
Overcoming Barriers to Language Learning for Newcomers Through the Ecological Approach

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Abstract. Language learning is closely intertwined with human interaction and the identity shaping process. By nature, the ecological approach to language learning conceptualizes language not as an isolated system, but as an interactive and adaptive component of a greater system. This article examines the integration of the ecological paradigm into language education, focusing on the role of ecological, pedagogical, and individual factors that influence learners in the language environment. The focus of the article is on the linguistic adaptation of newcomers to new language and educational ecosystems, in the context of the Latvian school system after the geopolitical shifts of 2022 (the Russian invasion of Ukraine). The results of the theoretical and empirical analysis highlight the importance of localized, adaptive teaching methods that take the individual needs and previous experiences of learners into account to create the conditions for comfortable language integration. Going beyond rigid curricular approaches, the ecological perspective offers a basis for promoting sustainable and inclusive language education. The aim of this study is to explore how the ecological approach to language learning can be effectively applied to support the linguistic integration of newcomer students—particularly Ukrainian children—within the Latvian educational system.

Keywords: cognitive and motivating factors, ecological approach to language learning; students' engagement in language learning; perspective; pedagogical strategies; newcomers.

Introduction

Language does not exist in isolation; it is embedded within a complex ecosystem where it interacts with human development and facilitates the expression of identity. Human ecological development involves the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond to environmental conditions in ways that promote growth and resilience. In this context, language learning is not merely a cognitive process but a dynamic interaction shaped by social, cultural, and institutional factors, with a focus on future possibilities and integration (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Studying language involves examining the individual's relationships with others in their social environment (Arndt & Janney, 1983). Van Lier (2004) emphasizes the ecological nature of language learning, highlighting the interplay between linguistic skills and environmental interaction. In the late 20th century, the concepts of "language ecology" and "ecolinguistics"

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emerged as key frameworks for understanding language within its broader social, cultural, and ecological contexts (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001).

The ecological perspective focuses on the various human and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of language use. Using an ecological approach in an educational setting involves understanding individual and collective needs “locally,” creating comfortable conditions built on analysis of the current situation, using professional qualities (Freeman, 2018). Thus, this approach is based on the concept of local relevance. In relation to the choice of strategies and methods aimed at teaching language in a process that is integrated with the environment, it is necessary to emphasize individual differences, peculiarities of perception and preferences in learning style (Williams & Burden, 1997). Accordingly, the 1991 Latvian Law on the “(..) Free Development and Right to Cultural Autonomy of National and Ethnic Minority Groups (..)” the state institutions of the Republic of Latvia promote the creation of material conditions for the development of education, language, and culture of national and ethnic groups living in the territory of Latvia, allocating specific amounts for this in the state budget (Kultūras ministrija, 1991).

The full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine in 2022 marked a critical turning point, causing global reconsideration of language values and the very approach to language learning in many countries (UNHCR, 2023). Latvia, as one of the most geographically close countries to the conflict, accepted 38,700 refugees (Official Statistics Portal of Latvia, 2023). In 2022/2023, 4,000 Ukrainian children were registered in Latvian schools, which was 2.1% of the total number of students enrolled in schools nation-wide during that academic year. In the following 2023/2024 academic year, the number of Ukrainian students was slightly lower, at 1.8%, which was 3,500 children (Eurydice, 2024). However, it is worth noting that this number of new students is impressive, given that educational institutions and teaching staff were not prepared to accept newcomers and create comfortable educational conditions. Moreover, the issue of children's ability to communicate with teachers and peers quickly became acute due to the language gap.

The aim of this publication is to explore how the ecological approach can be applied to overcome barriers faced by newcomer students in acquiring Latvian within a monolingual educational system, by analyzing the interaction between individual learner characteristics, pedagogical strategies, and the surrounding social and institutional environment. While the study is situated in the Latvian context, its findings may offer insights applicable to other national settings.

The literature review is used as a research method to summarize the theoretical basis of the topic, providing explanations for certain aspects of language ecology and perspectives.

The empirical research methodology is based on a quantitative approach, incorporating structured survey data collected from language teachers working with newcomer students. The study applies Spolsky's (1989) theoretical framework on second language acquisition, which emphasizes the interaction between prior linguistic knowledge, cognitive abilities, motivation, learning opportunities, and the educational environment. This framework supports the analysis of how ecological factors influence language learning outcomes in the context of Latvian schools.

Principles of ecological approach to language learning

Language learning plays a vital role in shaping personal interaction and perception. It fosters cognitive flexibility, enhances awareness of information, and supports the development of communicative abilities. The journey of acquiring a language can differ greatly depending on various influencing factors, including age, personality traits, and ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Spolsky (1989) highlights the diversity among learners, noting that cognitive

capacities, aptitudes, motivations, and age-related aspects contribute to a broad spectrum of language acquisition processes and outcomes. As Haugen (1972) observes, language serves as a constant ecological presence within its environment—an inherently social dimension that supports its growth and evolution. The ecological approach, grounded in the theories of Gibson (1979) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), underscores the significance of the learner's interaction with both academic and social contexts. It emphasizes individual needs and characteristics, framing language learning not merely as a cognitive endeavor but as a socially embedded activity. Calvet (1999) further reinforces this perspective by asserting that the social environment is central to ecological orientation, and that all languages are interconnected within the global sociolinguistic system.

Van Lier (1997) uses the term "ecological" to describe a perspective assuming that language learning and the process of learning are a totality of the involvement of all participants, rather than a single stakeholder unit that can be viewed in isolation. In other propositions, Kramsch (2002) adds that language learning should be perceived as an ecological process, where the learner is a part of a larger ecosystem that includes not only linguistic input, but also cultural-ecological influences. In this sense, the ecological approach to language relates to the complex network of relationships that exist between the environment, languages, and their speakers. The linguistic structuring of language is perceived as a unified and self-sufficient entity, devoid of any connection with the individuals who use the language or the socio-cultural environment in which the language develops and matures (Rahardi, 2023). This emphasizes the need to take a different perspective and engage language skills in communication, linking personal, social, and environmental elements, going beyond frameworks and structured standards (Van Lier, 2004). The focus of acquisition, as Wijayanto (2005) notes, is on social and cultural interactions devoted to the study of multilingual societies. This approach to language learning is a holistic concept that considers the process of language learning in the context of the entire environment in which the learner finds himself/herself. The ecological approach advocates for sustainable language learning practices that are adaptive, inclusive, and capable of supporting continuous language development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Ecological model

The ecological model is based on understanding and explaining change (Van Lier, 2004). Freeman (2018) notes that in order to create an ecological concept to language learning, it is necessary to engage "locality." As Spolsky (1989) noted, facilitating a new language acquisition requires a comprehensive model that takes into account the dynamic interaction between the individual's personal characteristics, language components and environmental conditions. Environmental influences, the quantity and quality of language exposure, the use of appropriately selected instructional strategies and the sociocultural context shape the trajectory of language acquisition and competence development.

For effective language learning from the pedagogical side, it is possible to use various practices and observations to assess the relevance of instruction to the context and the capabilities and goals of the learners, resulting in more productive subsequent learning experiences (Spolsky, 1989). The development of a learner's language skills depends on the interaction of internal competencies and external opportunities, which in turn requires the use of an approach that considers both the individual factors of the learner and socio-cultural and educational influences. The ecological approach leads learning process to become a joint activity of teachers and students, taking into account the specificities and the totality of the multifaceted nature of interaction and language use in all complexity (Van Lier, 2004). The achievement of various possible results in learning a second language depends on the fulfilment of a number of specific conditions and actions. Some of these are necessary conditions, without which learning is

impossible; many are graded conditions, in which there is a relationship between the amount or degree to which the condition is fulfilled and the nature of the result (Spolsky, 1989).

Methodology

To conduct this study, a quantitative research method was employed. The theoretical framework is grounded in Spolsky's (1989) theory of second language proficiency, which emphasizes an ecological approach to language acquisition. This perspective highlights the importance of creating ecologically valid contexts that foster meaningful relationships, motivation, and identity development. According to Spolsky, future language competence and proficiency are shaped by a learner's prior knowledge, abilities, motivation, opportunities, and the broader educational environment that influences the learning process.

The survey targeted language teachers of English and Latvian, focusing on their professional experience. A structured, closed-ended online questionnaire was used to collect data. All responses were anonymous, and ethical guidelines were strictly followed to encourage openness and provide richer data for comparative analysis. The collected data were analyzed, visually represented, and compared to identify patterns and insights.

The aim of this study is to explore how the ecological approach to language learning can be effectively applied to support the linguistic integration of newcomer students—particularly Ukrainian children—within the Latvian educational system. By analyzing the interplay between individual learner characteristics, pedagogical strategies, and the surrounding social and institutional environment, the study aims to identify conditions that foster inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable language acquisition. The research seeks to provide insights into how educators can overcome barriers to language learning by creating ecologically valid learning contexts that reflect the real-life experiences and needs of students.

Respondents have experience of work with students from grades 1st till 10th during the 2022/2024 academic years. The number of students each respondent teaches or has taught was not recorded, since the main attention in this survey was placed specifically on the pedagogical view, experience, and personal subjective assessment of students' language learning success. This survey (N=118) involved qualified language teachers from two regions of Latvia—Kurzeme and Latgale.

Spolsky's (1989) theory "Conditions for Second Language Learning" states that it is possible to determine the future knowledge and proficiency in the second language using a model, which is expressed in the formula:

$$K_f = (K_p \times A \times M \times O) \underset{>}{\leq} E_a, \quad (1)$$

The composition of the model is a statement that each of the parts is important to the results, such that if one of the variables is missing, it can reduce or influence the outcome. This formula has a number of variables that must be used for the purity of the assessment of language skills and prospects:

- K_f – (future knowledge and proficiency in the second language);
- K_p – (prior linguistic knowledge, including first language proficiency and previously acquired languages);
- A – (cognitive abilities, including intelligence, memory, and processing skills);
- M – (motivational and affective factors, such as willingness to learn, attitudes and emotional resilience);
- (student language learning opportunity);
- E_a – (ecological approach, covering social interactions, language immersion, support, and educational environment) (Spolsky, 1989).

Utilizing this formula, comparative data from teachers in Latvian schools were gathered and analyzed to present a comprehensive overview of instructional practices with this group of newcomers' students, assessing their language proficiency, cognitive abilities, and future linguistic prospects.

Research results

This analysis focuses on teachers who have experience communicating in an educational language environment with newcomers. In this context, the main focus was on the group of Ukrainian students who arrived in Latvia after February 2022 and continued their studies in Latvian state schools. The main focuses of this study were the professional pedagogical viewpoint of teachers and their assessment of their newcomer students' future language prospects. The study involved English and Latvian language teachers for comparative analysis. Teachers evaluated the presence of previous language skills, motivation, cognitive abilities, and overall language capabilities of students. A total of 118 language teachers participated in the survey, including (N = 73) Latvian language teachers (LLT) and (N = 45) English language teachers (ELT). Although the sample sizes are relatively modest, the distribution of responses between the two groups is presented to illustrate general trends observed in the data.

The formula $K_f = (K_p \times A \times M \times O) \xrightarrow{>} E_a$ provides a comprehensive framework for understanding second language acquisition, incorporating both internal competencies and external capabilities in a dynamic, interacting system, forming an integral part of the ecological approach (Spolsky, 1989). The data are presented in the (Figure. 1)

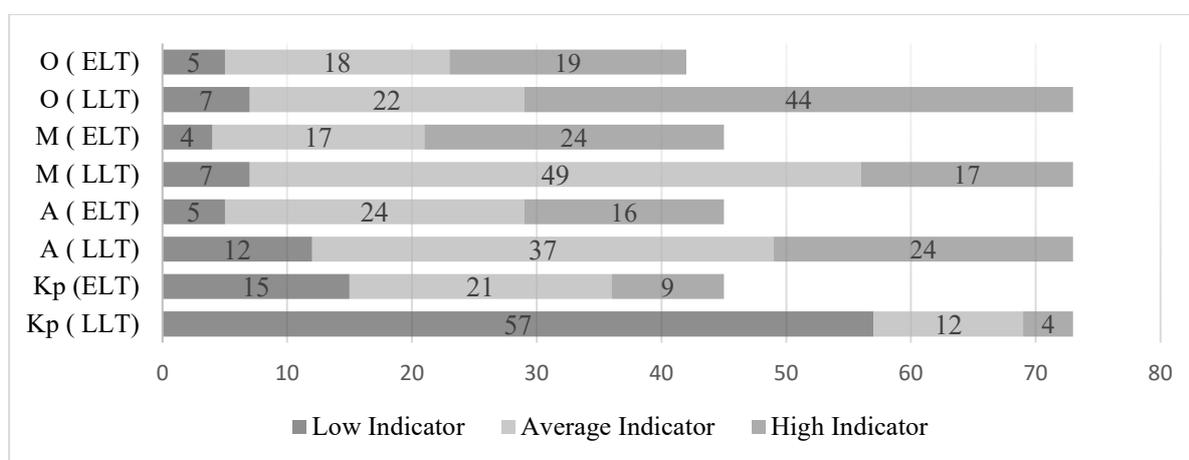


Figure 1. Assessment of the Kf indicators of the Language Perspective

According to the presented data, it can be noted that previous Latvian language learning skills had a low level (or absent) in this group of students, as noted by 57 respondents (79.2%). On the part of English language teachers, K_p was (20.8%). This difference may indicate that students may have had more opportunities, previous experience, or greater access to English as a global language in everyday life and educational environments. These judgments may indicate that accessibility and previous experience can shape and contribute to future learning trajectories. Cognitive abilities (A) of students, as assessed by both groups of teachers, demonstrate positive dynamics. The indicators of the A (LLT) group were 60%, and the A (ELT) group were 40% of the total number of participants, which indicates that students are able to effectively acquire the language when provided with appropriate support and the right

approaches. However, the A (LLT) indicator has a higher coefficient, which indicates that learners who study Latvian are more immersed in an environment where language learning is related not only to the curriculum and needs, but also to their everyday experience of intercultural communication.

The language used in multilingual situations is not a matter of translation between discrete and separate language systems, but rather a matter of possibilities and abilities of integration. In this context, the ecological approach (Ea) is a connecting element in which language acquisition and social practice (discourse) are interrelated and form a natural environment, that is a connection with personal, situational, cultural, and social factors.

Motivational factors (M) show an inconsistent trend in both groups of teachers. The average indicator presented in both groups may indicate that the motivation factors related to satisfaction and involvement in the learning process were not identified or involved in sufficient quantities to demonstrate a positive trend. Motivation implies active participation in language learning, indicating that it is not simply an internal characteristic of the learner, but rather a property that arises under the influence of factors such as the learning environment, attitudes, and support, as highlighted in the theoretical analysis of the ecological approach earlier in the article.

Consider the (O) indicator, it is worth noting that in the (LLT) group it was (71.2%), which is higher than in the (ELT) group, which was (28.8%) in relation to the (K_f) indicator. This may indicate that students have more opportunities to use Latvian in real life situations. The lower (O) value in the (ELT) group may indicate limited or lesser access to real-life practice or conditions, which may further limit the overall growth of language proficiency and use, thus highlighting the need to use the ecological approach (E_a).

To consider the language perspective, it is also necessary to evaluate the (E_a) indicator in both groups. It is worth noting that the ecological perspective focuses on the various human and contextual factors that influence the use and likely effectiveness of language learning.

Despite the initially low (K_p) indicator in the (LLT) group, in the process of analyzing the collected data, the E_a (LLT) indicator is higher than that of the E_a (ELT) group, as indicated by the data (Figure. 2). To identify the ecological approach, the positive dynamics in both groups was considered in the course of the study, that is, high indicators (Figure. 1), namely, the level of the presented language conditions, environment and opportunities that form the basis of (E_a). To illustrate these indicators, the statistical data presented in (Figure 2).

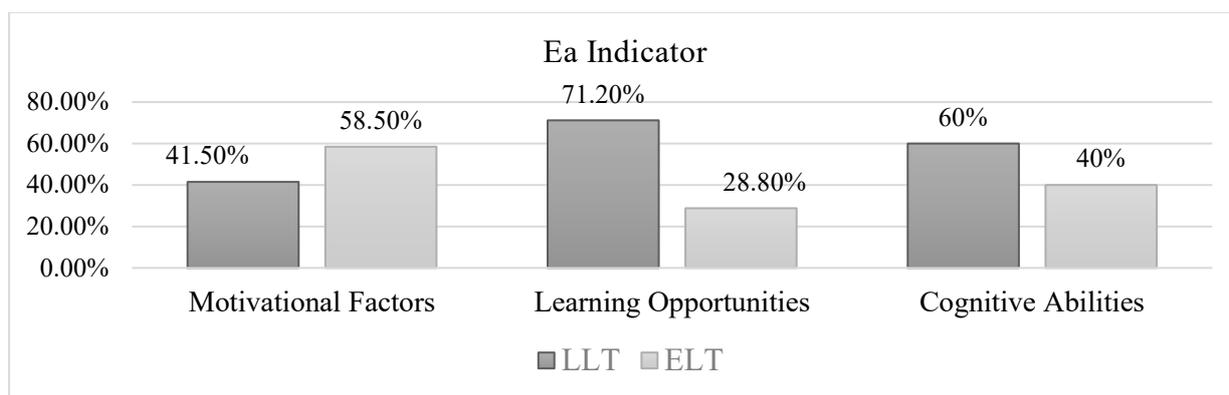


Figure 2. Engaging an ecological approach

In light of the implementation of the ecological approach across both groups, it is worth noting that the indicators in the (LLT) group are 25.4% higher than in the (ELT) group. According to the data provided by teachers, the language perspective is more prevalent among

students who use Latvian than English, indicating that this language is not only a need, but is also more used in the everyday environment among newcomers.

Discussion

The ecological approach to language learning presents a holistic framework that emphasizes the integration of language acquisition within the learner's entire environment. It promotes adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable learning processes that support continuous development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this context, language learning becomes most effective when it is closely tied to everyday experiences and social interactions (Spolsky, 1989). This approach fosters active participation, nurtures learner interest, and aligns with the natural tendencies of learners in real-world settings. Freeman (2018) highlights the importance of "locality" in ecological language learning, suggesting that learners benefit most when instruction is grounded in their immediate social and cultural contexts. Empirical findings from this study show that Ukrainian newcomer students in Latvia are frequently exposed to opportunities to use Latvian in authentic, everyday situations. However, a critical question remains: are these opportunities being fully recognized and effectively utilized by both students and educators? Survey data reveal that 79.2% of learners had little or no prior experience with Latvian, while 20.8% had some familiarity with English. Although the sample sizes are relatively modest, the percentages presented reflect internal trends observed among the surveyed teachers. This discrepancy likely reflects the global accessibility of English and underscores how prior exposure and availability shape future learning trajectories. Despite the low initial proficiency in Latvian, cognitive ability scores (A) were notably high—60% in the LLT group—indicating that learners possess the capacity to acquire the language effectively when supported by appropriate pedagogical strategies and a conducive learning environment. The opportunity (O) indicator was significantly higher among Latvian language learners (71.2%) compared to English learners (28.8%), suggesting that Latvian is more deeply embedded in the everyday lives of newcomers. This immersion enhances the potential for language acquisition and reinforces the ecological principle that learning is most effective when it occurs within authentic, socially embedded contexts. Richards (1996) emphasizes the importance of understanding teaching from within listening to the teacher's inner voice and professional judgment. Teachers, through sustained interaction with students, are uniquely positioned to assess individual needs and tailor instruction accordingly. Their insights are crucial for constructing personalized learning profiles that foster motivation and engagement. Motivation (M), as revealed in the study, showed inconsistent trends across both teacher groups. This suggests that motivational factors—such as learner attitudes, emotional resilience, and institutional support—may not be sufficiently activated or recognized. Motivation is not merely an internal trait, but a dynamic construct shaped by the learning environment, teacher-student relationships, and the availability of meaningful learning experiences. Van Lier (2004) argues that language is a constructed property, shaped by and shaping the environment in which it is used. From this perspective, language learning becomes a reciprocal process—learners influence and are influenced by their linguistic surroundings. The ecological approach thus supports the creation of pedagogically flexible and inclusive environments that accommodate diversity and foster deep engagement in language learning (Deci & Flaste, 1995).

Conclusions

The ecological approach to language learning offers a comprehensive and context-sensitive framework that recognizes language acquisition as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of personal, social, and environmental factors. This study confirms that language

learning is not solely a cognitive endeavour, but a multifaceted experience influenced by learners' prior knowledge, motivation, cognitive abilities, and the opportunities provided by their educational environment.

Findings from the empirical research highlight the importance of creating ecologically valid learning conditions—those that reflect learners' real-life experiences and social contexts. When students are immersed in environments where language is actively used and meaningfully connected to their daily lives, they are more likely to develop sustainable and functional language skills. This reinforces the value of integrating language learning into everyday practices and interactions.

The ecological perspective also emphasizes the need for pedagogical flexibility and responsiveness. Teachers play a central role in identifying individual learner needs and adapting instructional strategies accordingly. Their professional insights are essential for fostering motivation, engagement, and long-term language development. The data suggest that while learners may begin with limited proficiency, their potential for growth is significantly enhanced when ecological principles are applied—particularly through supportive environments, meaningful opportunities, and culturally relevant teaching practices.

Importantly, the ecological approach challenges traditional, rigid models of language instruction. It advocates for a shift toward inclusive, adaptive, and learner-centered methodologies that recognize the interconnectedness of language, identity, and environment. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, this perspective provides a flexible framework for informed pedagogical decision-making and supports the development of personalized language learning ecosystems.

In conclusion, the ecological approach presents a promising pathway for overcoming barriers to language learning among newcomers. By acknowledging the complexity of learners' experiences and fostering environments that support holistic development, educators can contribute to more equitable and effective language education systems.

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Appendix

Assessment of the language prospects for future knowledge (Kf) indicator

No	Designation of Indicators	Evaluation of Indicators		
	Questions	Low	Average	High
1.	Indicator “ Kp ” indicates <i>previous knowledge</i> ; the need to determine previous language experience and previously presented opportunities.			
	According to the language assessment, can you indicate the average level of previous knowledge, experience, and skills that were present at the initial stage among newcomers?			
2.	Indicator “ A ” indicates <i>abilities</i> ; it is aimed at determining the perception and processing of information, concentration, memory.			
	Based on the curriculum (surveys, tests, knowledge assessments, etc.) and professional observation, how would you assess the cognitive abilities, concentration, analysis and information comprehension of newcomers at the initial stage?			
3.	Indicator “ M ” - <i>motivational factors</i> internal and artificially created in the learning process			
	In accordance with your professional observations, have you noticed changes in behavior/mood, relationships among peers, interest and positive dynamics in the educational process among newcomers?			
4.	Indicator “ O ” - opportunities; determination of the provision of comprehensive support by the educational institution.			
	According your professional opinion, did the school provide all the opportunities for newcomers to learn the language(s)? (materials, assistants, mentoring support from the school/classmates, additional classes, language courses, assistance with language translation).			