category, like masculine or feminine (e.g., Spanish), regardless of whether such nouns indeed have a biological sex, while other languages do not (e.g., English) (Samuel et al., 2019). Given its “link with biological sex and the arbitrariness of grammatical gender”, the field of gender assignment has served as the new subject of empirical studies examining the veracity of the Linguistic Relativity theory (p. 1768).

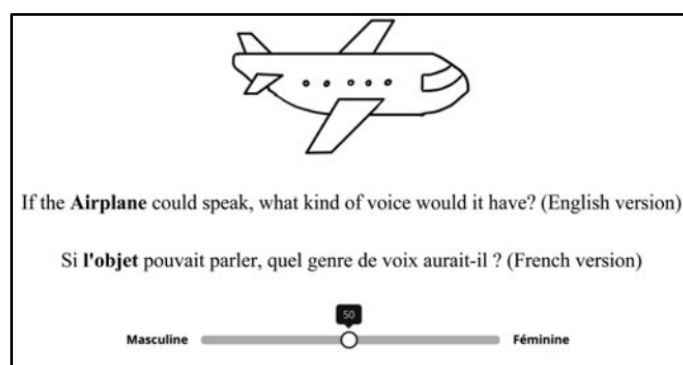
A common method to test the influence of one’s mother tongue on gender perception is the voice attribution task. Generally, participants are asked to think of a given noun and assign to it either a male or female voice. For instance, 282 students of French as a second language, with 21 different native languages (L1S), completed a voice attribution task in the study by Lambelet (2015). Despite the vast number of different native languages, the likelihood of assigning a male voice to an item with masculine gender in the participant’s respective L1 was as high as 75%, signalling a considerable influence of languages with grammatical gender systems on their speakers. Additionally, Lambelet found that participants whose language does not have a gender system basically attributed gender randomly, as their chances of assigning a matching masculine voice to an item only reached 51%.

In a recent study by Chen & Faitaki (2024), the authors examined gender perception among French and English monolinguals and bilinguals. Using the voice attribution task (see Figure 3), the authors tested the voice assigned to 32 items by each participant from the four different groups, aiming to study the effects of acquiring a second language with a different gender system on gender perception. The results obtained in the study revealed that the French bilingual participants’ native perception of gender was not weakened

by acquiring English, a genderless language, as their ratings for the items did not differ significantly from those of French monolinguals. Remarkably, English speakers were subject to a different effect. Bilingual English participants (i.e., native English speakers who learned French as a second language) showed a considerably different performance compared with their monolingual counterparts, as their voice attribution significantly matched the gender assignment in French, suggesting an important influence of acquiring a gendered language on gender perception.

Figure 3.

Example of the voice attribution task used by Chen and Faitaki.



Note: Participants used the slider to rate the gender of each item.

Source: (Chen & Faitaki, 2024, p. 405.)

A different basis to test gender perception is the stereotypes that are culturally and linguistically assigned to specific words. In Nicoladis et al. (2021), the authors found that their participants, native English speakers who had had some exposure to French as a foreign language in the past, were influenced by the stereotypical gender connotations present in their genderless mother tongue, English. The task consisted of assigning either the French male determiner or the female determiner to French words. The results manifest a considerable load of gender stereotypes, as a result of the association between words, among English speakers. Despite not speaking a mother tongue with a grammatical gender system, the participants consistently assigned the female determiner to nouns considered female in French.

Similarly, in the study by Jankowiak et al. (2024), the researchers assessed gender stereotypes for English and Polish words using a Likert scale. Once again, although English has no grammatical gender system, the English-speaking participants provided gender ratings for English words that were closely similar to those of the native speakers of Polish, a gendered language. As the authors conjecture, the world continues to be perceived in binary terms, despite the lack of a gender system in some languages, thanks to generalised stereotypes.

Notably, fragrances have also been shown to activate gender associations and stereotypes. Speed & Majid (2019) proved this in their study. The authors performed two experiments, one with native German and French speakers and one with German speakers only. All participants were asked to smell eight different fragrances and read a description of each aroma. Since the authors prepared the descriptions, they could manipulate gender associations to test them. Their results suggest that participants' olfactory memory was aided by descriptions that matched the fragrance's attributed gender. Additionally, the fragrances' ingredients were recognised more easily depending on the grammatical gender of the nouns used in the descriptions, a plausible sign of gender associations and stereotypes. Finally, the authors' hypothesis was confirmed: the intended gender associations were elicited, and fragrances marketed for female customers were deemed more suitable for participants' female relatives, and vice versa.

All the previously reviewed studies on Linguistic Relativity reveal a particular point: native languages affect, at least to a limited extent, their native speakers' perception in *specific* situations and in tasks with *specific* purposes. Consequently, the data cannot be deemed as sufficient proof for the linguistic determinism position, which holds that all languages impose a different general view of the world on their speakers. However, the fact that language-driven effects on human perception are significant makes this issue a concern for the Language Teaching field. What can language teachers do in the face of linguistic differences present in the classroom that are caused by native languages? This question will be addressed in the Discussion section.

Language Transfer

A final relevant theory on how students' native languages and cultures influence language learning is the Language Transfer (Crosslinguistic Influence) theory. According to T. Odlin (1989), Language Transfer is the "influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27). While different languages differ greatly in countless aspects, there are similarities, or features in common, that apparently bridge the acquisition of a second language. Experts in the field of SLA have identified two forms of Language Transfer, namely, positive transfer and negative transfer. Consistent with its designation, positive transfer facilitates language learning, as similarities between languages aid the acquisition of a new language; conversely, negative transfer creates difficulties for language learners, as linguistic differences hinder language acquisition (Chen, 2020; Yuan, 2021).

One area where Language Transfer is commonly observed is what has come to be known as Native Language Thinking. Before producing language, thinking occurs first. Consequently, when learning a second language, learners first use their native language's thinking, most of the time unconsciously, to understand the input received in the target language (Chen, 2020). However, native-language thinking is also observed when producing written output, such as in writing assignments. For instance, Cheng (2023) argues that when a Chinese student is asked to write an essay in English, the learner commonly constructs sentences in Chinese and then translates them into English. While this is helpful for beginners, the resulting manuscript is likely to be perceived as "awkward" by a native English speaker, leading to both positive and negative transfer in this case (Cheng, 2023, p. 1237). If, however, an intermediate or advanced learner who needs to express more advanced ideas in the target language faces a shortage of appropriate lexicon, the student will likely return to his or her native language to find known terms to express those ideas in the target language (Karim & Nassaji, 2013). Still, the effects of language transfer may be either positive, negative, or both.

What drives language transfer? According to Al-Ahdal & Aljabr (2023), the human brain is accustomed to seeking patterns and similarities; in consequence, when facing a situation of unfamiliarity with the target language, the brain "instinctively draws upon" what is already familiar, such as linguistic structures and patterns from the native language (p. 3233). Additionally, the constant use of one's mother tongue reinforces the reliance on its linguistic features and promotes their fixation; then, if the target language contains similar features to those already present in the native language, transfer is bound to occur (Zhang, 2023, p. 455).

Empirically, a considerable number of studies on Language Transfer have examined this phenomenon across a wide range of linguistic events and situations. A recent study on language transfer, conducted by Qian et al. (2024), aimed to examine how the Mandarin Chinese dialect influenced native Chinese speakers learning English as a second language and their linguistic performance. The linguistic process tested was the use of articles, and the methods used were a sentence completion task and a cloze task. While the Mandarin Chinese dialect does not have a formal article system, the English language does,

as it uses definite and indefinite articles, as well as a zero-article feature in certain contexts. The authors found that the participants were more successful with the indefinite articles, since their native language, despite not having a formal article system, similarly uses the demonstrative *nei* to how English speakers use *a* and *an*. However, the results dropped significantly for the other two English article categories because Mandarin dialects do not follow the same article rules and patterns as English. Evidently, both forms of Language Transfer were present in the case of these Chinese speakers, as they were aided by using the demonstrative *nei* as an indefinite article in their mother tongue. At the same time, the overall lack of such words in their native language hindered their performance in the other two article categories.

Materials and Methods

For the Literature Review, the Scopus database and the platforms Google Scholar and ResearchGate were used to compile relevant publications about the main categories of study, namely, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Linguistic Relativity and Language Transfer. Since there is a considerable amount of literature on all of the three studied theories, the sources were included in the study based on the following criteria:

- No year range exclusion for publications in which authors introduce the examined theories or fundamental principles
- For empirical studies, scholarly publications released in the 15 last years of research were reviewed, with a few exceptions in the case of fundamentally renowned studies

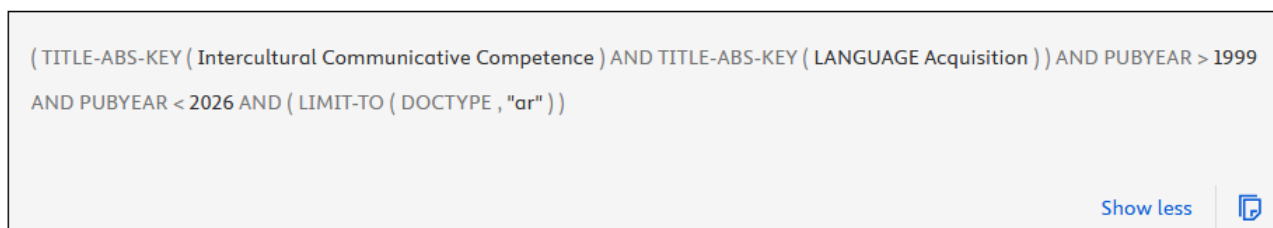
The review of scholarly books and articles examined in the literature review provide the answers to the research questions of this study. Such questions are addressed in the Discussion section.

For the Bibliometric Overview, bibliometric data were exported from Scopus's bibliographic database, which was available as of October 2025, when this research was conducted. A bibliometric analysis enables the deciphering and mapping of the available scientific knowledge and evolutionary tendencies within research fields by rigorously analysing objective quantitative data (Donthu et al., 2021).

To fulfil the purpose of this study, two searches were performed on the Scopus database. The first search was conducted by entering the terms "Intercultural Communicative Competence" and "Language Acquisition" on the platform's browser. The search parameters were adjusted to look for the selected terms on all titles, abstracts, and keywords. Once the preliminary results were obtained, the search was limited to including only article-type documents within the year range of 2000 to 2025, as presented in Figure 4. 69 articles were found within the Scopus database that match the criteria.

Figure 4

Parameters for the first search on the Scopus database.



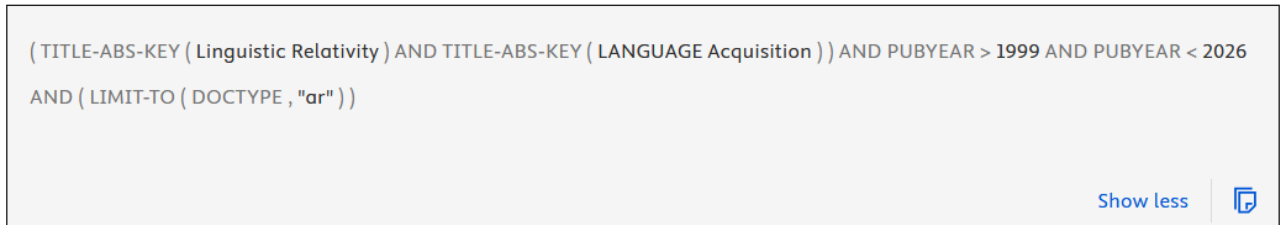
Source: Scopus

The second search was conducted on the Scopus database by typing the terms "Linguistic Relativity" and "Language Acquisition" on all titles, abstracts, and keywords. The preliminary results were also limited

to scholarly articles that were published between the years 2000 and 2025, as presented in Figure 5. 37 documents were found to match the desired criteria.

Figure 5

Parameters for the second search on the Scopus database.



Source: Scopus

Once the bibliometric data from both searches was obtained and exported, the data sets were processed using the RStudio software. RStudio is a free IDE (integrated development environment) developed by the Posit Company (Posit Team, 2025). RStudio offers its users tools and a familiar interface to use the R programming language with ease. The R language is available as a free software provided by The R Foundation, and it is intended to process statistical computing data and graphics (R Core Team, 2025).

As acknowledged by Donthu et al. (2021), the most common tools for visualization of bibliometric data include the Bibliometrix package for R and the VOSviewer software. In addition, as each software has its own strengths and shortcomings, a common way of dealing with them in bibliometric studies is to use one visualization software in combination with another visualization software (p. 291), a method used in the present study.

The Bibliometrix package is a tool that may be run on the RStudio program. The tool was developed by the researchers M. Aria. and C. Cuccurullo (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) with the purpose of analysing large volumes of bibliometric data. The Biblioshiny interface is part of the Bibliometrix package and provides an easy-to-use interface for the tool. The VOSviewer application was used to create the keyword networks. This program was developed by Nees Jan van Eck and Ludo Waltman, both researchers at the Leiden University's Centre for Science and Technology Studies (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). VOSviewer was developed as a tool for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks.

Results

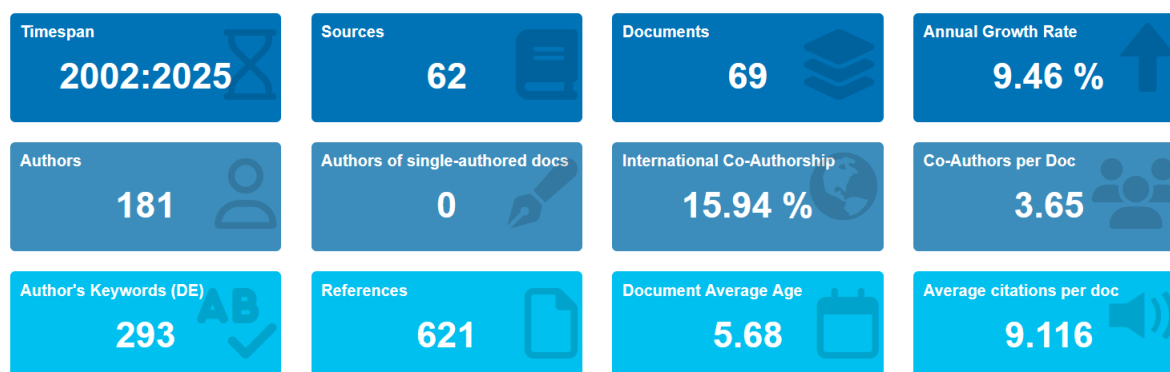
In this section, the results obtained from processing the bibliometric data obtained from the Scopus database will be presented as a Bibliometric Overview. Inferences based on the bibliometric data and graphics are presented as a short analysis of the information obtained, with the purpose of facilitating a broader view of the results.

Intercultural Communicative Competence and Language Acquisition

The bibliometric data retrieved from the search performed on Scopus was exported as a .csv file and then uploaded to Bibliometrix through the Biblioshiny tool. The number of documents that met the criteria and a summary of the main information from the search about Intercultural Communicative Competence and Language Acquisition is presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Main Information obtained from the first search, as presented by the Biblioshiny interface.

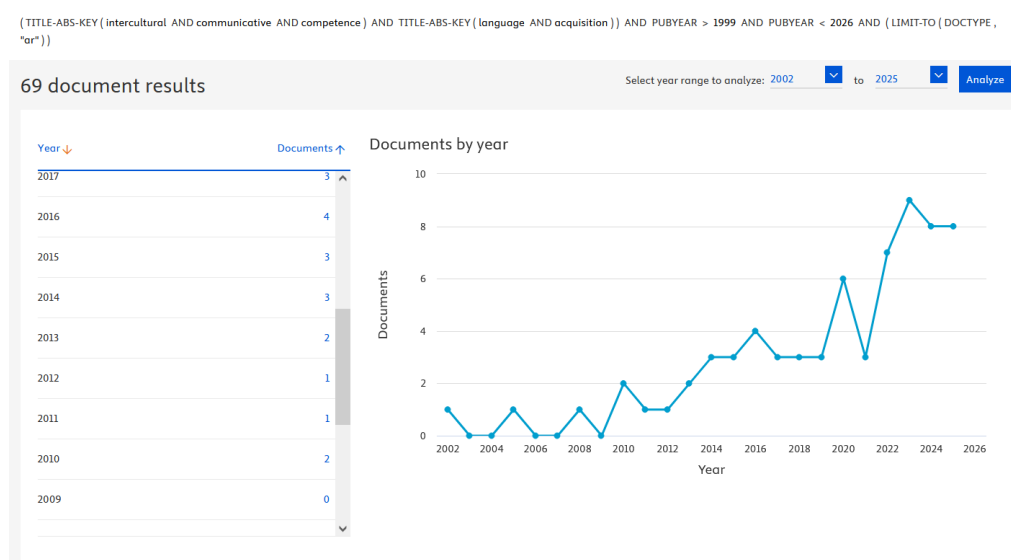


Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the Bibliometrix package on RStudio.

The Scopus platform allows analysis of results from its database by several factors, such as year, author, and subject area. In Figure 7, the Yearly Production of articles that feature the terms “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition” in either their titles or their abstracts is presented. As it can be seen in the graphic, the production of articles that include the terms “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition” reached a peak of 9 in 2023 and has remained steady at 8 in 2024 and 2025 so far. While there were no publications in 7 different years during the first decade of the century, the field has experienced an exponential increase in publishing since 2010.

Figure 7

Yearly production of articles that feature the terms “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition”.



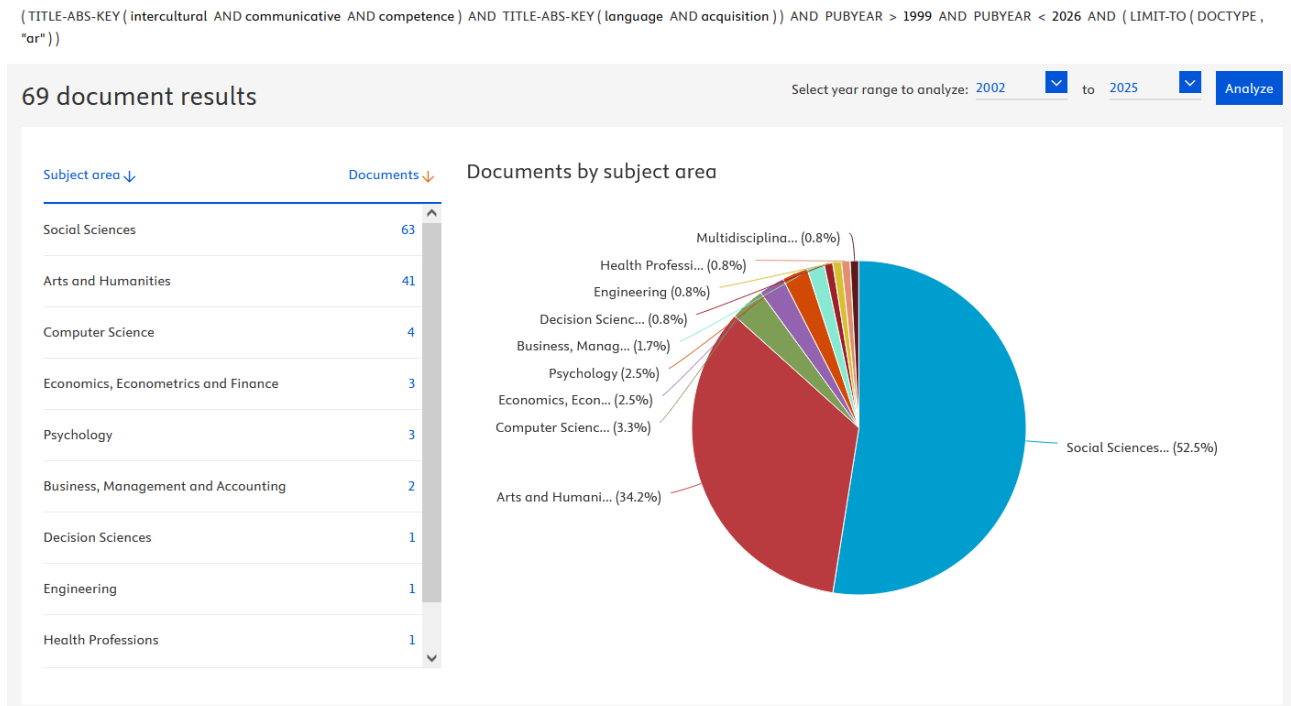
Source: Scopus

Additionally, an analysis of the subject area of the articles was performed on the Scopus platform. As shown in Figure 8, most of the published articles are in the Social Sciences area, which accounts for 52.5% (63 articles) of the graphic. The Arts and Humanities area represents the second-largest section of the

graphic, accounting for 34,2% (41) of the featured articles. The remaining areas represent less than 15% of the distribution, with Computer Science featuring four articles that contain the selected terms. It is worth noting that some articles are featured in more than one subject area, e.g., Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities, simultaneously. Since the Scopus platform provides a graphic based on full counting, the resulting number of articles analysed by subject area is higher than the 69 articles that were initially found to match the defined criteria.

Figure 8

Distribution of documents that contain the terms “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition” according to the subject area.



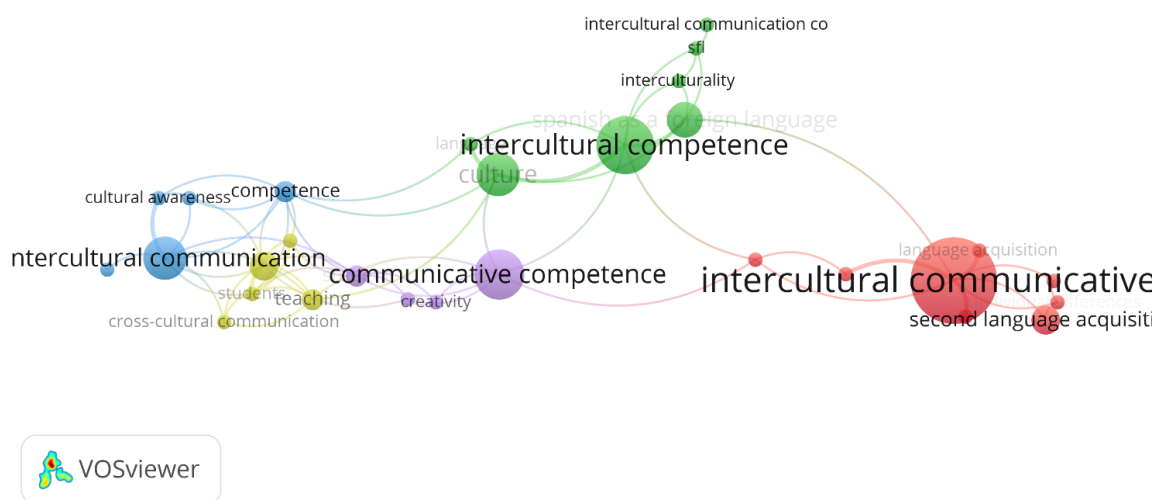
Note: Some articles are featured in more than one subject area

Source: Scopus

An analysis of keyword co-occurrence was then performed using the VOSviewer program. As claimed by Murtianingsih & Udin (2026), “a co-occurrence network visualises research articles that share commonly used and closely related terms or topics” (p. 9). In this analysis, the vast majority of the 322 keywords in the articles did not repeat, with 290 featured only once across the data. To include more keywords in the cluster map, the minimum number of occurrences required for a keyword to be considered relevant was set to 2. 32 keywords were found to appear at least twice in the data. However, three were suggested for exclusion by the VOSviewer program because they had no connection to other keywords. 29 terms, distributed across 5-word clusters, are featured in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Network map of the most recurrent keywords in articles that include the terms “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition”.

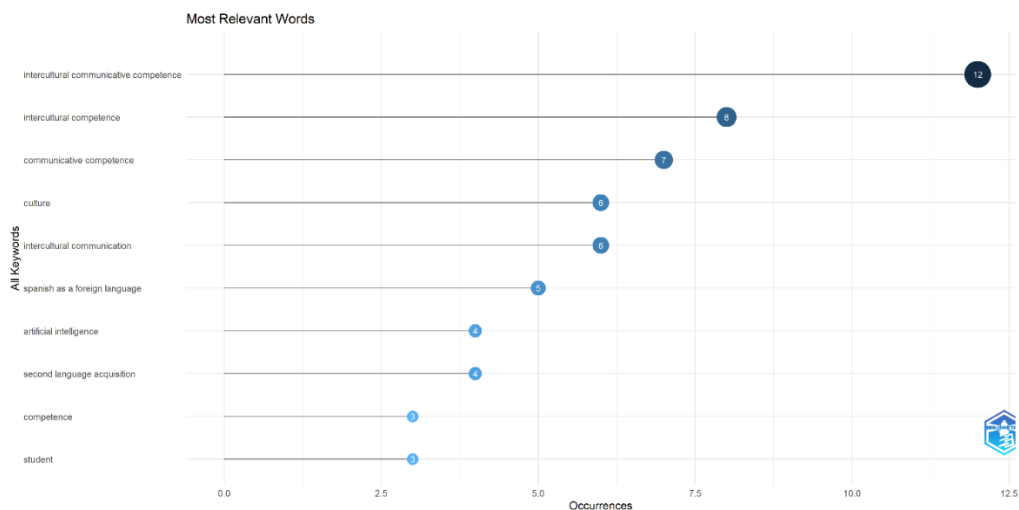


Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the VOSviewer program.

To complement the network map, a graphic created in Bibliometrix using the Biblioshiny tool is shown in Figure 10, highlighting the 10 most relevant keywords. While the first keyword in the list is *Intercultural Communicative Competence*, repeated 12 times across the data, the subsequent terms *intercultural competence* and *communicative competence* appear 8 and 7 times, respectively. This might signal that the three terms have been used interchangeably in some papers to refer to the same concept, namely, Intercultural Communicative Competence. The keywords *culture* and *second language acquisition* appear 6 and 4 times, respectively. Interestingly, *artificial intelligence* appears 4 times on this list as well.

Figure 10

Most relevant keywords found in articles that include “Intercultural Communicative Competence” and “Language Acquisition”.



Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the Bibliometrix package on RStudio.

Linguistic Relativity and Language Acquisition

As with the first search, the selected terms and parameters for the second search were entered into the Scopus search browser, and the resulting bibliometric data were downloaded as a .csv file and uploaded to Bibliometrix. The number of documents that met the criteria and the summary of the main information from this Biblioshiny search are presented in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Main Information obtained from the second search, as presented by the Biblioshiny interface.

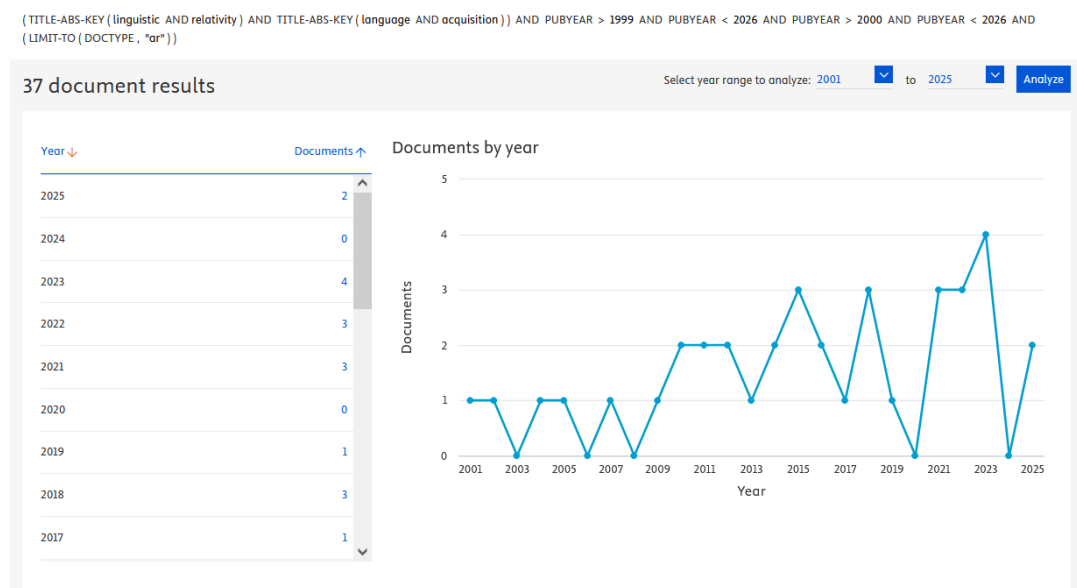


Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the Bibliometrix package on RStudio.

The Annual Scientific production of the articles that contain the words “Linguistic Relativity” and “Language Acquisition” in either their titles or their abstracts is presented in Figure 12. As can be seen in the graphic, the number of published papers containing the previously mentioned keywords has fluctuated over the last fifteen years. While no papers on the subject were published in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2020 and 2024, the data reports at least one paper published in 9 different years. A peak of four articles published was reached in 2023, and two more papers have been published in 2025.

Figure 12

Yearly production of articles that feature the terms “Linguistic Relativity” and “Language Acquisition”.

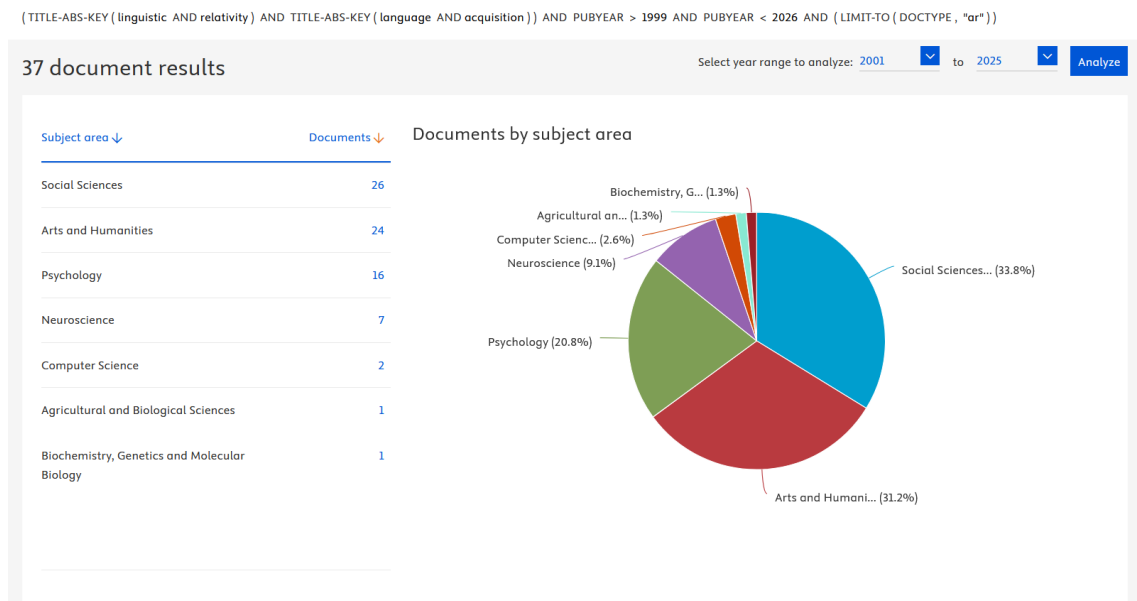


Source: Scopus

The next analysis performed on the Scopus platform is based on the subject area in which the papers were published. As it can be seen in Figure 13, 33, 33,8% (26 documents) of the papers were published in the Social Sciences area, and 31,2% (24 documents) in the Arts and Humanities area. 20,8% (16 papers) of the documents are indexed under the Psychology area. The Neuroscience area also features a considerable share of the articles, likely due to the number of in-depth papers that examine the effects of language on cognition and conduct studies on human brains.

Figure 13

Percentages of documents that feature “Linguistic Relativity” and “Language Acquisition” according to the subject area.



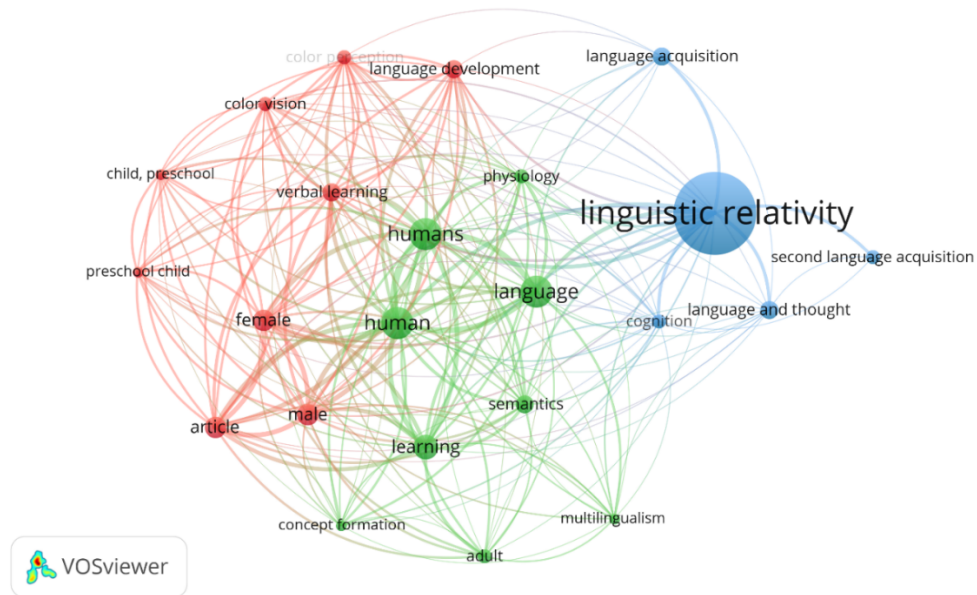
Note: Some articles are indexed in more than one subject area

Source: Scopus

In addition, a network map with the keywords obtained in this search was created using the VOSviewer application. The data was exported from Scopus as a .csv file and was then uploaded to the program. Given the number of documents, the minimum number of occurrences for a keyword to be considered as relevant was set as 3. 23 words were found to match such several occurrences, resulting in three different word clusters, as displayed in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Network map of the most recurring keywords from papers that include “Linguistic Relativity” and “Language Acquisition”.

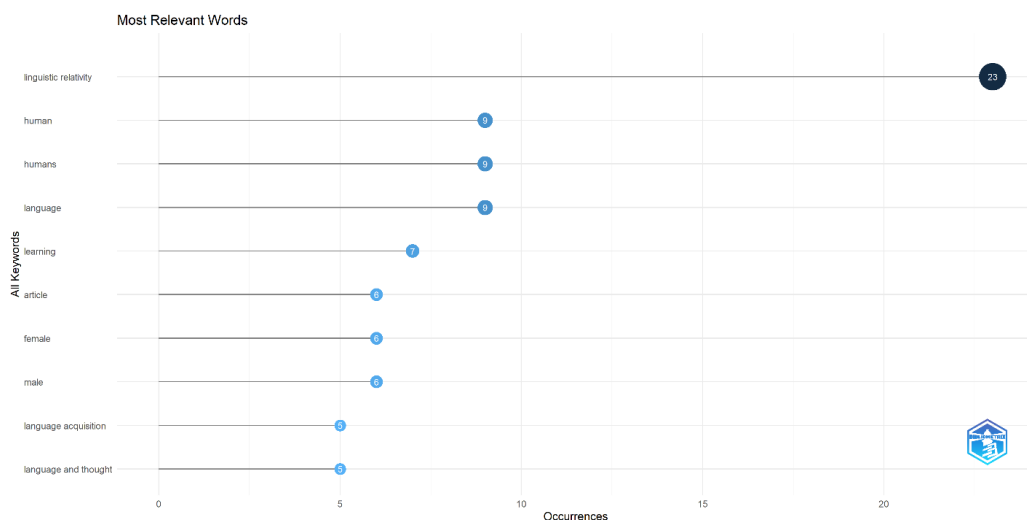


Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the VOSviewer program.

To complement the previous map, the 10 most recurrent keywords from this search were also analysed with Bibliometrix. The graphic is presented in Figure 15. The phrase “*linguistic relativity*” is, by far, the most common keyword in the titles, author keywords, and abstracts, with 23 occurrences. While the words *human* and *humans* share a basic meaning and the same number of occurrences (9 times) across the data, *language* is repeated 9 times, and *learning* is featured 7 times. The words *male* and *female* share the same number of occurrences (6 times) across the data, possibly because of how they are naturally paired in studies that delve into gender assignment in relation to linguistic relativity. *Language acquisition* was found to have five occurrences.

Figure 15

Most relevant keywords found in articles that include the terms “Linguistic Relativity” and “Language Acquisition”.



Source: Data retrieved from Scopus processed with the Bibliometrix package on RStudio.

As the data may suggest, the study of Intercultural Communicative Competence and Linguistic Relativity, specifically in relation to language acquisition, constitutes a relatively young research niche with the potential to attract researchers' attention and efforts. While most of the papers are related to social sciences and humanities, more fields of study are also enrolling in the study of the previously mentioned theories, particularly in studies on Linguistic Relativity.

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss how the previously examined theories and empirical data relate to and become relevant to those involved in the English Language Teaching field. Additionally, a brief account of the situation of the Ecuadorian education system, particularly regarding EFL instruction, will be presented as a complement.

Interculturality and English Language Acquisition

The theories of Linguistic Relativity and Language Transfer represent a deep look at what occurs when one's culture encounters the culture carried by the second language one is learning, a case of interculturality. Throughout such a process, instances of linguistic relativity and crosslinguistic influence will undoubtedly arise. While such differences may be deeply embedded in our understanding, cognition, and perception in specific areas, as reviewed by the studies Linguistic Relativity, such differences may also be used to the learners' advantage, as the work on Language Transfer makes it evident. Particularly in the case of the English language acquisition when faced with interculturality, the issue raised by the first research question of this study, its non-gendered grammatical system, may present learners of the language with particular challenges. However, similarities with other languages also present opportunities for ELT teachers.

Implications of Culture for Teaching and Teachers

Given how important it is to develop intercultural competence in language acquisition, many scholars have begun to call for greater emphasis on intercultural education. Within the field of English as Lingua Franca (ELF), also known as English as an International Language, the ICC concept has acquired prominence. Al Hariri, (2022) suggests that teachers be aware of what culture exactly is, which culture they should focus on in their lessons, and how important it is that they encourage their students to avoid imposing their own beliefs and customs as they interact with people from different backgrounds, looking for common ground upon which to build mutual acceptances and achieve successful intercultural communication.

As the English language has assumed the role of Lingua Franca, some scholars have focused on redefining language proficiency, given that the traditionally taught American or British cultures no longer represent the vast array of English varieties that have emerged around the world as a result of English becoming an international language. Language learners of English now need to "navigate" between different variations of the language to achieve successful communication (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018). The authors go on to define this new proficiency concept as the "awareness of variation in global Englishes alongside the ability to use Englishes appropriately across contexts and genres and gaining the pragmatic skills to negotiate across Englishes" (p. 79). Additionally, the authors advocate for a meta-cultural approach to culture teaching, which they define as "knowing about *culture* is more important than learning about any *particular* culture of language use" (p. 82). While their contributions are mostly directed to teaching English as a Lingua Franca, the meta-cultural approach may prove useful, as any language learner needs to know and understand what a group's cultural inheritance is, how it is expressed, and why it should be respected and valued.

In consequence, responding the second research question of this study, it may be argued that the intercultural factors that affect language learning and performance are a thorough understanding of the definition of culture in relation to language learning, sufficient knowledge about the culture that makes use of the language/dialect one is learning, as well as the awareness of the diversity of cultures that speak English and dialects of English, both in lands where English is an officially-spoken language and in lands where the language has not acquired such status yet.

More effective methods and practices to teach culture and languages

Having analysed Byram's work and theory, the Intercultural Communicative Competence, Pulverness (1999) identifies Byram's ideal student approach to culture as a comparative ethnographer, a researcher living in the middle of the culture studied, but who is simultaneously observing such an encounter as if from the outside, analysing all that occurs around him/her. Retelling his experience of designing a new syllabus for English Instruction in Bulgaria, along with a large group of teachers, Pulverness mentions the notion of language students as researchers who, thanks to the development of "ethnographic skills, can deconstruct and analyse situations filled with cultural knowledge. For instance, when presented with a typical supermarket context from the target culture, students should ideally act as ethnographers and ask internally: Where is it located? Who are the customers? What products are on sale? What technologies are available? What supplementary services are provided? among other questions (pp. 28, 29). We believe this approach would help any language student to gain appropriate insight into cultural tendencies and customs rather than treat them as mere information.

Regarding vocabulary, Hurst (2022) found substantial differences between French prototypical words for the studied word categories and the words that are commonly presented as representative in French language textbooks. Consequently, the author suggests that language teachers first examine the existing content in available textbooks to use and present their students with authentic, representative vocabulary in the target language. Additionally, Hurst encourages the use of updated translation equivalents and cognates, as the results presented in her study indicate that French native speakers do not use the traditionally taught equivalents. That is the case with the French equivalent of a police officer. While *agent de police* is the most common term, Hurst's study reveals that *policier* is the preferred term among French participants to refer to members of the police force (p. 1080). While Hurst's study focused on French representative words in French learning, we believe that the same suggestions may and should be followed by English language teachers.

In her review of how culture should be taught as a fifth skill to the members of the Romanian army who need to learn English and achieve successful intercultural communication within the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Mitrulescu (2023) suggests using the following methods as useful ways of integrating culture into language lessons: activities that include a cultural goal, use of authentic materials and texts about culture, project-based learning with a focus on culture, and assessment that evaluates language performance as well as cultural understanding. While the author's suggestions are aimed at English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, there is sufficient reason to believe that such methods could prove helpful in EFL settings.

Regarding Linguistic Relativity, Chen & Faitaki (2024) state that language teachers need to understand the effects of grammatical gender systems on the students they teach. According to the authors, such knowledge of linguistic differences caused by native languages should lead teachers to emphasise discrepancies in grammatical gender when needed, and to be more understanding when students consistently use the wrong gender in the target language. Additionally, the authors link situations of incongruence between target and native language as possible scenarios of cross-linguistic influence, or language transfer (p. 12). As reviewed earlier, language transfer may be positive or negative when learning

a language. Consequently, teachers may take advantage of the positive cross-linguistic influence experienced by their students if they are aware of this phenomenon.

The entirety of the previously mentioned points responds to the third research question of this study. An ethnographic approach for language students, better acquaintance with the appropriate word equivalents in the foreign language, proper assessment of cultural knowledge, and advantageous use of the incongruences caused by native languages in the classroom are ways of developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL classrooms.

English Teaching in Ecuador

English instruction was not introduced in Ecuador until 1912. However, it was only formalised as a required subject in the national curriculum in 1950, under the administration of Galo Plaza Lasso, the President at the time (Newman & Gibson, 2023). However, as the authors explain, the last three decades of efforts to improve the English instruction provided in public schools have not yielded the expected results. The Education First's latest English Proficiency Index for 2024 ranked Ecuador at #82 out of 116 countries globally, with a global average score of 477 points, placing the country in the Low Proficiency category (Education First, 2024). Regionally, Ecuador ranks 19th out of 21 Latin American countries in the same ranking provided by Education First, followed only by Mexico and Haiti, which are in places 20 and 21, respectively.

What causes such low performance of the initiatives and educational reforms proposed by the government? Several papers have sought to hear from EFL teachers in Ecuador to understand the problems they face daily and, from their perspective, those that have a considerable impact on their instruction. For instance, Sevy-Biloon et al. (2020) provide a detailed account of the challenges identified by 40 EFL teachers working in public schools in Ecuador who participated in the researchers' round-table discussions. One of the issues identified is the low status that English instruction holds in public schools. Various teachers mentioned that, at the time the study was conducted, the administrators of their institutions were planning to include a new subject, and, to do so, the weekly English hours were likely to be reduced to 2 hours per class (p. 289). As the authors explain, the apparent disconnection between educational policies, their makers, and the reality of public classrooms may well be one of the causes of the low attainment of English proficiency throughout the country.

In Orosz et al. (2021), 10 English teachers who work in public schools in Ecuador were interviewed by the researchers. The teachers reported the following challenges as part of their daily work: too large classes (35-40 students per classroom), insufficient teaching time (3-5 weekly school hours per class), unrealistic and unachievable curriculum, overwork and underpayment, lenient regulations, students' lack of motivation and discipline, among others (p. 238). Regarding the material, the teachers consider the amount of content in the provided resources to be too large for the scant teaching time the schedules allow. For instance, one of the interviewed teachers pointed out that each unit of the textbook provided by the Ministry of Education must be taught and finished in six weeks; however, since each unit contains six different topics, teachers are obliged to cover one whole topic, including all of its tasks, in the 3-5 weekly hours assigned to the English subject, in order to abide by the mandated policies (p. 239).

What is needed to improve the current state of the English instruction in the public Ecuadorian Education system? Interestingly, Chicaiza et al. (2023) do not consider a systematic reform of professional development programs nor a complete reform of the Ecuadorian education system to be viable options. Instead, the authors advocate for a "ground-up approach" to current teacher professional development programs that is centred on communicative principles and student-centredness, to apply truly communicative teaching and foster healthy relationships between teachers and students, as ways to compensate for the educational challenges (p. 89).

Almeida et al. (2023) report that EFL teachers in Ecuador tend to blame their students' poor educational outcomes on the adverse circumstances, but are unaware of the responsibility they too share. EFL teachers blame external issues, curricular disconnection, and too-large classes for their students' low attainment. However, the professionals do not seem to realise that their teaching practices also affect such attainment, as the authors claim (pp. 70, 71). Almeida and colleagues suggest further research into teachers' perceptions and understanding of the curriculum and practice, possibly as a starting point for educational reforms proposed by EFL teachers in Ecuador.

Finally, Alvarez et al. (2025) hold that the apparent disconnection between curricular goals and classroom reality in primary schools may be bridged by providing more technological resources, teacher training programs for EFL teaching in primary schools, and fostering parental involvement (p. 488). The authors also mention that the current curriculum should be reformed in a way that allows it to remain "practical and effective over time", as this would allow for the implementation of equally effective professional development and teacher training programs (p. 488).

Conclusions

As presented throughout this paper, several cultural effects affect second language acquisition. The work of the previously reviewed authors demonstrates that language and culture are closely connected and that culture affects language to the point that some scholars consider culture a language skill in its own right.

The number of studies reviewed in this paper that investigate whether native languages affect their speakers' perception shows that there are specific ways in which native languages may influence human perception, a fact of interest in language acquisition and language teaching.

The theory of Crosslinguistic Influence shows that, while differences between languages hinder language acquisition, similarities between them may facilitate the acquisition process when capitalised correctly. This is a fact of interest for those involved in ELT, but it also constitutes a possible starting point for better teaching practices in language instruction.

The Bibliometric Overview provides insight into the current state of the theories reviewed in this paper as research fields: Intercultural Communicative Competence and Linguistic Relativity, both in relation to the process of acquiring a language. While both theories seem to be studied more often in recent years, the number of publications examining their veracity indicates that both research fields remain modest in significance but hold potential for future research projects.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study aimed to examine some of the most relevant theories about cultural effects on language acquisition, there are certainly more theoretical ideas that have been proposed to understand this process better, but were not presented here, such as the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. Future reviews could delve into such theories and their empirical evidence.

The extensive literature available on Linguistic Relativity in other domains, such as numerical, temporal, or spatial perception, may also prove helpful for expanding awareness of how native languages affect human perception across various areas of knowledge and vocabulary, while still holding significance for the language acquisition field. In addition, the suggestions collected in this study regarding what to do in the presence of educational challenges related to Linguistic Relativity and Language Transfer in the classroom could be applied and tested empirically and longitudinally.

As presented in the Literature Review, there is scarce empirical evidence supporting the idea that culture is a fifth language skill, one as relevant as the other four. Future empirical studies may also aim to investigate whether such evidence actually exists, or whether the consensus that culture is the fifth language skill lacks foundations.

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Conflict of Interest

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