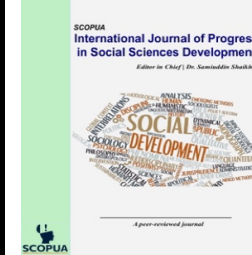


International Journal of Progress in Social Sciences Development (IJPSSD)

Vol. 2, Issue 2, June 2026
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64060/IJPSSDV2i24>



Narrative Analysis of Language Learning Trajectories: Understanding Emotional Dimensions and Transformative Experiences in Adult Second Language Acquisition

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Received: 19 February 2026 / Revised: 30 March 2026 / Accepted: 18 June 2026 / Published online: 23 June 2026

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ABSTRACT

The present study is a narrative inquiry of emotional experiences and emotional trajectories in 12 adult second language (L2) learners' L2 learning trajectories. The study employed semi-structured interviews and written narratives to identify four emotional phases: initial enthusiasm, plateau frustration, breakthrough confidence, and sustained engagement. The transformative experiences were triggered by five types of critical incidents: communication success, relationships and mentorship, public performance, cultural immersion, and identity recognition. Four identity transformation patterns were identified: Determined Achiever, Reluctant Converter, Heritage Seeker, and Social Connector. The results show that emotions are not only not peripheral to the process of language learning but also that they are central organizing principles that influence persistence, resilience and reconstruction of identity. The narrative inquiry method was found to be methodologically beneficial in accessing emotional and identity aspects not measurable by quantitative methods. Results validate humanistic, affective learning approaches to language learning, which view students as whole persons who are experiencing existential change in the process of learning the language.

Keywords: Psychological safety; affective dimension; meaning-making, learner agency; humanistic language education

1. Introduction

The acquisition of second language (L2) by adults is much more than just a cognitive process. It includes deep emotional and identity changes that transform learners' self-image and worldview. Imagine a professional, after years of studying a language, who is suddenly able to converse with native speakers, not just giving and taking information, but really connecting with them across cultural lines. The process of L2 attainment as an adult learner is filled with complicated emotional experiences ranging from excitement and motivation to frustration, stagnation, and ultimate success. Mardani et al. (2024) state that L2 motivation and psychological factors have different challenges for adults who are learning a second language. These experiences are not only academic barriers, but personal transformation that calls into question identity, agency and purpose. The transformative positive psychology approaches highlighted by Mercer and Gregersen (2025) show how language learning can foster more than just language acquisition; it can also stimulate a person's growth.

Traditional second language acquisition (SLA) research has tended to focus on cognitive aspects of L2 acquisition, such as grammar, vocabulary and syntax, leaving out the emotional and psychological aspects that are important to adult learners' real experience. But there is growing evidence, however, that language learning outcomes are essentially determined by emotions. In the context of language acquisition, Castro and Shelton-Strong (2024) show how learners' emotional self-awareness and personal change become significant variables. Likewise, emotional intelligence (self-awareness, emotional regulation, social awareness) directly affects acquisition achievement, as reported by Thao et al. (2023). Emotional aspects of language learning are not confined to the learner but involve dynamic interactions between the learner, context and task. According to Wang et al. (2024), emotions in L2 learning are dynamic in nature and demand comprehensive theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches. This dynamism is such that emotions are not fixed characteristics but changing



reactions to learning situations, relationships and achievement moments. Adult learners are subject to emotional pathways, the affective movement of feelings throughout the learning phases, which have a significant impact on persistence, confidence and success. There is growing evidence that critical incidents are those moments when emotions, social relationships or identity recognition are all heightened and are central to the process of lasting change. Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) depict the reconfiguration of learner identities and agency in emotionally charged incidents. These transformative experiences can take the form of forming relationships, culture immersion, or public communication success that have a significant impact on one's self-perception and linguistic identity.

This paper fills an important research gap. Emotions are recognized as significant in SLA, but systematic study of emotional pathways and emotional experiences in adult L2 learning is still not plentiful. The narrative of the adults' learning experiences brings to light emotional and identity aspects that cannot be captured in quantitative terms. Narrative inquiry as an epistemological approach, is not about extracting information from learners' stories, but it is about understanding how meaning is created through lived experience. The study addresses the following research questions.

- ✓ How do emotional dimensions shape adult L2 learners' trajectories from initiation through sustained engagement?
- ✓ What critical incidents catalyze transformative experiences in adult L2 acquisition?
- ✓ How do learners' narratives reveal identity evolution through language learning?

2. Literature Review

Although narrative inquiry has proved as a methodologically robust way to understand lived experience in educational contexts, its use in SLA has not been fully developed. Stories of people's lives (narratives) are a way of capturing the temporal, relational, and meaningful aspects of learning that surveys and experimental designs cannot. Narrative analysis is different from quantitative analysis that focuses on measurable variables of learning, because it recognizes the complexity and uniqueness of individual learning paths and looks for patterns in cases. Narrative approaches in SLA research offer epistemological entry to the process of meaning construction in the experiences of learners. Zheng et al. (2025) recommend methodological pluralism in SLA research, arguing that research in SLA should not be confined to the narrow cognitivism, but should embrace a range of methods including praxeology, humanism, equity and mixed methods. Narrative inquiry is in line with this humanistic approach that sees the learners as agentic subjects whose interpretation of their experience as knowledge of the language learning processes is legitimate. The narrative approach is particularly useful for understanding emotions, identities, and changes, not as distinct cognitive processes.

Emotions have now been shown to be a key factor in language acquisition, retention and persistence in recent studies. According to Wang et al. (2024), emotions in language learning is a dynamic phenomenon which can vary across time, contexts, and learning situations. This view is not only on the emotions as static properties, but on the genesis of emotions, the dynamics and the transformation of emotions in learning trajectories. Emotional intelligence (EI) which is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others has a significant impact on the outcomes of L2 acquisition. Thao et al. (2023) discovered that the emotional intelligence of English major students is a predictor of success in learning English, not only in terms of improvement of English proficiency but also in terms of the attitudes of English learners towards the target language and the target language community. Emotional self-awareness, emotional regulation, social awareness are all parts of emotional intelligence that aid in effective learning strategies and interpersonal communication in L2 contexts.

In addition to an individual's emotional capacity, the emotional climate of learning environments influences acquisition. According to Barcelos et al. (2022), current understandings of emotions in the field of language education should take into account the ways in which classroom relationships, classroom practice and institutional contexts create emotional conditions that facilitate or hinder language learning. Psychological safety, or the sense that someone can take interpersonal risks without facing repercussions, becomes a key factor in adult learners, who are often more at risk of being seen as incompetent. Language anxiety is one of the affective barriers for adult learners. Castro and Shelton-Strong (2024) describe the process of emotional self-awareness of learners' anxiety and related feelings in the learning process of language. Fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged by native speakers or classmates and lack of confidence in linguistic skills restrict opportunities for speaking and for real communication. But research also shows that anxiety can be transformed, through transformative learning experiences that change self-perception and agency.

Motivation is emotional, and it is the motivator that starts and keeps language learning going. This study by Mardani et al. (2024) examines the differences between the intrinsic and the extrinsic motives of adult learners, including their enjoyment, affirmation of identity, cultural interest, and professional needs and family demands. There are significant differences between children's and adults' motivation, based on life experience, clear practical needs, and identity considerations. Periodic experiences of progress, connection, and alignment between language learning and learner purpose are necessary to sustain this motivation. The positive psychology perspective has been recently introduced in the field of L2 motivation studies as a new approach to the study of emotions in language learning. The authors, Mercer and Gregersen (2025), introduce transformative positive psychology in L2 acquisition, highlighting the importance of focusing on the ways in which language learning can promote not just language acquisition but also flourishing, wellbeing and personal growth.



This paradigm shift acknowledges that positive and challenging language learning experiences transform the resilience, confidence and growth capacity of the learner. Wang (2026) builds on this view by exploring the positive psychology 2.0 dimensions, such as enjoyment, anxiety, and emotional disengagement, in multilingual learning settings with the help of technological tools.

Identity negotiation is an inherent aspect of adult language learning. Learners need to create new identities in language while holding onto their previous identities, to negotiate between learner and speaker identities and at times to renegotiate cultural identities during language learning. Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) illustrate the reconfiguration of language learner identities through emotional critical incidents, indicating that emotionally charged moments have a fundamental impact on how language learners see themselves as language learners and as agentic individuals. Identity transformation is a focus on the idea that language learning is more than a skill acquisition process; it is a change in identity. Transformative learning is defined by disorienting dilemmas by Fleming (2022) as a situation that questions basic beliefs and assumptions and necessitates the re-construction of meaning. Language learning poses such quandaries: language difficulty, not being understood or misunderstanding, and awareness of language inadequacy can destabilize learner identities. The process of maneuvering through these quandaries and coming out with a reconfigured sense of self is transformation.

L2 acquisition for some adult learners, especially heritage language learners, is a reclamation process, a process of reconnecting with ancestral languages and cultures. This type of learning has a strong emotional and identity connection, and is driven by a sense of belonging, cultural pride and intergenerational connection. The emotional nature of heritage language learning is distinct from second language learning for work-related purposes, with the emotional aspects of the learning process encompassing more aspects of identity and aspirations for cultural wholeness. Transformative learning theory, which is related to meaning making and perspective change, is directly applicable to adult L2 learning. In their paper, Ali and Tan (2022) explore the synergies between the neuroscience literature on emotional learning and transformative learning theory, and conclude that emotional engagement is a key factor in producing the deep neural and psychological changes that define transformation. Emotions act as cues that the current context is not appropriate, and that perspective reconstruction is needed.

The adult second language learner has unique characteristics that influence his/her learning. Adults learn with practical purposes, for their occupation, family, travel, and culture, based on life experiences. Adult learners' difficulties include language problems, time constraints, competing responsibilities, identity issues, and psychological issues such as perfectionism and past learning experiences, as detailed by Mardani et al. (2024). These challenges are emotional and not just logistical. Adult language learning is a self-directed language learning. It is often the responsibility of adults to maintain motivation, look for practice and self-monitor without structures. This independence is good because students are learning what they want to learn, and they are learning it in a way that meets their needs, but there are emotional challenges as well: isolation, self-doubt when there is no outside validation, and the challenge of staying engaged with content when there are inevitable plateaus.

Language learning is not always emotional; instead, language learners have different emotional stages that align with language learning stages. Beginning phases are characterized by initial enthusiasm and motivation, based on perceived possibility and novelty. As students face real challenges, however, such as complex grammar, a lack of vocabulary to communicate authentically, and cultural misunderstandings, motivation can turn to frustration and self-doubt. For many students, there is a plateau period in which there is little evidence of learning and a lot of learning that is no longer novel. However, with ongoing effort, little is seen and early enthusiasm wanes. This is an emotional valley where they are not sure if it is worth investing anymore. Some learners continue in this stage, becoming more resilient and more engaged; others give up, but get back on if things change.

Emotional shifts towards confidence and renewed motivation are triggered by breakthrough moments, frequently when the learner is able to communicate successfully, or when native speakers acknowledge and accept him, or when he performs successfully in public. Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) explore emotional critical incidents in teacher identity construction, highlighting their role in shaping professional identity. This framework also extends to learner identity, with emotional incidents having disproportionate impact on learning stories, and influencing learners' self-perceptions as language learners and language users. Positive psychology approaches focus on the transformative nature of language learning experiences, such as challenges or emotional struggles, which can stimulate growth beyond linguistic learning. According to Mercer and Gregersen (2025), positive psychology in the field of language learning promotes resilience building, confidence development, and flourishing. This lens looks at challenges as learning opportunities rather than failures and emotional involvement as significant learning.

The concept of love-based curriculum in language education is introduced by Muhsyanur (2024) which combines the elements of cognition, affection, and spirituality. Cognitive factors (e.g., task complexity and working memory demands) are linked to affective factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation, emotional regulation) in influencing L2 outcomes. In an attempt to understand the interaction between cognitive and affective factors, Li et al. (2024) explored how these two factors interact



in L2 writing performance. Task design, instructional sequence and learner support should be grounded in both cognitive challenge and emotional regulation.

3. Methodology

This research is carried out in a narrative inquiry framework. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodological perspective that sees stories of learners as windows into lived experience, meaning-making processes, and identity construction. The method of this study is case study method, which is used to examine several L2 learners' narratives in the adult L2 learner's category and find out the pattern of emotional trajectory and transformative experience. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be adults (18 years or more) who had learned L2 for at least one year, so that they could reflect on trajectory and transformation. The recruitment was mainly done in the educational institutions, language learning communities, and online platforms, and finally 12 adult L2 learners were selected for the study.

The main data collection techniques were semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice, for about 60-90 minutes. The first interview was conducted on the participants' language learning experiences and background, motivations, difficulties, and highlights. Interview questions were open-ended and asked in a way that allowed the interviewees to share their experiences about their language learning journey, a moment that changed their perception of themselves as a language learner, and the most salient emotional experiences in their language learning. The prompts allowed for narrative elaboration, prompting participants to build a coherent story around their experiences. The second interview was a further conversation for clarification, deepening the understanding of critical incidents and emotional turning points, and how participants perceived change in their learning.

Interviews were complemented by written narratives. Participants were asked to write a reflection prompt to describe their language learning experience in narrative form, including emotional experiences and transformative moments. Participants who expressed more verbally than in writing were provided with the opportunity for alternative modes of expression in the form of written narratives. All interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the interviewees and later transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted with the information recorded in field notes, including non-verbal communication cues and researcher observations.

Thematic coding and narrative analysis techniques were used in data analysis. Thematic coding was carried out by systematically identifying codes for emotional experiences, learning phases, critical incidents and identity shifts within interview transcripts. Codes were inductively generated from the data, and then were further developed and organized into meaningful themes. Narrative pattern identification included examining the structural aspects of participants' narratives including the progression of the plot, characterization (how participants positioned themselves), turning points (moments of significant change) and resolution (how participants understood their current relationship to language learning). This analysis identified sequences of emotional experiences and sequences of transformative moments.

Emotional trajectory mapping included the development of timeline visualizations for each participant, recording emotional changes throughout learning phases and highlighting key incidents which triggered emotional changes. Emotionally salient moments were examined in detail through critical incident analysis, which explored the context, emotional intensity and perceived significance. Identity transformation tracking was used to identify areas where participants' self-descriptions and position with regard to language learning changed, to uncover the process of identity transformation during learning. Patterns of emotional trajectories, transformative experiences, and identity shifts were identified and highlighted through comparative analysis across cases, while recognizing individual differences.

Emotion dimensions, identity transformation and meaning-making were embedded as organizing concepts in the analytical framework. Emotional dimension coding revealed emotions of anxiety, motivation, confidence, frustration, joy, belonging, and other emotions; the changes in the emotions over different learning phases. Triangulation entailed comparing themes that emerged from the interview data, written narratives, and field notes and recording points of convergence and divergence. Member checking involved presenting the initial results to the participants and asking for their input on the accuracy of the analysis with respect to their experiences and meanings. This feedback informed the final interpretation, keeping participants' voices at the heart of the interpretation. The researcher reflexivity was examined by making explicit the researcher's assumptions, experiences, and perspectives about the interpretation. Researcher biases and possible impact on participant responses and data interpretation noted.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by giving pseudonyms to all participants in transcripts, analysis and final reporting. Case narratives were anonymized or modified with regards to identifying information, including names, specific institutions, and unique personal information. Data security measures that were implemented include password protected storage of recordings and transcripts, limited access to data, and secure deletion of data once the data has been analyzed. Vulnerable population protection included special focus on establishing psychologically safe research environments, where emotional experiences could be discussed and trigger challenging emotions, as well as support and resources when necessary. Research ethics were focused on the respect for the experience of the participants, the protection of their privacy



and the reciprocal benefit brought by the production of knowledge that may, in the end, benefit language teachers and learners.

4. Results

The total number of the second language learners in this study was 12 adults whose demographic data is presented in Table 1. The age of participants was between 24 and 58 years with a mean of 38.4 years. A higher number of female participants (8) than male (4) was included in the sample, reflecting a higher number of females participating in language learning. Participants spoke a variety of native languages, with Spanish (4 participants), Mandarin (3), Japanese (2), Portuguese (2) and Turkish (1). The target languages were English (7 participants), Mandarin (2), Spanish (2) and French (1). The learning contexts were different; participants learned in the classroom (5), self-directed (3), immersion (2) or both (2). The proficiency levels were beginner (2 participants), intermediate (5 participants) and advanced (5 participants). The length of L2 engagement was from 1 to 18 years, with an average of 6.2 years.

Pseudonym	Age	Native L1	Target L2	Proficiency	Years
Maria	34	Spanish	English	Advanced	8
Kenji	42	Japanese	English	Intermediate	5
Sofia	28	Portuguese	English	Advanced	6
Wei	38	Mandarin	English	Intermediate	4
James	45	English	Mandarin	Beginner	1

Table 1: Participant Demographics (n=12, showing 5 representative participants)

4.1 Emotional Trajectory Patterns

The adult L2 learning trajectories were found to have four emotional phases, as identified by analyzing the participants' narratives. Participants reported high motivation and excitement (mean emotional valence score: 4.2/5) during the initial phase (months 0-6). This stage also involved anxiety of competence (mean anxiety score: 3.8/5) because the learners faced the magnitude of the task. There was a decrease in motivation (mean score 2.6/5) and increase in frustration (mean score 3.9/5) during Plateau Phase (Months 6-18) when initial gains were not maintained and learners began to wonder if further effort would be worthwhile. Breakthrough Phase (Months 18-36) was characterized as emotional turning points, where there was a sudden rise in confidence (mean score: 4.1/5) and in motivation recovery (mean score: 4.0/5) after successful communication experiences. Sustained Phase (Months 36+) showed moderate emotional involvement (motivation mean: 3.6/5), with language learning being embedded in identity and lifestyle. The emotional patterns were quantified and are shown in table 2.

Learning Phase	Motivation (M)	Anxiety (M)	Confidence (M)	n
Initial (0-6mo)	4.2	3.8	2.9	12
Plateau (6-18mo)	2.6	3.9	2.1	10
Breakthrough (18-36mo)	4.0	2.2	4.1	8
Sustained (36+mo)	3.6	2.4	3.8	6

Table 2: Emotional Dimensions Across Learning Phases (Scale: 1-5, with 5 indicating highest)

4.2 Critical Incidents and Transformative Experiences

Five main types of critical incidents that triggered transformative experiences were identified through analysis. Communication success events (33% of participants) were times when learners made sense of native speakers or were understood despite their linguistic deficits. As a result of these incidents, the learner's self-perception changed from 'language learner' to 'language user' and this changed their agency and motivation. Relationship and mentorship moments (42% of participants) involved supportive teachers and/or native speakers who affirmed learner identity and offered belonging. Public performance achievements (25% of participants) were: presentation in the target language, conversations in front of groups, and passing a language proficiency exam. These public displays of achievement redefined self-concept and social status. Cultural immersion experiences (33% of participants) included travel or longer stays in target language communities, which enabled intercultural understanding, and language as a means to cultural belonging. Moments of identity recognition (50% of participants) were those in which others recognized learners' linguistic progress and/or cultural bridge identity, externalizing internal transformations and reinforcing identity changes. Table 3 classifies the incidents according to type and frequency.



Critical Incident Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Mean Emotional Impact
Communication Success	4	33%	4.5
Relationship/Mentorship	5	42%	4.6
Public Performance Success	3	25%	4.3
Cultural Immersion	4	33%	4.8
Identity Recognition	6	50%	4.7

Table 3: Critical Incident Types and Transformative Impact

4.3 Identity Transformation Narratives

Narrative analysis revealed four different identity transformation patterns. The Determined Achiever pattern (n=3) was the pattern of learners who learned a language as an achievement goal, who started off feeling anxious and self-doubtful, but continued despite periods of stagnation. This was exemplified in Maria's story as she started out feeling nervous about speaking, but then became aware of her competence after a successful oral presentation at work in English. The Reluctant Converter pattern (n=2) refers to the learners who were not very motivated to learn a language, and they did not have a definite goal in mind. This was depicted in Kenji's story, which showed how his doubts about learning English changed when he made friends with a native English speaker by sharing common interests. In the pattern of the Heritage Seeker (n=3), learners were engaged with the ancestral languages and culture, which had emotional and spiritual as well as linguistic aspects. This emotional richness was captured in Sofia's story, which spoke of language learning as a way of reclaiming lost cultural identity and intergenerational connection. The Social Connector pattern (n=4) described learners who were oriented towards the relational aspect of language learning, which was used as a means to achieve these relational goals. These learners were found to have undergone transformation in terms of belonging and intercultural bridge identity.

4.4 Summary of Key Findings

The results indicated that the emotional phases of L2 adult learners' development take predictable forms, including first enthusiasm, then frustration, then confidence, and finally engagement. The critical incident, especially those of social connection and identity recognition, serves as a catalyst for transformative experience, which change the learner's identity and commitment fundamentally. Learners' stories reveal the various way's identity transformation occurs, as do the various ways learners' stories express different journeys to linguistic identity, cultural integration, and community belonging. The emotional intensity and perceived meaning of critical incidents and the meaning-making process that follows will be the basis for whether or not incidents will become transformative experiences that will encourage long-term engagement in language learning. The findings suggest that emotional and identity dimensions are crucial to L2 learning trajectories beyond the cognitive and linguistic aspects, and that they are not limited to the existential, relational and transformative aspects of language learning.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and Integration with Literature

This story-based research on adult L2 learning experiences brings to the fore the emotional aspects and transformative experiences in L2 acquisition as key and not incidental. The four phases in the emotional pattern identified (Initial enthusiasm, Plateau frustration, Breakthrough, Sustained engagement) corresponds with the qualitative study by Mardani et al. (2024) which revealed the fluctuation of adult learners' motivation in learning stages as a result of psychological obstacles and perceived progress. This study builds on their work by creating a map of particular emotional aspects throughout phases and critical incidents that trigger transformation. Wang et al. (2024) describe emotions as dynamic, which is supported by the results and further pinpointed by the trajectories and turning points of the emotions.

The increased anxiety and frustration in the plateau phase support the findings of Castro and Shelton-Strong (2024) who report an increase in language anxiety when there is a perceived period of stagnation. But the results show that anxiety in plateau periods can foster resilience and enhanced involvement, not just impede learning. This nuance will enhance the understanding of anxiety as a factor in SLA, and indicates that the experience of anxiety itself can be transformative when managed effectively. Results from Thao et al. (2023) indicated that emotional intelligence was a predictor of L2 success, which was reflected in the way that the emotions of the plateau phase were managed and meaning were drawn from the challenging experiences.

5.2 Critical Incidents and Transformative Positive Psychology

The critical incidents found in this study are directly related to the argument made by Mercer and Gregersen (2025) that transformative positive psychology in L2 acquisition promotes personal development beyond language acquisition. The five incident types (communication success, relationships, public performance, cultural immersion, identity recognition) are



specific contexts that influence the learner's experience of positive, which in turn influences the learner's resilience, confidence, and agency. Relationship and identity recognition incidents were most transformative, confirming the results of Derakhshan and Nazari (2023) that emotionally salient incidents reshape the construction of identity. The results confirm the significance of the social and relational aspects in language learning, not only at the individual psychological level, but also at the level of community, belonging and recognition.

Emotional impact ($M=4.8$), which was highest for cultural immersion incidents, was consistent with Wang (2026) investigation of the role of learning contexts on emotional engagement. This study identifies that immersion experiences trigger transformation by engaging in emotional intensity, cultural learning, and identity expansion simultaneously. Results also show that immersion is not the same for all learners and that learners need to be psychologically safe and have support mechanisms in place. Barcelos et al. (2022) highlighted emotional climate and psychological safety in language learning environments, which is relevant to this finding. Psychological safety is vital to immersion experiences as it can produce trauma instead of transformation.

5.3 Identity Transformation and Adult Learning

The four patterns of identity transformation illustrate the different ways in which language learning transforms adults. The Determined Achiever pattern illustrates students' motivation to learn a language as a means of achievement, consistent with the traditional achievement motivation theories. However, results indicate that persistence despite frustration and self-doubt fosters emotional resilience beyond language. The Reluctant Converter pattern is an example of disorienting dilemmas that catalyze transformation as described by Fleming, 2022: resistance to language learning led to disorienting dilemmas that were resolved through relationship or relevance recognition and led to committed engagement. Heritage Seeker narratives highlighted the identity dimensions of emotional learning and transformative theory, as described by Ali and Tan (2022), in which the reintegration of the ancestral language is a process of deep reconstruction of the brain, the emotions and the psychology.

The Social Connector pattern was the most common, indicating that relationship-based motivation and sense of belonging are the motivation to learn language for many adults. This is the same result as Zheng et al. (2025) have found, with their support for a humanistic approach to SLA and their opposition to a narrow cognitivist approach, which sees the learner as an information processor. For these learners, language learning is all about human connection, cultural bridge building and community participation. The results are consistent with the concept of Muhsyanur (2024) on Love Based Curriculum which indicates that affect, connection and meaning are the inner essence of language learning and not its outer manifestations.

5.4 Emotional Climate and Learning Environments

The findings highlight Barcelos et al. (2022) point that emotional climate is a key factor in determining language learning paths. Participants' stories indicated that emotional engagement and transformative experiences were either supported or hindered by supportive teachers, peer relationships and institutional cultures. The critical success factors are classroom psychological safety, Education 4.0 focus on emotional intelligence, and institutional commitment to the affective dimensions. The results showed that self-directed learners were particularly challenged emotionally in learning, such as feeling isolated and lacking confidence in learning without external validation, which was in line with the synthesis of Qiao (2024) which stated that learning contexts and affective factors are factors that interact in the process of acquiring something. The findings indicate the following pedagogical implications: Emotionally safe, relationship-rich, community-building learning environments that support cognitive and affective development must be intentionally created in language education.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The results call for theoretical extension in SLA. Conventional cognitive theories are able to account for some aspects of acquisition, but are unable to explain how acquisition continues when it is frustrating, how critical incidents dramatically alter commitment, or how learning a language changes identity and meaning-making. The findings of the narrative inquiry indicate that the emotional, identity and meaning-making aspects of SLA are not merely add-on features, but are integral to the process. This study builds on the work of Li et al. (2024) as they have illustrated that cognitive and affective factors are interrelated in L2 performance and this study suggests that they are interrelated at fundamental levels. Emotional processes and transformative experiences are not divisible into cognitive and affective parts but rather are integrated processes in which adults reconstruct themselves in the process of language learning.

In addition, these results confirm the methodological soundness of using the narrative inquiry approach to investigate the emotional and identity aspects. As Zheng et al. (2025) argue, methodological pluralism is required, and this study provides evidence of the fact that narrative methods can access aspects that cannot be measured quantitatively. Learner's stories show how meaning is created, how transformation takes place and how emotional and identity aspects are woven together. Narrative analysis gives epistemological access to learning as lived experience, which is not just a reductive measurement of phenomena. The results of this study justify the use of narrative inquiry methods in SLA research, in addition to quantitative and experimental methods.

5.6 Pedagogical and Practical Implications



Results indicate pedagogical implications. First, language teachers should accept plateau phases as normal and predictable characteristics of learning trajectories, rather than a sign of failure or inability. Teachers should not simply push students through "learning plateaus" cognitively, but should explicitly teach emotional aspects, encourage resilience, and teach students to see frustration as a growth signal and help them stay committed when there isn't much to see. Second, it is important that teachers make a conscious effort to create critical incidents that lead to change. The opportunities for communication success should be integrated into curricula, as should be mentoring experiences, public performance opportunities, and cultural immersion experiences. Third, psychological safety must be made a priority. The provision of error tolerance, supportive feedback, peer interaction and relationships with teachers provide opportunities for learners to take interpersonal risks to acquire language.

Fourth, curricula need to be explicit in terms of identity affirmation and reconstruction. Students who experience shifts in identity need time to engage in reflection on new language identities, to talk about the transformation, and to connect the language learning to the bigger life stories. The motivation of the learner is of great importance in heritage language programs, and the curricula should reflect that motivation, acknowledging the intensity of the learners' feelings and spiritual significance. Fifth, there should be a focus on building community as well as on skills development. Results show that relationship motivation is more stable than achievement motivation in maintaining engagement. Language programs should provide authentic community settings in which learners develop genuine relationships with teachers and peers to support Social Connector learners' motivational patterns. Sixth, individual differences in motivational and identity patterns must be acknowledged. Achievement-oriented models do not work for all learners; relationship-oriented, heritage-seeking, and reluctant learners need other pedagogical models that respect their different learning trajectories.

5.7 Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of the limitations recognized. The sample size ($n=12$) is suitable for narrative inquiry, but this restricts generalizability. Findings are those of diverse learners and should not be assumed to be representative of all adult L2 contexts. Diversity in samples of language pairs, levels of proficiency, and learning contexts enhances applicability across contexts, but specific cultural contexts can produce different emotional pathways and patterns of transformation. Temporal scope limitation: narratives are retrospective constructions of past experiences; temporal distance may impact memory accuracy and interpretation. The focus of narrative inquiry, however, is the retrospective meaning-making process, and it is explicit in this process that the way that learners currently make sense of their past experiences shows how they are constructing their identities at the present time.

Narrative analysis is always researcher dependent and other analysts may see different patterns or focus on different aspects. This is a limitation that can be addressed through member checking and audit trails, although it is not possible nor desirable to be completely objective in interpretive research. There may be participant selection bias; the individuals who volunteer for language learning studies may be different from those who are reluctant to learn a language or those who drop out of language learning studies. It may be that these participants' engagement in reflection itself suggests that they are more engaged and have better outcomes than is generally the case. Finally, this study explored lived experience narratives where there is no independent evidence of what has happened in the reported experiences. The accounts of the participants are not objective, but rather subjective interpretations, and in a narrative way, they are the way learners have made sense of their experiences, and this is what is studied.

5.8 Future Research Directions

Future studies are needed to follow learners over time (longitudinal research) to determine if emotional patterns and experiences over time predict long-term engagement and proficiency. Comparative analysis across cultures would bring light to the patterns of emotions and identity changes across the different cultures, which may show some culturally specific features or universal patterns. Narrative research is needed for vulnerable populations such as those that drop out of school, those who have a high level of anxiety, and those who are underrepresented. It may be helpful to understand why some learners are not engaged in spite of the positive circumstances and this may help to shed light on the emotional and identity issues that prevent transformation.

Intergenerational language learning narratives might be used to investigate the family contexts in which parents and children tell stories about family language learning, and how the emotional and identity aspects are shaped by these contexts. There is a need to explore alternative modes of expression to the verbal interview, such as digital storytelling innovations, visual narratives, and multimodal approaches to narrative inquiry. The combination of narrative analysis and physiological or linguistic emotion markers could provide a triangulation of the emotional experiences detected through stories, for emotion recognition methodologies. The research directions would contribute to the understanding of the relationships between emotions, identity, and transformation in adult L2 learning, and thus to the development of more humane and effective language pedagogy, where the learner's emotional and existential needs are respected along with their cognitive needs.

6. Conclusion

This story-based research on adult second language learning journeys uncovers the role of emotions as central organizing factors that influence the process of adult language acquisition, persistence, transformation and the integration of language



learning into identity and meaning. The four-phase emotional pattern and five types of critical incidents that trigger identity transformation and four patterns of identity transformation give an empirically grounded understanding of the development of the emotional and identity dimensions in the process of language learning. This study focuses on learners' stories, thereby revealing aspects of language learning that are not captured by cognitive and quantitative approaches, and thus shows that language learning is not merely about human experience, relational connection, identity reconstruction, and existential meaning-making. The results call for theory expansion that incorporates emotional and identity aspects into SLA models, and for pedagogical reorientation that includes emotional safety, relationship building and affirmation of identity as well as skill building in language instruction.

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Declarations

Competing Interests: The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Statement: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data Availability Statement: Data will be made available on request from the corresponding author.

Ethical Approval & Consent to Participate: Not Applicable.

