



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



FOREIGN LANGUAGE IMMERSION AS A WAY TO OVERCOME PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The emotional state of a learner is a significant factor in successful foreign language acquisition, affecting both how learners absorb educational material and how they develop their language skills. Fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and a lack of confidence in one's own abilities may prevent learners from using the language they have already learned in real-life communication. In this context, language immersion becomes particularly important, as it involves regular interaction with a foreign language in a variety of educational and everyday situations. The author examines how immersion can contribute to overcoming psychological barriers, increasing willingness to communicate, enhancing motivation, and fostering greater enjoyment of foreign language learning.

Keywords: Foreign Language; Language Immersion; Language Anxiety; Willingness To Communicate; Motivation; Enjoyment of Learning; Psychological Barrier; Foreign Language Learning

1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional language learning often focuses primarily on grammar and vocabulary; however, psychological barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and language anxiety, can prevent learners from applying their knowledge in practice. As a result, a gap may emerge between theoretical knowledge and real-life communication, where learners may understand grammatical rules and know relevant vocabulary but still struggle to use the language effectively in natural communicative situations.

The aim of this study is to analyze how language immersion can help learners overcome these barriers. The article examines the impact of immersion on reducing language anxiety, increasing motivation, and developing learners' confidence in using a foreign language. The findings may be useful for educators seeking to create a psychologically comfortable yet effective learning environment that supports the development of students' oral communication skills.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Foreign language learning is often perceived primarily as an intellectual task: learners need to memorize vocabulary, master grammar, understand spoken language, and learn to construct sentences correctly. However, even a high level of knowledge does not necessarily imply that learners are willing to use the language. A learner may understand the

rules and have a sufficient vocabulary but may still struggle when it comes time to speak. This may be due to fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and a lack of confidence in one's own abilities.

These difficulties are particularly evident in oral communication. A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2025 included 627 upper-secondary school students. The authors found that higher levels of foreign language anxiety were associated with a lower willingness to communicate in the foreign language. In other words, anxiety may become a barrier between language knowledge and its practical application. This relationship is also supported by more recent evidence. A 2026 study published in the same journal involved 232 students enrolled in vocational education programs who were observed over three stages of their education. Higher levels of anxiety at the beginning of the study were associated with a lower willingness to communicate at the end of the study.



Figure 1: The impact of foreign language anxiety on willingness to communicate in a foreign language
Thus, one of the objectives of modern language education is not only to expand learners' knowledge but also to create conditions in which learners can use this knowledge more easily without constantly feeling that their abilities are being evaluated. One possible way of creating such an environment is language immersion.

3 IMMERSION AS A WAY TO OVERCOME THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER

Language immersion involves regular interaction with the target language in a variety of contexts. Unlike situations in which learners encounter a foreign language primarily through textbooks or classroom instruction, immersion makes it part of everyday experience: learners can watch films and TV series, listen to music, play video games, read, or communicate in the target language. In this case, the language becomes primarily a means of obtaining information, communicating, or enjoying the activity itself. This allows learners to perceive it not as a constant test of their knowledge, but as a natural part of an activity they are genuinely interested in.

At the same time, language immersion does not require learners to be in a country where the target language is spoken. The modern digital environment makes it possible for learners to create a language-rich environment on their own by selecting materials appropriate to their proficiency level and interests. What matters is not only the amount of contact with the language, but also its regularity, variety, and personal relevance to the learner.

A 2026 study available through ScienceDirect, which examined a six-week virtual cultural immersion program, found that participants who used VR technologies for immersion showed greater improvements in motivation and willingness to communicate immediately after the program. These positive changes persisted over the following months. This finding is particularly important from a pedagogical perspective: effective immersion may be associated not only with increased exposure to the target language, but also with how learners experience the learning process emotionally.

4 PRACTICAL STEPS: FROM IMMERSION THEORY TO REAL-WORLD ACTION

Theoretical evidence clearly shows that enjoyment of the learning process reduces anxiety and increases willingness to communicate. However, to put these findings into practice, language immersion should not be organized as "additional study", but rather as a natural part of everyday life. The following are specific steps for implementing this approach.

- **An Interest Audit and “Seamless” Integration.** Instead of searching for specialised learning materials, start with activities you already enjoy doing in your native language, such as hobbies, gaming, cooking, technology, or blogs. Switch the language of the content to the target language while keeping the activity itself unchanged. The language thus becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself.
- **The “No Dictionary” Rule for Enjoyment.** One of the main mistakes that undermines motivation is attempting to translate every unfamiliar word and understand 100% of the content. Introduce a rule: when watching videos or reading, look up a word only if it occurs more than three times and significantly interferes with understanding the overall meaning. This reduces psychological pressure and mirrors natural language acquisition.
- **Micro-Immersion Instead of Marathons.** Regularity is more important than volume. Fifteen minutes of listening to a podcast on the way to work or ten minutes of reading the news before bed every day can be more effective than a three-hour intensive session once a week, which can lead to fatigue and resistance to learning.
- **A Gradual Transition from Passive to Active Use.** Do not expect yourself to start speaking immediately. Begin with passive exposure, such as audio and video content, then introduce low-pressure forms of interaction, such as liking posts, short comments on forums, or messaging in chats related to your interests. Only after that should you move on to voice messages or speaking practice. This creates a “ladder of success” without sudden increases in anxiety.
- **The “Language Alter Ego” Technique.** One of the most unexpected yet scientifically grounded techniques is creating a persona in the target language. Give yourself a new name, biography, and manner of speaking. When a person communicates as a “character”, they psychologically distance themselves from their own identity, which can significantly reduce the fear of making mistakes: “It wasn’t me who made the mistake; it was my character.” Many polyglots use this technique and note that they feel more confident in a foreign language than in their native language, precisely because of this shift in identity.
- **Generative AI as a Personal Communication Simulator.** In 2026, large language models make it possible to create realistic role-playing scenarios with an endlessly patient conversation partner. Ask an AI to play the role of a barista, doctor, customer, or colleague and conduct a conversation on any topic. The key advantage is that AI does not judge, interrupt, or show irritation when you make mistakes. This creates a unique “safe practice zone” in which stressful communication situations can be rehearsed until they become more automatic.
- **Micro-Content Creation and the “Creator Effect.”** Passive consumption alone is not enough. Try creating small pieces of content every day: a 30-second voice note about your day, a short social media post, or a comment on a video. The brain tends to remember information better when it is actively produced rather than simply consumed. At the same time, scale is important: do not aim to write an essay; start with a single sentence. This helps develop the habit of “speaking” rather than simply “listening.”
- **Emotional Anchoring Through Strong Experiences.** Words learned in a neutral environment may be quickly forgotten, whereas words associated with strong emotions tend to be retained for longer. Watch emotionally powerful scenes from films, listen to music that evokes strong feelings, or play story-driven games, and try to remember the phrases you encounter in those moments. Research in neurolinguistics suggests that emotionally salient information can be consolidated into long-term memory several times faster.

Of course, immersion is not a universal solution to every difficulty that can arise when learning a foreign language. However, it allows learners to create an environment in which the language gradually becomes part of everyday experience. The psychological barrier is not overcome through rote memorization or simply forcing oneself to endure difficulties; instead, it can be overcome by shifting the focus: from “learning a language” to “living in the language.” Language immersion is not a magical cure-all, but it is one of the most reliable ways to create a safe, controlled, and enjoyable environment for language learning. When a foreign language ceases to be an object of constant evaluation and becomes a tool for experiencing emotions, accessing information, and communicating with others, the fear of making mistakes can naturally give way to greater confidence and willingness to communicate.

5 CONCLUSION

The study found that language immersion is an effective way to overcome psychological barriers in foreign language learning. Regular exposure to the language in natural communicative settings helps reduce anxiety, strengthen motivation, and build learners’ confidence, shifting the focus from simply “studying a language” to actually “living in the language.” Practical strategies, ranging from incorporating the target language into everyday hobbies to using AI-powered simulation tools and the “language alter ego” technique, can help create a safe and emotionally supportive environment for developing communicative skills. Integrating immersion-based approaches into language education can improve the quality of language instruction, better prepare learners for real-world intercultural communication, and contribute to the development of new approaches to foreign language teaching.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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