

The Role of Social Strategy, Affective Variables, and e-dictionaries on Individual Differences in Second Language Learning

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Received: 22 February 2025 | Accepted: 16 May 2025 | Published: 1 June 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ijares.2025.7.3.31>

Abstract: *This study investigates the role of social strategy, digital tools, i.e., e-dictionary use for new words to learn, and affective variables, i.e., motivation and anxiety, for individual differences in Second language Learning among Pakistani adult ESL students. The study is based on a quantitative approach. The study focuses on how learners' social strategies, such as peer collaboration and peer discussion, affect their second language acquisition (SLA) and improve ESL skills. The study also focuses on e-dictionary applications for improving English language skills. In affective variables, adult students' motivation and anxiety are analyzed as major factors of language learning success criteria. The population is based on 120 university graduate students from Pakistan. The students were gathered for the quantitative study of the survey form in one of the private universities of Pakistan. For the quantitative study, close-ended questions are critically analyzed. The finding reveals the role of social engagement in ESL learning. A significant number of second language learners actively participate in group discussions and language exchange programs. The survey form analysis reveals that 31.7% seek conversational partners and highlights the importance of social engagement. Additionally, 41.6% of participants frequently use group discussions and language exchange programs to enhance their speaking skills. The study identifies specific social strategies such as peer collaboration, conversation practice, and language exchange programs as key facilitators of fluency development.*

Keywords: Second Language Learning, Individual Differences, Social Strategies, Digital Tools, Motivation, e-dictionaries, Learning styles, Affective factors, Anxiety, Self-Confidence

1. Introduction

In Second language acquisition, differences in learning arise from psychological and social factors. These factors determine learners' success. Unlike first language acquisition, where all children generally attain fluency, SLA presents variability due to age, cognitive development, learning strategies, and affective factors (Chomsky, 1981; Wells, 1986). This paper examines key individual difference factors, including motivation and anxiety, and their implications for SLA success. Furthermore, the study discusses contemporary issues such as the influence of learning platforms in individual language learning, i.e., ESL. Here, special attention is given to the impact of e-dictionaries as digital tools in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension in second language learning. Particularly, it emphasizes individual learning.

The analysis of social strategy use suggests that learners who frequently engage in group discussions and seek conversational partners demonstrate higher language proficiency.

The research questions are:

- 1) How do motivation and anxiety influence ESL learners' engagement and participation in language learning among university graduates of Pakistan?
- 2) How do social strategies affect individual differences in second language acquisition among university graduates of Pakistan?
- 3) What is the role of Digital resources, including E-Dictionaries, on Individual Differences in ESL?

2. Literature Review

The literature review critically proposes a short description of the impact of social strategies, affective variables, and digital resources on individual differences in second language learning.

2.1 Social Strategies on Individual Differences in Second Language Learning

Social strategies are when ESL learners are involved in peer collaboration, asking questions, interactions, or social conversations (Oxford, 1990). Social strategies are employed when learners clarify, participate in group discussions, and practice with proficient speakers or native speakers of a second language. Recent research has explored how individual differences influence the effectiveness of these social strategies in SLA.

Loewen and Sato (2024) highlight that social, cultural, and political contexts significantly impact second language learning. They discuss how social identity and acculturation theories relate to immigrant learners, highlighting that learners' backgrounds and social interactions shape their language acquisition processes. Their key findings are that individual differences, i.e., cultural identities and social involvement, play roles in defining their second language learning strategies. Viberg and Kukluska Hulme (2021) interpret the development of self-regulation, i.e., language strategies and collaboration skills in mobile-assisted language learning beyond the classroom. Their findings indicate that individual differences in self-regulation, i.e., language strategies and collaborative abilities, influence how learners engage with social strategies, particularly in technology-mediated contexts. Albalawi (2024) reviews the role of individual differences in second-language vocabulary learning. They focus on out-of-class exposure, strategic learning, and motivation. The review highlights that motivated learners who engage in strategic learning and seek opportunities for social interaction outside the classroom tend to have more developed vocabularies. This finding suggests that individual differences in motivation and proactive engagement with social strategies significantly impact vocabulary acquisition. All the studies mainly interpret that there is a drastic impact of social strategies on individual differences in ESL.

2.2 Affective Variables on Individual Differences in ESL Learning

Affective variables such as motivation, anxiety, attitude, and self-efficacy play a crucial role in shaping individual differences in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2020). The variables excel in learners' engagement and foster overall success in language acquisition.

Gardner (1985), in his socio-educational model, emphasizes motivation. He proposes it as instrumental, i.e., learning for practical purposes, and integration, i.e., learning to integrate into a culture. Recent studies indicate that a shift toward self-determined motivation, where learners

have intrinsic interest, leads to better long-term outcomes (Ushioda, 2022). In online ESL learning contexts, self-regulation and intrinsic motivation are particularly critical for engagement and success (Papi et al., 2023). Horwitz (2020) focused on anxiety on individual differences in ESL and said that there is a major impact of anxiety on foreign language learning. His studies highlight that learners with higher levels of anxiety exhibit lower participation in communicative tasks, often avoiding opportunities for speaking practice (Zheng & Cheng, 2021). However, some research suggests that moderate levels of anxiety can enhance focus and task performance, indicating that anxiety's impact may vary depending on individual differences in coping strategies (Teimouri et al., 2023).

2.3 Role of E-Dictionaries on Individual Differences in ESL

The integration of digital resources in second Language Acquisition (SLA) has increasingly attracted intellectual attention from Pakistani university students. Several studies proposed that individual differences such as learning styles, motivation, and proficiency levels influence learners' interaction with e-dictionaries (Klimova & Pikhart, 2020). This research critically reviews how ESL learners' preferences for sensory modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) significantly affect their engagement with e-dictionaries. For instance, auditory learners benefit from pronunciation features, while visual learners engage more effectively with word definitions and example sentences (Klimova & Pikhart, 2020). He also found that visual learners benefit more from digital features like example sentences, collocations, and illustrations, while auditory learners leverage pronunciation tools to enhance phonological awareness. Ahmed et al. (2024) assert that using audio-video aids, like e-dictionaries, greatly improves vocabulary retention in EFL secondary students. Likewise, Noor-ul-Ain and Pervaiz (2023) discovered that implementing dual coding strategies, which merge visual and verbal information, enhances the recognition and retention of L2 vocabulary among Pakistani ESL learners of Pakistan.

Khan et al. (2024) found that ESL learners of Pakistan with electronic glosses improve their reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary retention. This indicates that digital tools can assist learners in decoding and comprehending new vocabulary within context, which is especially advantageous for individuals with different proficiency levels.

Motivation also plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of digital resources in ESL learning. Highly motivated learners are more likely to explore multiple features of e-dictionaries, actively incorporating them into their language learning routines, which leads to greater vocabulary expansion and comprehension improvement (Zou et al., 2022). On the other hand, learners with lower motivation may use these tools only for immediate word searches, restricting their overall benefits.

3. Methodology

This study proposes a quantitative approach, incorporating both quantitative methods of data collection techniques to investigate the influence of social strategies, digital tools, and affective variables on second language learning among Pakistani ESL learners.

3.1 Sampling

The study includes 120 participants, selected through convenience sampling, to examine individual differences in ESL learning.

3.2 Procedure

For the quantitative data collection, a survey questionnaire was administered among graduate learners' use of social strategies, digital resources, including e-dictionaries, and affective variables, i.e., motivation, and anxiety. The questionnaire had Likert-scale items and was analyzed for frequency and numbers.

3.2.1 Survey Validation & Reliability

For the quantitative data validity and reliability following theoretical frameworks were used: Oxford's (2011) Strategic Self-Regulation Model. Horwitz's (2020) Language Anxiety Research.

4. Quantitative Data Analysis

The study follows a quantitative data approach, i.e., quantitative to identify and investigate the influence of affective variables, including motivation and anxiety, and the role of social strategy and digital resources, including e-dictionaries, in second language learning.

4.1 Use of Digital Resources in Second Language Learning and Individual Differences

The section provides statistical findings on the frequency of the role of digital resources, including e-dictionaries, in ESL vocabulary learning. For the deep investigation of research, the data is critically analyzed.

4.2.1 Frequency of Use of Digital Resources Focusing on e-Dictionaries

Table 1: Frequency of using e-Dictionaries during second language learning

Items	Participants number	Percentage %
Daily	55	50%
Weekly	44	40%
Rarely	11	10%
Never	10	10%

Critical Analysis

55 participants out of 120 participants accepted the daily use of digital resources, including e-dictionaries, during second language learning vocabulary. And 40 percent of the participants agreed on the weekly use of e-dictionaries in second language learning and vocabulary learning. However, the percentage ratio of the rare use of e-dictionaries is almost equal to the 'never' use of digital resources such as e-dictionaries for vocabulary or new word searches. The daily use of digital resources means that participants practice words and use e-dictionaries to learn speaking skills in a second language. It is because they have difficulties learning a second language.

4.2.2 Data Analysis for Social Strategies; ESL Learners in Peer Collaboration

The section provides statistics and findings on the frequency of social strategies when ESL learners are involved in peer collaboration, asking questions, interactions, or social conversations.

Table 2: Frequency of English Language Practice with Others

Items	Numbers	Frequency in %
Daily	46	38%
2-3 times	23	19%

Weekly	23	19%
Rarely	27	22.3%
Never	2	1.7%

Critical Analysis

A combined 76% of participants are involved in the English language practice with peers at least weekly, with 38% doing so daily. The analysis highlights a strong reliance on peer collaboration as a social strategy for language development. Participants who frequently engage in group discussions and informal exchanges demonstrate higher confidence and fluency. These social practices support theories of sociocultural learning, where language emerges through interaction and shared meaning-making.

4.2.3 Cultural, Social Involvement in Second Language Learning Strategies

The section analyses the learners' engagement in learning ESL about the culture of English speakers as a part of their language learning. The scale in the table expresses how often you incorporate learning about the culture of English speakers into their second language learning approach.

Table 3: Data Collection for Social Strategy

Items	Numbers	Frequency
Never	19	15.7%
Rarely	11	9.1%
Sometimes	25	20.7%
Often	16	13.2%
Always	50	41.3%

Critical Analysis

The question is designed to determine the participants' application of a social strategy for trying to learn about the target culture. Around 19 participants, with a ratio of 15.7, deny the application. They chose scale (1) in the question. In contrast, 50 participants out of 120, with a percentage ratio of 41.3, chose a scale (5). There are 41 participants with a percentage ratio of 34 who 'often' and 'sometimes' do so, as they have chosen scales (3) and (4). The overall results are positive and illustrate the acceptance of the target culture for second language learning.

4.2.4 Data Analysis for Affective Variables; Motivation

The section deals with data analysis in frequency for participants/second language learners who actively seek out people to engage in English language conversations with.

Table 4: Affective variables; self-motivation

Items	Numbers	Frequency in %
Never	10	8.3
Rarely	16	13.3%
Sometimes	33	27.5%
Often	23	19.2%
Always	38	31.7%

Critical Analysis

The analysis reveals that 51% of participants (Often & Always) actively seek English conversations. It describes that higher motivation encourages frequent language use. This aligns with Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, reinforcing that self-motivated learners engage more in communicative tasks, leading to better proficiency.

4.2.5 Data Analysis for Affective Variables: Anxiety

The section explores individual differences in frequency and numbers when they feel nervous about talking English as part of their second language learning.

Table 5: Affective variables; Anxiety

Items	Numbers	Frequency in %
Never	14	11.7%
Rarely	9	7.5%
Sometimes	29	24.2%
Often	18	15%
Always	50	41.7%

Critical Analysis

As discussed in the literature review, participants feel anxiety when exhibiting lower participation in communicative tasks, often avoiding opportunities for speaking practice. With 57% of participants (Often & Always) experiencing anxiety while speaking English, the findings support Horwitz's (2020) argument that anxiety limits participation in oral communication. This suggests that high-anxiety learners may require targeted interventions to reduce fear and improve fluency in ESL learning.

5. Conclusion and Findings

The findings of this study confirm that individual differences, particularly in social strategies, e-dictionary usage, and affective factors, play a crucial role in second language learning outcomes. Learners who actively engage in group discussions, peer collaboration, and language exchange programs demonstrate higher levels of speaking proficiency. Moreover, the integration of digital tools, such as e-dictionaries, significantly enhances vocabulary retention and overall language learning success. The quantitative data analysis indicates that 41.6% of participants actively engage in social strategies, while 55 out of 120 participants rely on e-dictionaries for daily learning, reinforcing their effectiveness in SLA.

This study is particularly significant in the Pakistani Context for ESL learners of higher education who often face linguistic and epistemic challenges due to a lack of exposure, limited access to native-like environments, and socio-cultural barriers. For them, social engagement through peer collaboration and cultural immersion positively correlates with improved speaking and comprehension skills. Moreover, e-dictionaries help them in comprehension and reading skills. Along with it, affective variables like motivation and self-efficacy are among them influence their willingness to English language learning.

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