

SOCIAL NETWORK DYNAMICS AND L2 PROFICIENCY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LEARNERS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study examined sociolinguistic dimensions of second language acquisition (SLA) within a multilingual community in South Africa, focusing on how social identity, community participation, and cultural context shaped learners' linguistic development. Employing a mixed-methods ethnographic approach, the research used sociolinguistic surveys and in-depth interviews with second-language learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds to investigate how factors such as social identity, social class, age, gender, and motivational dynamics influenced SLA outcomes. The study further explored how learners navigated sociocultural boundaries within complex multilingual networks and how language attitudes and ideologies informed their engagement with the target language community. Findings revealed that social network integration specifically the frequency and quality of interaction with target-language speakers emerged as the strongest predictor of linguistic proficiency, providing learners with sustained opportunities for meaningful language use. Positive attitudes toward the target language and its speakers were also associated with higher levels of linguistic integration and increased use of the language in everyday contexts. Overall, the research demonstrated that SLA was profoundly shaped by the interplay of social networks, identity positions, and local cultural dynamics. The study underscored the need for pedagogical and policy approaches that strategically promoted learners' participation in target-language social networks to improve L2 acquisition in diverse multilingual settings.

Keywords: *identity; language attitudes; second language acquisition; social networks; sociolinguistics*

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is increasingly conceptualised as a socially situated process that extends beyond the cognitive mastery of linguistic forms. Sociolinguistics provides a critical lens for understanding how learners acquire and use a second language (L2), as it foregrounds the social, cultural, and political conditions within which language learning is embedded. Foundational studies by Norton (1995, 2013) and more recent work

by Li and Zhang (2021) demonstrate that language learning is fundamentally tied to identity, power relations, and participation in social communities. These insights challenge decontextualised cognitive models and emphasise that access to meaningful interaction, valued linguistic practices, and linguistic capital is shaped by wider social forces. From this sociolinguistic standpoint, key factors such as identity, social networks, social class, and motivation have emerged as central in shaping learners' L2 trajectories.

Building on these foundations, sociolinguistic perspectives highlight that SLA is not merely an internal cognitive process but a social phenomenon involving the negotiation of meaning, social roles, and identity. Research shows that learners' motivations, access to authentic interaction, and positioning within social networks significantly influence the speed and success of L2 acquisition. Yet, scholars also note that learners' experiences are mediated by broader social variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, and social class and by the power relations embedded in multilingual societies (Gao & Li, 2022). Dominant languages often carry greater prestige, while minority linguistic identities may be marginalised, shaping learners' confidence, willingness to communicate, and opportunities for participation (Eslami, 2023). Understanding how learners navigate these intersecting dimensions of language, identity, and power is therefore critical for developing socially informed models of SLA.

The significance of these factors becomes especially evident in multilingual settings characterised by historical inequality and linguistic diversity, such as South Africa. With eleven official languages, a legacy of racially stratified language policies under apartheid, and the continued dominance of English as a gateway to socioeconomic mobility, South Africa presents a uniquely layered sociolinguistic ecology. In provinces such as Limpopo where several African languages coexist alongside English—linguistic identities intersect with social class, mobility pathways, and uneven access to educational resources. These conditions intensify the influence of social identity and social networks on L2 English acquisition and provide an ideal context for examining how sociolinguistic forces shape adult learners' language-learning experiences.

Despite the global rise of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA, research in the South African context remains limited. Few empirical studies have explored how identity, social networks, social class, and power dynamics jointly shape adult learners' English proficiency within the everyday realities of post-apartheid society. As the country continues to undergo rapid socioeconomic transformation, there is a notable gap in community-level research documenting how shifting social condition's structure learners' access to English, their opportunities for interaction, and their investment in the L2. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more inclusive and socially responsive frameworks for language education in multilingual and developing contexts.

The present study responds to this need by investigating the sociolinguistic dimensions of L2 English acquisition in an authentic South African community setting. Focusing on four interrelated sociolinguistic variable's social identity, social networks, social class, and motivation it examines how these factors interact to influence adult learners' English language proficiency. By analysing these interconnected dimensions, the study seeks to illuminate how social environments both facilitate and constrain L2 development. In doing so, it contributes to advancing sociolinguistic understandings of SLA in multilingual societies and offers empirically grounded insights for pedagogical approaches that draw on learners' social networks and community resources.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social Identity in SLA: Norton's Framework

Social identity remains a foundational construct in sociolinguistic perspectives on SLA, and recent studies continue to expand Norton's framework by showing how identity, investment, and power shape learner participation. Recent evidence demonstrates that learners' imagined identities and access to symbolic capital strongly affect their willingness to invest in English learning (Ma, 2025). Similarly, contemporary scholarship has documented how learners' identities shift across contexts, revealing that identity construction is dynamic and closely linked to learners' access to linguistic resources (Ogul, 2024). Additional studies further confirm that identity mediates learners' opportunities for participation and determines how they are positioned by others in target-language communities, ultimately affecting English proficiency (Al-Mohtaseb, 2023). These findings reaffirm that identity, power, and legitimacy continue to shape L2 engagement and the quality of learners' interactional experiences.

3.2 Social Network Theory and L2 Acquisition

Recent scholarship shows that Social Network Theory (SNT) remains highly relevant to explaining variation in L2 acquisition. A 2025 longitudinal study of study-abroad learners demonstrated that diverse, expansive networks promote greater L2 proficiency gains by providing broader access to social and linguistic resources (Gallagher & Hasegawa, 2025). Complementing this, research on sociolinguistic development found that learners embedded in networks with a high number of L2 speakers acquired more authentic and socially valued linguistic forms (Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, new methodological work highlights that network-based modelling can effectively capture the complex relationships between interaction opportunities, individual differences, and L2 development (Konishi et al., 2022). These studies collectively confirm that the structure and diversity of learners' social networks directly influence the quantity, quality, and prestige level of English input they access.

3.3 Social Class and Motivation in SLA

Recent research underscores the continued relevance of social class as a determinant of learning opportunities, linguistic capital, and access to English-rich environments. A 2024 South African study shows that English-medium schooling reproduces class-based inequalities, as learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience reduced access to high-quality English instruction despite strong motivation (Nkosi, 2024). Another study highlights how multilingual instruction can increase participation and motivation among working-class learners by validating home languages and reducing structural barriers (Simango & Moyo, 2024). In addition, scholars argue that motivational constructs must be re-evaluated in multilingual and socially stratified contexts, as traditional motivation models fail to account for the realities of learners whose access to L2 opportunities is shaped by class and linguistic hierarchies (De Wet, 2022). Together, these studies confirm that motivation does not operate independently but is shaped by socioeconomic constraints and unequal access to English-dominant domains.

3.4 Sociolinguistic Context of Multilingual South Africa

Recent research continues to document the complexity of South Africa's multilingual landscape, revealing persistent inequalities in access to English-medium domains. A 2022 analysis of multilingualism in childhood highlights a mismatch between learners' rich

multilingual repertoires and the English-dominant practices in schools, limiting equitable educational participation (De Klerk & Makalela, 2022). A 2024 study on rural learners' language attitudes shows both strong instrumental motivations to learn English and anxiety about its impact on indigenous identities, highlighting the ambivalent status of English in post-apartheid society (Matemba, 2024). Moreover, research on multilingual pedagogies demonstrates that school-based language policies continue to shape learners' identity positions, language choices, and access to English-speaking domains (Maseko & Nomlomo, 2025). These findings confirm that in South Africa, social identity, class, and social networks are not individual variables, but structural conditions embedded in a historically stratified linguistic ecology.

3.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

International scholarship has established the importance of identity in shaping learners' access to English (Norton & De Costa, 2018; Norton, 2019) and has shown how social networks influence exposure to and uptake of linguistic resources (Milroy, 1980). However, these constructs have rarely been examined together in African or postcolonial settings. Research on identity has largely focused on Western or Asian learners, while network-based studies tend to investigate immigrant groups or formal classroom contexts in the Global North. As a result, there is limited understanding of how identity, social networks, social class, and community-level dynamics jointly shape English proficiency in South African multilingual communities. Furthermore, little empirical work examines community dynamics, defined here as the patterned ways linguistic resources, interactional norms, and social hierarchies operate within everyday local contexts. This study addresses these gaps by integrating identity theory, Social Network Theory, and class-based motivational perspectives to investigate how adult learners' social environments condition their English proficiency in a South African community. The study therefore contributes a contextually grounded account of how sociolinguistic variables interact within a society where language, power, and mobility remain deeply interconnected.

4. Research Method

This study adopted a Mixed-Methods Ethnographic Research design, selected to generate an in-depth qualitative understanding of learners' social identities, community-based interactional opportunities, and access to English, while also incorporating quantitative survey data to measure motivation, social network strength, and self-rated proficiency. The design was appropriate because it allowed the study to capture both the sociocultural complexity of multilingual contexts and the measurable relationships between social variables and English proficiency.

4.1 Research Setting and Participants

4.1.1 Setting

The study was conducted in a peri-urban multilingual community in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, characterised by dense local social networks, limited English-dominant domains, and high linguistic diversity. Data were gathered at a public secondary school that served learners from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds and where English functioned as the target language (L2) of instruction.

4.1.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the following criteria:

- (a) they were L2 learners of English.
- (b) they resided in the target community.
- (c) they represented varying levels of proficiency, motivation, and access to English-speaking networks.

4.1.3 Participants

A total of $N = 84$ learners participated in the sociolinguistic survey. From this group, a subset of $n = 18$ focal participants were selected for in-depth qualitative work. Participants were aged 15–18, had diverse L1 backgrounds (Xitsonga, Sepedi, Tshivenda), and had studied English as a school subject for 9–12 years. Two English teachers also participated in interviews and classroom observations.

4.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

4.2.1 Sociolinguistic Surveys (Quantitative)

The survey collected quantitative data on:

- L2 motivation, using items reflecting instrumental and integrative orientations.
- self-rated English proficiency, measured across speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
- basic social network structure, including size, frequency of contact, and contexts of English use.

Network-mapping questions included items such as: “Who do you speak to in English daily?”, “How often do you interact?”, and “In which situations do the interaction occur?” Network strength was operationalised through frequency, multiplexity, and linguistic function of ties.

4.2.2 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with focal learners and teachers. These interviews elicited:

- narratives of linguistic identity,
- experiences of accessing English-speaking spaces,
- barriers and affordances within the community, and
- perceptions of English as a resource linked to social class and mobility.

Follow-up stimulated-recall sessions used short excerpts from classroom observations to prompt participants’ interpretations of interactional moments.

4.2.3. Classroom Observation and Ethnographic Fieldnotes

Ethnographic observations were conducted over 8–10 weeks, producing detailed fieldnotes on language practices, classroom participation, peer interaction, and teacher mediation. Selected lessons were audio-recorded to document naturally occurring L2 interaction.

4.3 Data Analysis Procedure

4.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Survey data were entered into statistical software and analysed using:

- descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations),
- correlation analysis to examine relationships between network strength, motivation, and self-rated proficiency.

These analyses provided evidence of statistical associations between learners' social environments and English competence.

4.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed using Thematic Analysis. The process involved:

1. initial open coding of raw transcripts,
2. development of analytical codes,
3. grouping codes into themes such as Navigating Sociocultural Boundaries, Class-Based Access to English, and Patterns of Community Interaction.

This approach enabled a systematic interpretation of how learners perceived their identities and interactional opportunities.

4.3.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

A triangulation strategy was used to integrate data strands. Qualitative themes were used to interpret and explain quantitative relationships (e.g., how network diversity clarified reported proficiency levels). Convergent and divergent findings were compared to develop a holistic account of sociolinguistic influences on English learning.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Written informed consent was collected from teachers and parents, with assent from minors. All data were anonymised and securely stored.

Trustworthiness was ensured through:

- member checking, where participants reviewed and verified interview interpretations.
- inter-rater reliability checks, performed by an independent coder on a sample of interview transcripts.
- prolonged engagement, through repeated observations across several weeks.
- methodological triangulation across surveys, interviews, and observations.

These steps enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the quantitative findings from the survey and social network analysis (SNA), followed by qualitative insights from participant interviews. The results are interpreted through the study's sociolinguistic framework, drawing on Milroy's Social Network Theory, Granovetter's weak/strong tie distinctions, Norton's Investment Framework, and scholarship on multilingualism and social inequality in South Africa.

5.1 Summary of Quantitative Findings

Table 1

Correlation Coefficients Between Key Variables

Variables Compared	Correlation (r)
Social Network Strength ↔ L2 Proficiency	0.61
Exposure at Home ↔ L2 Proficiency	0.48
Peer Interaction Frequency ↔ L2 Proficiency	0.52
Attitudes Toward L2 Community ↔ L2 Proficiency	0.44
Media Engagement ↔ L2 Proficiency	0.50

5.2 The Role of Social Network Strength on L2 Proficiency

Consistent with the highest correlation coefficient ($r = 0.61$), social network strength emerged as the most powerful predictor of L2 proficiency. Participants with frequent, meaningful interaction with L2 speakers, whether peers, family, or community members—consistently achieved higher proficiency scores.

Survey data on exposure (Table 1) indicated that 30% reported high exposure at home, while 40% had moderate exposure. Peer interaction data similarly showed that 35% engaged with the L2 weekly, and 25% daily. These patterns reflect the importance of sustained interpersonal contact.

Interview accounts reinforced these findings. One participant noted:
“My closest friend speaks English at home, so we end up using it when we’re together. That’s when I feel I really improve because I’m not scared of making mistakes with her.”
(P12, Female, 16)

Another learner described the benefits of weak-tie connections:
“At school I speak English with classmates from different areas. They correct me, but in a friendly way. I learn more from them than from people I know well in my neighbourhood.”
(P27, Male, 17)

Interpretation

These findings correspond with Milroy’s (1987) argument that dense, multiplex networks support language maintenance, while weaker, more expansive networks enhance language innovation and access to broader linguistic norms. In this study, learners with weak ties to diverse L2 speakers tended to acquire richer input and demonstrated higher proficiency—aligning with Granovetter’s theory that weak ties provide access to new linguistic resources not available in immediate social circles.

Within the South African multilingual landscape, where English often functions as a lingua franca across social groups, these weak-tie interactions provide crucial routes for learners to participate in broader social and economic domains.

5.3 Social Identity and Investment in L2 Learning

Learners’ attitudes toward the L2 community and their sense of identity significantly shaped their investment in language learning. Quantitatively, 50% expressed positive attitudes, while 30% were neutral and 20% negative.

Interview perspectives reveal that identity negotiation strongly influences willingness to communicate:
“Sometimes when I speak English, my cousins say I’m trying to act better than them. It makes me hold back, even though I want to improve.”
(P05, Female, 15)

Conversely, learners who embraced multilingual identities showed higher investment:
“Speaking English makes me feel like I can fit in anywhere. It doesn’t take away my home language; it just adds more options.”
(P33, Male, 18)

Interpretation

Norton’s (2013) Investment Framework explains that learner motivation is embedded in identity positions and access to symbolic and material resources. In the South African context where English carries historical associations with socioeconomic mobility positive

attitudes often reflect learners' aspirations for upward mobility. However, negative attitudes or pressure to remain aligned with L1-speaking groups can restrict L2 use and reduce investment.

This finding extends existing theory by demonstrating how identity tensions are heightened in post-apartheid multilingual communities, where English can simultaneously represent empowerment and cultural distance.

5.4 Social Class and Access to Target Language Speakers

Social class played a mediating role in shaping learners' opportunities to interact with L2 speakers. Although not directly measured as a numeric variable, qualitative data consistently emphasized disparities in access:

"Where I stay, we don't meet many English speakers, so I only practice it at school."

(P40, Male, 16)

"My parents have Wi-Fi at home, so I watch English shows every day. I think that's why my English is better."

(P14, Female, 17)

These insights align with the quantitative data: learners with higher digital/media access (35% daily use) tended to report stronger proficiency.

Interpretation

South Africa's persistent socioeconomic inequality continues to shape language acquisition opportunities. Learners from higher-income households have greater access to English media, diverse social networks, and schools where English is used regularly. This supports previous research showing that SES strongly conditions access to linguistic capital, extending Bourdieu's notion of language as a resource for social mobility.

5.5 Community Dynamics and Sociocultural Boundaries

The multilingual communities in which learners reside presented both opportunities and constraints. While occasional code-switching was reported by 45% of respondents, participants described nuanced sociocultural boundaries influencing when and how they used the L2:

"In my area people mix languages all the time. You start in isiZulu, then switch to English without noticing."

(P22, Female, 17)

In contrast, others identified restrictions:

"If you speak English too much, people think you're showing off. So I only use it at school."

(P09, Male, 15)

Interpretation

These patterns reflect the complex language hierarchy present in multilingual South African communities, where English holds high prestige but may carry social stigma within certain peer groups. Code-switching serves as a strategy for managing social boundaries and negotiating identity, consistent with sociolinguistic literature that positions bilingualism as a resource rather than a deficit.

The finding that occasional code-switchers performed well supports research suggesting that flexible linguistic repertoires foster pragmatic competence and adaptive communication strategies.

5.6 Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Overall, the study confirms, challenges, and extends several key sociolinguistic theories:

- Supports Milroy (1987): Strong social networks contribute to stable linguistic environments, but the South African context shows that weak ties particularly across racial and socioeconomic boundaries—are crucial for L2 development.
- Extends Norton's Investment Framework: Investment is shaped not only by identity negotiation but also by community attitudes toward English as a symbol of mobility or elitism.
- Aligns with multilingualism scholarship: Code-switching and hybrid language practices are integral to communicative competence in linguistically diverse communities.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that second language acquisition (SLA) is fundamentally shaped by the social worlds in which learners participate. Across the quantitative and qualitative data, Social Network Strength emerged as the most powerful determinant of L2 proficiency, surpassing the influence of home exposure, media use, or attitudes alone. Strong and weak ties not only determine how frequently learners encounter the target language but also mediate their access to diverse linguistic norms, interactional opportunities, and identity positions. In this way, social networks operate as the central bridge between a learner's Social Identity as theorised by Norton and their ability to engage meaningfully with the wider L2-speaking community. The findings further reveal that Social Class and historically embedded linguistic hierarchies shape the formation and reach of these networks. Learners from higher socioeconomic backgrounds accessed broader, more heterogeneous English-speaking networks, while those in lower-income settings experienced constrained opportunities for contact. These patterns affirm that SLA in South Africa is deeply mediated by structural inequalities and sociocultural boundaries, which influence not only where and with whom learners interact, but also how they perceive and invest in the L2.

The research offers a unique contribution to global sociolinguistic scholarship by extending Social Network Theory (SNT) through ethnographic and empirical evidence situated in the post-apartheid South African context. It demonstrates how social class and linguistic stratification directly shapes network formation and L2 interaction opportunities dimensions that have been noted theoretically but rarely documented with mixed-methods evidence in multilingual, socially stratified societies. By illustrating the combined effects of network strength, identity negotiation, and unequal access to linguistic capital, the study enriches our understanding of how structural and interpersonal factors intersect to shape acquisition.

These findings carry significant implications for language pedagogy and policy in multilingual contexts. They suggest that effective L2 education cannot rely solely on classroom instruction or decontextualised exposure. Instead, policies and pedagogical approaches must strategically cultivate and validate learners' social networks. Community-based programmes, peer-interaction initiatives, and opportunities to form meaningful weak

ties with fluent L2 speakers could substantially enhance learners' access to authentic input. Schools and policymakers should recognise the sociolinguistic realities of learners' environments and design interventions that leverage the social resources available within multilingual communities.

The study's scope was geographically limited to one community, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings across South Africa's diverse linguistic landscapes. Additionally, proficiency measurements relied partly on self-reported data and ethnographic observation, which, although valuable, may not capture all dimensions of linguistic competence. Future research should pursue longitudinal studies tracing how learners' social networks evolve over time and how these shifts correlate with L2 development. Comparative work examining the acquisition of English (a high-status language) versus a local African language (lower status) within the same community would further illuminate how language hierarchies influence network patterns and learning trajectories.

Based on sociolinguistic insights into second language acquisition (SLA), several key recommendations can guide educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in creating effective and socially responsive language learning environments. It is essential to integrate authentic social interactions into language learning. Learners acquire linguistic competence most effectively when they use the target language in real-life contexts, such as through conversation with native speakers, community engagement, or collaborative projects. Classroom activities should therefore move beyond rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing communicative tasks that reflect genuine social practices. Cultural awareness and pragmatic competence should be central to SLA programs. Understanding the sociocultural norms, idiomatic expressions, politeness strategies, and discourse conventions of the target language community enhances learners' ability to communicate appropriately and meaningfully. Teachers should incorporate materials and activities that expose students to diverse sociocultural contexts, including media, literature, and community interactions, to foster intercultural competence. Attention should be given to learner identity and motivation. Sociolinguistic research highlights that learners' attitudes toward the target language, their sense of belonging to the speech community, and their perceived social roles can significantly affect acquisition outcomes. Educators should create supportive, non-judgmental environments that validate learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds while encouraging engagement with the target language. Encouraging learners to explore how the new language aligns with their personal and social identities can strengthen motivation and investment. Exposure to linguistic diversity is crucial. Learners benefit from encountering various dialects, registers, and sociolects of the target language, which prepares them for real-world communication and reduces reliance on a single standardized form. Incorporating multimedia resources, guest speakers, and virtual exchanges can help learners navigate and appreciate this diversity. Policymakers and curriculum designers should promote socially inclusive language policies that recognize the role of community, peer interaction, and social networks in SLA. Programs that foster collaboration with local communities, language clubs, and online forums can provide learners with sustained, meaningful exposure to the target language outside the classroom. By implementing these recommendations, second language acquisition can be approached not just as a cognitive exercise, but as a socially embedded, culturally responsive, and identity-affirming process, aligning closely with the principles of sociolinguistics.

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