



## A PERSONAL JOURNEY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: EXPERIENCE, MOTIVATION, AND SOCIAL DISTANCE IN CHINA.

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### Abstract.

This paper explores second language acquisition through the personal experience of an Uzbek student studying in China. It focuses on the role of motivation and social distance in shaping language learning outcomes within a foreign academic and cultural environment. Drawing on established SLA theories, the study connects intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with real-life observations of interaction between language learners and the target language community. The article also examines how cultural unfamiliarity, linguistic barriers, and social separation influence confidence, communication, and acculturation. By combining reflective journaling with theoretical perspectives from scholars such as Schumann and Lepper, this study highlights the dynamic and non-linear nature of language learning. Although limited by its personal scope, the paper offers valuable insights into the emotional and social dimensions of SLA and suggests directions for future research and exchange program development.

### Author Introduction.

I am a 19-year-old student from the historical Kashkadarya region of Uzbekistan. During my primary and secondary education, I performed well in mathematics, English, Russian, and history, although I occasionally received lower grades in my mother tongue due to poor handwriting. I began studying English in the first grade and attended additional lessons taught by my neighbor, Oisha, who played an important role in developing my early language skills, grammar was challenging for me during my elementary years. By seventh grade, my level improved to pre-intermediate, and I began speaking despite making many mistakes. My teacher, Jurayev Xurshid, encouraged me by emphasizing that language learning requires time and persistence, and his support helped me gain confidence over the next two years. Based on my aunt's advice to choose a profession that brings long-term satisfaction, I decided to follow my passion for languages and become a translator. My mother also encouraged me by saying that a job you love never feels exhausting. On May 25, 2024, I graduated from high school and received certificates in both my mother tongue and English. After submitting my university application, I received confirmation of admission on August 18, 2024.

When I began university on September 1, I immediately noticed the strong English-speaking environment among my classmates, which further motivated me to improve. There was a visiting professor from Anqing Normal University who taught introductory Chinese. He introduced us to Chinese culture and informed us about an exchange program offering students the opportunity to study abroad for one semester or two years. Interested in experiencing new environments and expanding my worldview, I applied for the program. In April, we submitted

our applications to Ms. Alice at Anqing University, along with our GPA and a recommendation from the rectorate.

### **Method.**

During my time in China, I began to keep a journal upon my arrival. Throughout this writing process, I researched a significant amount of information related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. I examined my own learning experiences by reading texts and articles written by learners from different linguistic backgrounds. I also gathered information from various books. Additionally, through conversations with my friends, I realized that there is a need to explain why learning processes and mutual understanding differ among individuals.

### **Previous Research.**

One important topic is motivation. One of the most widely recognized distinctions in motivational theory is between these two types. Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviors performed in order to receive an external reward or avoid punishment. In contrast, intrinsic motivation is driven by internal rewards such as personal satisfaction, curiosity, or the joy of engaging in an activity.

However, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations do not always operate separately; in some cases, they can complement or even strengthen one another. This interaction is known as "intrinsic plus extrinsic motivation." As Mark R. Lepper and Jennifer Henderlong (pp. 257–307) argue, sometimes "play" needs to be turned into "work," and "work" into "play" in order to maximize motivation and learning outcomes.

Another relevant concept is social distance. In psychology, the term refers to the degree to which a person or group prefers to remain separate from members of other social groups. It reflects how willing individuals are to accept people of different ethnicities, nationalities, or social backgrounds. Social distance often occurs between Chinese and international students, especially at the beginning of their stay. New environments, unfamiliar traditions, and language barriers may cause learners to feel shocked or isolated.

For instance, when Karshi State University first introduced scholarships for studying in China, many Uzbek students experienced a high level of social distance due to the unfamiliarity of the cultural and linguistic environment. According to Bogardus (1925a), who developed the concept of social distance as a measure of prejudice, such distance can be associated with depression, anxiety, acute stress, and intrusive thoughts. Although these effects were originally thought to result from loneliness or lack of social support, research has shown that social distance can persist even when perceived support is relatively high.

Furthermore, when learning a second (L2) or third language (L3), students are often divided into the target language group and the language learner group. Many second language acquisition (SLA) theorists have made clear distinctions between the learner and the learning context. According to Schumann (1976), when the second language group and the target language group are closely aligned, the social distance between them becomes minimal. This reduced distance facilitates the learners' acculturation into the target language community and significantly enhances language acquisition.

### **Findings.**

During this my time studying in China & learning Chinese, I encountered both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. For instance, there was a girl—let me refer to her as "Alies." She holds an HSK 4 certificate in Chinese. When we had lunch together—two Uzbek girls, two

Chinese girls, and Alies—the Chinese girls consistently supported us. They corrected our pronunciation kindly and encouraged us. However, Alies often reacted negatively, saying things like "What?" or "Your pronunciation is so bad." Her comments made me feel upset and demotivated. Although Chinese is her L2, using her knowledge to discourage others is inappropriate. As a language learner, her attitude sometimes made me feel angry, especially because she is part of the target-language group and has a higher proficiency than I do.

Regarding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, when I first arrived in China, I became genuinely interested in Chinese people, their traditions, and especially their language Schumann (1976). My desire to communicate in Chinese without relying on AI or translation apps was a strong intrinsic motivator. However, when I realized how difficult the language actually is, my motivation gradually shifted from intrinsic to extrinsic. My aunt and family expected me to speak at least 40% Chinese when I returned home, which became an additional external pressure.

In China, we also interact with native speakers whose pronunciation and vocabulary are exceptional. Listening to them gives me energy and motivates me to improve. Still, the difference between the target language group and the language learner group is much greater than I expected. The target-language group usually consists of people whose L1 is Chinese or who grew up in China. They speak quickly, combine words naturally, and can easily obtain high HSK scores due to their linguistic background. According to Schumann (1976), reduced social distance between learners and the target language community facilitates acculturation and language acquisition.

### **Conclusion & Future Implications.**

This article helps us better understand how personal experience, motivation, and social distance interact in the process of second language acquisition. By connecting theoretical perspectives with real-life observations, it highlights the complexity of learning a new language in a foreign environment. However, this study was limited because of time and the reliance on personal experiences rather than long-term empirical data. For this reason, continued research in the future is necessary. Future research can include longitudinal studies, language exchange programs, and institutional support systems that reduce social distance and strengthen learner motivation to further explore these factors across different contexts and learner groups, which would contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of SLA.

My primary reason for choosing the exchange program is my desire for continuous growth. Studying abroad allows students to broaden their academic knowledge, understand different cultures, develop independence, and strengthen responsibility. After completing my semester in China, I plan to participate in other exchange programs in Spain or Poland to further expand my academic and cultural experience.

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