

Individual Differences and Adaptive Strategies in Language Learning Across Diverse Linguistic and Sociocultural Transitions

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Abstract

Second language acquisition is influenced by learners' individual differences, such as motivation, aptitude, and learning strategies, which condition how they cope with new linguistic and sociocultural environments. Migrant learners moving from one linguistic context to another experience multifaceted academic, social, and cultural struggles, yet research has given restricted attention to the extent to which such transitions interact with personal attributes, creating a lacuna in insight into adaptation strategies and outcomes. This research explores three research questions: how students perceive language learning across sociocultural contexts, what strategies facilitate adjustment to new linguistic environments, and how individual differences shape academic transitions. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was used, pairing a survey of 120 students who moved across linguistic and cultural contexts with narrative interviews of five purposively selected participants embodying diverse linguistic backgrounds. Quantitative findings show that origin language, destination language, and length of time abroad are significant predictors of adaptation outcomes, explaining 29% of the variance in academic performance, with lower adaptation evidenced among Arabic-speaking students in linguistically distant contexts and higher achievement supported in German-speaking contexts. Narrative results demonstrate self-regulated learning, social scaffolding, and authentic contextual integration as facilitative strategies for adaptation. Interpreted through the Noticing Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory,

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Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivational Theory, the findings offer actionable implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and policy while inviting longitudinal research on the dynamic interplay of individual differences and sociocultural transitions.

Keywords: individual differences, language learning strategies, sociocultural adaptation, migrant students, second language acquisition

Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has traditionally focused on the dramatic influence of individual differences (IDs) on the learning process. IDs encompass a relatively broad scope of characteristics, from age and gender to motivation, aptitude, and learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2006). These variables heavily influence how an individual undertakes the process of language acquisition since every learner presents unique characteristics, notions, and modes of engaging in the learning environment (Ellis, 2004; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012). Indeed, as proposed by Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990), intake occurs only when the learners' awareness of the language input emerges. Intake is then mediated accordingly through cognitive mechanisms like noticing and attention preceding SLA. Moreover, motivation and aptitude are defined as the indispensable factors that will make possible the successful acquisition of a language (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Over the years, SLA research has evolved to explore the dynamic interaction between IDs and language acquisition processes. As Tseng and Gao (2021) emphasize, constructs such as motivation and learning strategies are context-dependent in that they are dynamic and modulated by learners' unique sociocultural backgrounds. More recent research has also investigated how factors such as age, gender, and aptitude impact levels of language proficiency and learners' engagement with the language learning process (Tanaka, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Zhang and Zhang (2024) have expounded various profiles of SRL strategies, noting the need for differentiated instruction in light of the differences in learners' needs.

However, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has yet to fully respond to the experiences of those who migrate to new linguistic environments for educational purposes. The students face complex socio-cultural, academic, and linguistic challenges that can have enormous impacts on their language acquisition process (Yawen, 2023). A new context will, for example, upset traditional linguistic practices and expose learners to changing norms of communication, along with changes in educational expectations. Chadian students in Malaysia have the double challenge of adjusting to a new academic culture while working to master a second or even a third language. Similarly,

Kashmiri and Nigerian students studying in Dhaka have to learn how to operate in a linguistically diverse urban environment. In contrast, native Bangladeshi students have to cope with city-based linguistic norms as well as institutional practices that differ from those in their areas of origin (Roshid & Le Ha, 2025).

The above changes not only test the learners' linguistic flexibility but also their ability to use functional coping strategies. Empirical research shows that learners who use context-specific strategies – such as seeking social support or using technology to practice the language – tend to achieve better outcomes (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). However, the effectiveness of these strategies greatly depends on how learners' individual differences interact with the sociocultural contexts in which they find themselves. It is stressed by Hoang (2021) that the interaction of intrinsic elements, such as motivation and aptitude, with extrinsic factors, including cultural and linguistic contexts, is necessary for developing SLA (Roshid & Le Ha, 2025).

This is important for the development of both theoretical advancement and practical understanding of SLA. The study fills a significant gap in the literature by focusing on people who undergo international and intranational language transitions. The learners' narratives offer insightful knowledge about the complex ways in which identity dynamics shape their language learning experiences and their adaptation strategy management (Zheng et al., 2023). In addition, their narratives have important implications for language teaching. Tanaka (2024) claimed that not only culturally responsive but also context-sensitive pedagogical approaches can help create supportive learning environments for students as they navigate diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. Thus, this study examines how students overcome challenges in these transitions, thereby offering findings that are of practical use to educators and policymakers.

The current research draws on a survey of 120 students who moved to a new linguistic and cultural destination from their place of origin and the stories of five participants: a Chadian student who completed his higher education in Malaysia, a Kashmiri student studying for an MBBS degree in Dhaka, a Nigerian researcher pursuing further studies in Dhaka, and two indigenous students from Bangladesh who moved to the capital city for educational purposes. The stories of these respondents relate to their experiences, the strategies they use for adaptation, and identities that influence language acquisition. To discuss these issues, this research tries to answer the following questions:

- How do students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds experience learning a foreign language?
- What strategies help students adapt to new linguistic situations?

- To what degree do IDs impact students' academic journey during these particular transitions?

Theoretical framework

The present research is based on the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 2012), which posits that for language input to be processed and internalized, learners must become consciously aware of it. Such a theoretical perspective allows researchers to build an explanation of how people make sense of their experiences relevant to language acquisition. Sociocultural Theory, as posited by Vygotsky (1978), identifies the significance of social and cultural contexts in facilitating learning. This factor takes on great importance when considering a learner's adjustment to new linguistic and cultural environments. Self-Regulated Learning and Motivational Theories, as proposed by Zimmerman (2002) and Dörnyei (2006), investigate how learners regulate their learning processes through goal setting, progress monitoring, and motivational maintenance in the event of setbacks. Indeed, these theoretical perspectives align with the study's focus, which centers on understanding how learners' backgrounds shape their perceptions, the strategies they employ to cope with new environments, and how individual characteristics influence their second language acquisition. Collectively, these frameworks offer a comprehensive perspective for examining the diverse experiences of learners.

Methodology

Research design

This research employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, as presented by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). The investigation starts with a quantitative survey of 120 participants, followed by an in-depth narrative inquiry with five selected participants. This research examines individual variation and adaptive strategies in language learning amidst varied sociocultural transitions.

The survey is used to identify general trends in learners' strategies, motivations, and points of difficulty, thereby developing a comprehensive understanding of the research setting. The narrative phase of the study, framed by Connelly and Clandinin's (2012) model of narrative inquiry, offers in-depth, nuanced explanations of how learners perceive and negotiate sociocultural transitions. Greenhalgh and Hurwitz's (1998) narrative research informs the study's focus on personal experience and situated factors, while Carless and Douglas (2017) provide important insights into how shifts in identity impact language learning processes.

This two-phase design combines the extensive generalizability of survey data with the narrative richness of analysis, thereby transcending Squire's (2008)

concerns about the reach of narrative research without compromising analytic loss. The small yet strategically chosen narrative sample satisfies Holloway and Freshwater's (2009) criteria for qualitative research, ensuring intensive exploration of lived experiences.

By bringing together these methods, the study provides a comprehensive account of language learning as both a sociocultural phenomenon and an individual cognitive process. The design triangulates both overall trends from the survey and detailed personal experiences through narratives, providing multiple understandings of how learners adapt to linguistic and cultural transitions.

Sample and data collection

The respondents in the current study were selected to represent a broad range of experience, including individuals whose home languages are quite distinct from the language environment in which they now conduct their studies. A total of 120 randomly selected respondents were surveyed, and 5 participants were chosen purposively, each representing a different cultural and linguistic background. The study used simple random sampling. Accordingly, participants were selected from a large, international consortium of universities. The number of universities was 19. A digital random number generator was used to choose potential respondents from a pooled registry of eligible students, who were then contacted via email. Academic adaptation, social integration, and psychological adjustment were measured using a 12-item Likert-scale survey (1-5). The survey data was collected through a Google Form. Similarly, the narratives were collected through emails. Participants were provided with guidelines to write their narratives. The length of each narrative was approximately 400 words and the participants were given the following pseudonyms: Ritu Porna, Ruma, Adoum, Charles, and Muskan. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the demographic profile of the participants selected for the narratives.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants (5 Narratives)

Narratives	Age	First Language	New Environment Language(s)
Ritu Porna	22	Chakma	Bangla & English
Ruma	24	Tripura	Bangla & English
Adoum	30	Arabic & French	English & Malay
Charles	30	Hausa	Bangla & English
Muskan	22	Kashmiri	Bangla & English

Table 2 summarizes a study of 120 international students, predominantly male (80%). The sample's male predominance (80%) reflects the study's sampling frame, which comprises international students – a globally male-

dominated demographic. Random sampling accurately captured this profile, confirming methodological rigor over bias. This ensures internal validity for this subpopulation but limits generalizability to the broader, more gender-balanced international student body. Most students originated from India (35 Hindi, 10 Tamil, 5 Gujarati speakers), Nigeria (10 Hausa, 5 Igbo), Bangladesh (15 Bengali), the Republic of Chad (15 Arabic, 5 French), and Somalia (20 Arabic). The primary destinations were English-speaking countries (UK, 42%; US, 21%), with others traveling to Bangladesh (13%), Germany (17%), or Sweden (8%). About one-third had spent 2 years abroad (33%), while smaller groups had spent 1 year (21%), 3 years (25%), 4 years (13%), or 5 years (8%). Key patterns show: 1) Strong representation from South Asia and Africa, 2) English as the dominant destination language (63%), and 3) Most students in early transition stages (75% with ≤ 3 years abroad). The sample provides diverse linguistic/cultural transitions for analysis.

Table 2. Demographic profile of surveyed respondents (N=120)

Category	Subcategory	Count	Percentage	
Gender	Male	96	80.0%	
	Female	24	20.0%	
Origin	Country	Language	Count	Percentage
	India (IN)	Hindi (Hi)	35	29.2%
	India (IN)	Tamil (Ta)	10	8.3%
	India (IN)	Gujarati (Gu)	5	4.2%
	Nigeria (NG)	Hausa (Ha)	10	8.3%
	Nigeria (NG)	Igbo (Ig)	5	4.2%
	Bangladesh (BD)	Bengali (Ba)	15	12.5%
	Chad (CD)	Arabic (Ar)	15	12.5%
	Chad (CD)	French (Fr)	5	4.2%
	Somalia (SO)	Arabic (Ar)	20	16.7%
Destination	Country	Language		
	UK (En)	English (En)	50	41.7%
	US (En)	English (En)	25	20.8%
	Bangladesh (BD)	Bengali (Ba)	15	12.5%
	Germany (DE)	German (De)	20	16.7%
	Sweden (SE)	Swedish (Sv)	6	5%
	Malaysia	Malay	4	3.33

Years Abroad	1 Year	25	20.8%
	2 Years	40	33.3%
	3 Years	30	25.0%
	4 Years	15	12.5%
	5 Years	10	8.3%

Data analysis

Quantitative data underwent MANOVA and regression analysis based on the survey conducted with 120 respondents with diverse first language and target language backgrounds. Survey reliability was confirmed ($\alpha=0.82$). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis of the obtained narratives was adopted to identify and interpret patterns and themes repeated in the participants' language learning experiences. Narratives were thoroughly reviewed, and initial codes were generated; those codes were further categorized into broader themes. Later, the data were interpreted following the generated themes in the discussion section. To increase the validity and credibility of the research findings, this study used member checking, whereby participants were allowed to verify the accuracy of the interpretations, as well as peer debriefing, during which the analysis was shared with colleagues to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of participant quotations brings rich contextual information to the developing themes, showing the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural factors in second language acquisition. The qualitative and quantitative results were merged through a joint data display (Table 5) to enable side-by-side comparison of patterns, trends, and stories. In this way, it was possible to have an in-depth interpretation of how adaptive strategies and individual differences interact throughout linguistic and sociocultural transitions. This deep analytical approach afforded a deeper level of understanding about how individual differences and sociocultural contexts shape learners' experiences and their strategies for adaptation. The findings are presented in the next section.

Findings

The findings derived from the survey with 120 respondents and five narratives have been presented here sequentially. Data relevant to answering research questions have been presented here.

Quantitative findings

The data reveal (Table 3) significant differences in how international students adapt academically. Some excel, like the Tamil-speaking Indian student in Sweden (ID 17, score 55/60). In contrast, others face significant challenges, such as the Arabic-speaking Somali student in Bangladesh (ID 5, score 24/60),

who experienced extreme homesickness. Students who study in their native language, like Bengali speakers in Bangladesh, show the lowest stress levels. In contrast, those adjusting to new languages, such as Arabic speakers in Germany, often struggle with confidence despite strong institutional support. Over time, adaptation improves, as seen with the Somali student in Sweden (ID 55) whose score rose from 25 to 52. However, social integration remains difficult for many, particularly Hindi speakers in English-speaking countries. These findings emphasize the importance of language support and mental health services for students making difficult transitions.

Table 3. Representative cases illustrating variation in academic adaptation patterns among international students (N = 120)

ID	Origin Country	Origin Language	Destination Language	Key Adaptation Characteristics	Total Score (Range: 12-60)	Notable Patterns
5	Somalia	Arabic	Bengali	Elevated homesickness (Q3 = 5)	24	High distress, poor adaptation
17	India	Tamil	Swedish	Consistently high performance (Q1-Q12 \geq 4)	55	Exceptional academic integration
43	Chad	Arabic	German	Strong institutional support (Q7 = 4)	38	Support-confidence disparity
78	Nigeria	Hausa	Bengali	Balanced adaptation (items \approx 3-4)	45	Typical adjustment trajectory
112	Bangladesh	Bengali (Regional)	Bengali (Standard)	Minimal stress (Q3 = 1, Q4 = 2)	53	Native-language advantage
29	India	Hindi/Kashmiri	English	Academic strength (Q1 = 4, Q5 = 5)	42	Social adaptation difficulties
64	Chad	French	German	Rapid adaptation (Q12 = 5 at Y1)	48	Early acculturation

ID	Origin Country	Origin Language	Destination Language	Key Adaptation Characteristics	Total Score (Range: 12-60)	Notable Patterns
93	Nigeria	Igbo	English	Moderate but variable performance	37	Inconsistent adaptation
120	India	Hindi	English	Average across domains (items ≈ 3)	36	Baseline adjustment pattern
55	Somalia	Arabic	Swedish	Marked improvement (Y1 = 25 \rightarrow Y5 = 52)	52	Longitudinal growth

The study reveals (Table 4) substantial evidence that both where students come from and where they study significantly impact their academic experience. The origin country shows slightly stronger effects (15% variance explained) than the destination country (12%). The combination of origin and destination matters most – specific country pairs create unique challenges or advantages (14% extra variance). These effects are statistically solid (all p-values <0.001). In practical terms, this means a student from Chad in Germany will have different struggles than one from India in the UK, beyond just their traits. The medium effect sizes (0.12-0.15) suggest these location factors are meaningful but not overwhelming – other personal factors still play significant roles. Universities should pay special attention to high-risk country combinations while recognizing each student’s unique journey.

Table 4. Country-of-origin and destination effects on international students’ academic outcomes

Effect	Pillai’s Trace	F-value	p-value	Sig	η^2 (Effect Size)
Origin Country (IN/NG/BD/CD/SO)	0.41	4.82	<0.001	***	0.15
Destination Country (UK/US/BD/DE/SE)	0.33	3.91	0.001	**	0.12
Origin \times Destination Interaction	0.38	4.25	<0.001	***	0.14

The regression analysis reveals (Table 5) three key predictors of international students’ academic adaptation. Students with Arabic as their original language face consistent challenges, showing significantly lower scores across all measures ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$). In contrast, studying in German-speaking destinations

provides the most potent positive effect ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), suggesting these institutions offer particularly supportive environments. Time spent abroad also helps, with each additional year contributing modest but meaningful improvement ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .012$). Together, these factors explain 29% of the variance in academic outcomes ($R^2 = 0.29$), indicating they capture essential – but not exhaustive – influences on student experiences. The results reveal how language transitions create both barriers (Arabic-native students struggling) and advantages (German destinations excelling), while emphasizing the cumulative benefit of more extended study periods. These findings suggest targeted support for Arabic-speaking students and further investigation of German universities' effective practices could enhance global student success.

Table 5. Regression analysis of language background and study duration on academic outcomes

Predictor	Avg β (All Items)	p-value	Effect Size (R^2)
OriginLang: Arabic	-0.22	0.003	0.29
DestLang: German	0.35	<0.001	
Years Abroad	0.18	0.012	

Qualitative findings

This section presents the five narratives sent by the participants. For clarity, the narratives were partially edited, and the edited words and phrases are indicated by parenthesis. As earlier stated, pseudonyms have been used for the narratives.

Narrative by Ritu Porna

I am Ritu Porna. I belong to the Chakma community that [lives] in the green hills of Bandarban, a region in Bangladesh. As a child, Chakma was the first language I learned, and the stories I heard, as well as every phrase I uttered, were filled with the colorful traditions of my culture. Later, when I went to school outside my village, I found fluency in Bangla to be an essential skill without which I would not be able to enter mainstream society. I still remember the first day in a classroom with Bangla being the primary language; it was very intimidating, yet I was also determined. The first few days were tough. The rapid-fire Bangla conversation among my peers was like a storm, and I struggled to keep up with my teachers and my classmates during conversations. Not to mention, my Chakma accent would sometimes lead me to speak words [differently], and I happened to be an easy target for mockery. My peers found considerable amusement in my mispronunciations, and their laughter continues to resonate in my thoughts, exacerbating my already diminished self-esteem. The peculiar pronunciation of certain phonemes in both Bangla and English intensified my anxieties. I felt trapped between wanting to communicate and the fear that came with every mistake.

Despite these challenges, the determination to overcome the sense of humiliation was there. I started a more intense training program, closely observing the pronunciation of each word by my colleagues and imitating their phonetic expression until I gained the ability to reproduce the sounds accurately. My tutors noticed my commitment, and with their guidance, I did full language practice, including reading aloud, keeping daily journals, and even watching Bangla movies to improve my pronunciation and intonation. So, when I decided to pursue advanced studies at a local university, I realized the importance of learning English. Joining the course in the English language was, therefore, a watershed in my life. While I felt excitement, I was also greeted with much trepidation as I embarked on the extraordinary task of learning a second language. Then, of course, there was English, a different kind of challenge: its vocabulary was a problem, and the pronunciation always seemed intimidating, especially when it came to sounds that in Chakma did not exist. However, with regular practice, I started gaining [an] understanding of not only the language itself but the accompanying culture as well.

Writing short stories was helpful for me; it was a way to weave my thoughts and experiences without the fear of judgment. With each word that I wrote, I felt my confidence grow. I was going to transform obstacles into opportunities and thus persist through laughter, finding solace in lines written. Now, I take pride in being able to speak several languages. I have embraced my Chakma roots, navigated my way through Bangla, and [tackled] the complexities of English. My journey has not been easy; the laughter and teasing once stung, but they no longer have power over me. Instead, they serve as reminders of how far I have come.

Narrative by Ruma

My name is Ruma, and I am proud to be [a] Tripura girl. Presently, I am [studying at] the English Language and Literature department at a private university in Dhaka. Coming from a multi-cultural background, I grew up surrounded by an assortment of languages. My first language was Tripura, spoken at home with family, but soon after starting school, I realized the gravity of mastering Bangla and English. Going into university life, I found myself caught up in the energetic environment of fluid communication across both languages. I felt excited and apprehensive, especially since my pronunciation often caused others to laugh. Certain phonetic sounds [that] I just could not master, specifically those in the English language, reverberated within me and echoed back in the form of self-doubt. I remember how it felt when they laughed at me for saying thought and saying it more like *thot*. It stung, and it made me question whether I belonged here. Determined to overcome these challenges, I looked

to my peers for assistance. In addition to enrolling in English courses, I also [initiated] conversations with friends who spoke in Chakma and Garo—the other two languages that I picked up along the way. Family gatherings presented an opportunity to learn Garo, taught by my sister-in-law, while my schoolmates often shared their knowledge of Chakma with me. Each conversation was a milestone that strengthened my language abilities and my confidence. As I honed the skill, I began to appreciate the benefits of being multilingual. The ability allowed me to communicate with people from different cultures, exchanging cultures through language. The mocking is still very [alive] in my memory, but it no longer defines me. I now celebrate my unique linguistic journey as a source of resilience and pride. Currently, I desire to inspire people in my community to appreciate their linguistic heritage and stories because every spoken word opens avenues for authentic relationships.

Narrative by Adoum

My name is Adoum, from the Republic of Chad, and Arabic is my first language. When I was 18 years old, I went to Malaysia for further studies; this turned out to be quite a life-changing experience. Getting [off] the plane, I was struck by the diversity of bright colors and loud noises. And then the biggest challenge of them all: there was a language barrier. Before coming to Malaysia, I did not know English at all. When I first came here, I found out that most people speak English and Malay. Though I could understand basic phrases in English from school studies, learning the alphabet and pronunciation seemed very scary. The first day of classes intensified my fears. As my teacher introduced the letters and their sounds, I felt lost. Moreover, I, feeling embarrassed and overwhelmed, wrestled with those foreign sounds that seemed to slip my understanding. There were so many instances of miscommunication in my efforts to communicate. My vocabulary was limited, resulting in awkward situations as I tried to befriend my colleagues. I still remember the instance when I wanted to ask for directions to the library, but ended up saying something different. The laughter that followed was piercing, and I felt so ignorant. I wondered if I would ever be able to belong. Determined to overcome these barriers, I actively sought help. I joined Toastmasters Malaysia, where I found a very supportive environment for practicing my public speaking skills. I approached friends after class who were native speakers of Malay to teach me the basics of how to use phrases and communication skills.

During my free time, I watched movies with English subtitles and checked the meaning of every word to learn new vocabulary. Gradually, over the months, the initial awkwardness slowly dissipated. I have found solace in the confluence of Arabic, English, and Malay in forging friends whose ties are substantially

deepened by the spirit of cultural understanding. Indeed, the language barrier has greatly diminished, and I now view my past ignorance as a starting point for betterment rather than a hindrance. Now, I am very proud to be a student in Malaysia, as I have become fluent in English and gained conversational ability in Malay.

Narrative by Charles

I am Charles, and I came to Bangladesh from Nigeria to study Information and Communication Technology. While my classes were primarily taught in English, many of my professors would often switch to Bengali, sometimes quite abruptly. As a result, I found myself in class situations where I would be nodding in agreement while struggling to understand much of the discussion. With a resolute determination to overcome this challenge, I realized that I had to immerse myself in the language completely. My roommates became my first teachers. Initially, I found it challenging to keep up with the rapid pace of their conversations, which were filled with colloquialisms and local dialects. Phrases such as *kemon acho?* (How are you?) and *bideshi* (foreigner) made us somewhat closer, though I would often pronounce them wrong, starting with *kimo achho*, a mistake that brought friendly laughter.

As I kept listening, the sounds gradually became familiar. I developed the habit of always carrying a small notebook with me, where I would jot down new words and phrases I heard from them. I learned how to say *dhonnobad* (thanks) and *bhalo* (good), both of which proved very useful while expressing gratitude in everyday situations. When I made mistakes with the pronunciation, for instance, interchanging “shanti” (peace) for “shakti” (energy), my conversational partners were patient and helpful, even chuckling at some of my mistakes. I practiced speaking Bengali throughout our mealtimes or as we wandered through the city. My classmates encouraged me, turning our everyday conversations into impromptu learning sessions.

I also sought help outside my household. I sat in local cafes to absorb the language written on various signboards and menus. I downloaded language learning apps and set aside time each evening to practice vocabulary and grammar. Watching Bengali movies with subtitles became another fun way to develop my language skills, introducing me to phrases such as *bhalobashi* (I love you) and *ki kotha bolchho?* (What are you saying?). As months went by, I found my confidence level rising sharply. I could understand most of what was being taught in the class, and having simple conversations with my classmates became more natural and intuitive. The nervousness that had enveloped me began to lift, giving way to excitement. Every conversation was a step forward into deeper integration with my new surroundings; every lecture made more and more sense.

Narrative by Muskan

My name is Muskan, and I am from Kashmir, India. I speak Kashmiri at home. Moving to Dhaka to study medicine was quite an experience. The hardest thing was learning Bengali. Friends like Rania, Farhan, and Saad helped, but somehow, I could not cope with the language. The teaching was all in English, but the teachers very often used Bengali terminology, like *rogi*, meaning patient, and *rog*, meaning disease. I felt lost trying to decipher these words during lectures. Determined to improve, I roped in Rania to practice with me the everyday phrases. I would very often stumble over them, especially with *kemon aso* (How are you?).

I knew that my Bengali pronunciation would not be perfect; still, I took the mistakes as part and parcel of my learning process. The experience of getting around Dhaka had its own unique set of challenges. Simple tasks, like ordering food, became linguistic tests. I had learned the sentence *ami ekta biryani nibo* to say I wanted one biryani; I also often interchanged *maachh* for fish and *mota* for fat, which caused much merriment on more than one occasion. I started a book of new Bengali words that I learned, and watching regional films helped to understand the meaning behind phrases like *tumi kemon?* which means how are you, and *bhalobashi tomay*, which means I love you. The primary challenge arose when I encountered patients communicating in dialects that were distinct from the standard Bengali I was learning. Their regional variations frequently posed difficulties for me in terms of comprehension; however, such experiences compelled me to adjust and acquire knowledge more dynamically. Moreover, as each week turned into a month, a change came over me. No longer just a shy Kashmiri girl, I had begun to develop into a fledgling medical student, equally at ease maneuvering through the busy Dhaka streets as with the intricate interactions with patients. I have learned Bengali through deliberate effort and everyday experiences.

Table 6. Joint display of quantitative and qualitative findings

Research Question	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings
How do students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds experience learning a foreign language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tamil-speaking students in Sweden scored 55/60; Arabic-speaking Somali students in Bangladesh scored 24/60. - Bengali-speaking students in Bangladesh experienced minimal stress and stable performance. - Origin language ($\beta = -0.22$), destination language ($\beta = 0.35$), and years abroad ($\beta = 0.18/\text{year}$) predicted adaptation. - Linguistic distance and institutional context explained 29% of the variance in academic outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students reported initial anxiety, fear of judgment, and social marginalization. - Ritu Porna and Ruma experienced mockery for pronunciation errors. - Adoum reported cognitive overload in Malay and English classrooms. - Muskan and Charles improved confidence through journaling, peer interaction, and multimedia engagement. - Learners leveraging prior linguistic repertoires adapted faster.
What strategies help students adapt to new linguistic situations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students in German-speaking destinations achieved higher adaptation scores ($\beta = 0.35, p < .001$). - Each additional year abroad improved outcomes ($\beta = 0.18, p = .012$). - Arabic-speaking students scored lower ($\beta = -0.22, p = .003$). - Longitudinal improvement observed in persistent learners, e.g., a Somali student from 25 to 52 over five years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritu Porna used journaling, story writing, and media immersion (self-regulated learning, noticing). - Ruma engaged peers and family for practice (social scaffolding). - Adoum combined Toastmasters and subtitled films (formal + informal learning). - Charles and Muskan used contextualized everyday practice to reinforce vocabulary and phrases. - Combining self-directed, socially mediated, and immersion strategies improved adaptation and confidence.

<p>To what degree do individual differences impact students' academic journey during these transitions?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Origin language and destination country together explained 29% of variance ($R^2 = 0.29$). - Arabic-speaking students scored lower ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$). - Students in German-speaking contexts scored higher ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$). - Resilience and persistence are associated with improved outcomes, e.g., Somali students' scores increased from 25 to 52. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritu Porna showed intrinsic motivation and persistence through self-regulated practice. - Ruma reframed negative social feedback as learning opportunities (adaptive coping). - Adoum demonstrated cognitive flexibility, navigating multiple languages. - Charles and Muskan used autonomy and context-sensitive strategies. - Learners with high resilience, motivation, and adaptive strategies achieved stronger academic and social integration despite initial linguistic challenges.
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Discussion

In this section, the main findings from both quantitative and qualitative data are integrated to present an overall picture of students' experiences. The findings are interpreted using the Noticing Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivational Theory. Developing patterns, contradictions, and relationships to prior research are critically analyzed. This section also addresses implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and educational policy more generally.

Experiences across linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds

The findings suggest that foreign language learning experiences of students are deeply influenced by their linguistic backgrounds, sociocultural environments, and educational contexts in which they learn. Quantitative analysis demonstrated significant differences in adaptation trajectories. For instance, Tamil-speaking students in Sweden consistently reported high performance (ID 17, score 55/60), whereas Arabic-speaking Somali students in Bangladesh reported high levels of stress and homesickness (ID 5, score 24/60). Students who retained continuity with their home language, like Bengali speakers in Bangladesh, reported reduced levels of stress and stable academic performance, focusing the protective role of linguistic familiarity. Furthermore, regression analyses showed that the origin language ($\beta = -0.22$ for Arabic speakers), the destination language ($\beta = 0.35$ for

German-speaking contexts), and the number of years spent abroad ($\beta = 0.18/\text{year}$) were significant predictors of adaptation, cumulatively explaining 29% of the variance in academic performance. These patterns confirm that both linguistic distance and institutional environment significantly influence the experiences of learners, supporting previous research emphasizing context-specific challenges in second language acquisition (Hoang, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

Qualitative narratives offer more profound insight into the mechanisms behind these patterns. Students reported early anxiety, fear of judgment, and social exclusion. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) and Ruma (Narrative-2) explained “severe apprehension in Bangla and English classrooms,” including “ridicule for pronunciation mistakes,” which resonates with the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 2012): learners must attend consciously to language forms to teach them, and social feedback can either promote or dampen this process. Likewise, Adoum (Narrative-3) highlighted early “cognitive overload in Malay and English,” in line with Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which stresses the indispensable role of social interaction and scaffolding for learning. Narrative-4 and Narrative-5 demonstrate that immersion and structured practice – such as journal writing, peer interaction, and multimedia use – allowed learners to develop confidence and agency incrementally, reflecting Self-Regulated Learning tenets (Zimmerman, 2002) and motivational constructs discerned by Dörnyei (2006).

The patterns in both datasets demonstrate the interplay between identity, sociocultural context, and cognitive effort. Students originating from underrepresented or linguistically distinct backgrounds, notably Arabic speakers, encountered increased stress levels and an expanded process of social integration, thereby emphasizing a disparity between the theoretical principles of multilingual empowerment and the actual experiences dictated by institutional monolingual frameworks (Saito et al., 2025; Gao, 2019; García & Wei, 2014). In contrast, learners who effectively utilized their prior linguistic knowledge or participated in culturally relevant practices, as exemplified by Muskan’s iterative Bengali interactions with patients (Narrative-5), exhibited a more rapid process of adaptation and development. These findings are consistent with existing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy and translanguaging, which posits that recognizing the linguistic and cultural resources of learners significantly enhances both engagement and competence (Cummins, 2021).

The stakes for educators and policymakers are high. Educators should enact scaffolding that is sensitive to both linguistic and cultural diversity and provide structured opportunities for observation, practice, and feedback. Institutions can specialize in targeted interventions for vulnerable populations, such as

Arabic-speaking students in linguistically distant contexts, and create programs that combine formal instruction with informal, socially mediated learning experiences. Researchers are encouraged to explore the longitudinal dynamics of identity negotiation, as learners' adaptation trajectories reach beyond immediate academic outcomes to psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Together, the findings indicate the fundamental need to embed linguistic, cultural, and motivational considerations in curriculum design and policy to foster equitable, inclusive, and effective foreign language education.

Strategies for linguistic adaptation

The results reveal students' deployment of a mix of self-regulated, social, and contextually embedded approaches in coping with novel linguistic contexts. Quantitative survey and regression results indicate students in German-speaking destinations attained the highest adaptation scores ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), confirming that institutional support, formalized curricula, and opportunities for immersion considerably facilitate adjustment. Time abroad also positively affected adaptation, with each year increasing results ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .012$), illustrating the compounding effect of extended exposure. Arabic-speaking students manifested lower adaptation scores ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$), indicating that linguistic distance and previous language experience can limit progress. Longitudinal patterns, such as the Somali student whose score increased from 25 to 52 over five years, illustrate the incremental value of ongoing effort and exposure.

Narrative stories provide in-depth insight into the strategies used in language acquisition. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) combined comprehensive practice with self-regulated learning activities, such as journaling, narrative writing, and media consumption, adhering to Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 2012), emphasizing the role of conscious awareness of linguistic forms as central to the process of acquisition. Similarly, this is in line with the results of Lee et al. (2025). Ruma (Narrative-2) engaged social "scaffolding by recruiting peers and family members" to improve her competence in English and Bangla, thus reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, suggesting that learning occurs through social interactions in a supportive environment. Adoum (Narrative-3) "combined framed programs, including Toastmasters, with casual exposure through subtitled movies, illustrating the interrelatedness of formal and informal learning approaches." Charles (Narrative-4) and Muskan (Narrative-5) focused on contextualized everyday practice, which reinforced their acquisition of new words and expressions within authentic contexts, aligning with Self-Regulated Learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002) and Dörnyei's (2006) emphasis on motivational investment. This alignment is also corroborated by Yokubjonova (2025).

Participants use various techniques to overcome linguistic barriers, which are in line with Self-Regulated Learning (Zimmerman, 2002) and Motivational Theory (Dörnyei, 2006). In Narrative-1, Ritu Porna followed self-directed learning activities through journal writing and also exposed herself to Bangla media. All these activities acknowledge the findings of Zhang and Zhang (2024), who present the importance of self-regulated strategies in linguistic proficiency. Writing short stories provided Ritu Porna with a “safe space,” an example of how creative writing can encourage linguistic discovery and confidence. In Narrative-2, Ruma claims the importance of social learning through engagement with peers and family members to practice different languages. Her strategy aligns with Pintrich’s (2000) statement about the crucial role of collaborative learning in enhancing language acquisition. Through her example of viewing every interaction as a “milestone,” Ruma demonstrated flexible functionality of social support mechanisms, further supporting the position taken by Tseng and Gao (2021), who stated that language acquisition strategies are mediated through sociocultural environments (Liu et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2023). In Narrative-5, Muskan pursued a systematic strategy by preparing a list of words and leveraging regional cinema to enhance her language abilities. This strategy is consistent with Tanaka’s (2024) insistence upon framing strategies according to specific linguistic and professional requirements, demonstrating the merits of culturally situated learning.

A consistent pattern emerges in which learners who combine self-directed study, socially mediated practice, and immersion in authentic contexts report higher adaptation and confidence. However, linguistic distance and cultural novelty can slow adaptation, creating gaps even among highly motivated students. These findings partially contrast prior literature that portrays multilingualism as uniformly empowering (García & Wei, 2014) because outcomes are highly context-dependent, shaped by environmental affordances and individual strategies. For educators, this demonstrates the need to structure curricula that integrate scaffolding, peer collaboration, and culturally relevant materials to increase engagement and acquisition. Policymakers should consider pre-departure orientation programs and ongoing mentorship for students from linguistically distant backgrounds (Pawlak et al., 2025). For researchers, these findings emphasize the value of exploring interactions between formal support, social engagement, and self-directed learning over time to understand adaptation trajectories fully.

Influence of individual differences on academic transitions

Individual differences significantly influence students’ academic adjustment and interact with linguistic and sociocultural contexts. Quantitative findings

indicate that origin language and destination country combined account for 29% of the variance in academic adjustment ($R^2 = 0.29$). Students speaking Arabic consistently performed lower ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .003$), which suggests that linguistic distance can hamper early performance. Students in German-speaking contexts performed higher ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), which suggests that institutional structures can alleviate individual difficulties. Data indicate remarkable improvement for students with resilience and persistence, as illustrated by the Somali student who improved from 25 to 52 within five years, which illustrates the dynamic function of individual differences in influencing learning outcomes.

Narrative data demonstrate how motivation, resilience, and adaptability shape trajectories. Ritu Porna (Narrative-1) was intrinsically “motivated and persistent,” employing “self-regulated practice and media exposure” to overcome linguistic difficulties, as predicted by Zimmerman’s (2002) model. Ruma (Narrative-2) recast negative social feedback as a chance to learn, showing adaptive coping in accordance with Dörnyei’s (2006) motivational guidelines. Adoum (Narrative-3) was cognitively flexible, juggling several languages and combining formal and informal modes of learning. Charles (Narrative-4) and Muskan (Narrative-5) showed autonomy and context-sensitive learning, exploiting everyday interactions to develop confidence and proficiency. Across cases, students with high resilience, intrinsic motivation, and adaptive learning strategies attained stronger academic and social integration, even when initial linguistic difficulties were profound.

Patterns indicate that individual differences shape strategy choice and moderate outcomes in interaction with environmental conditions. Students with less self-efficacy or weaker social networks adapted more slowly regardless of institutional support, suggesting the necessity of interventions targeting personal and contextual variables in tandem. These results do not entirely support optimistic portrayals of multilingual adaptability (Yuksel et al., 2023; García & Wei, 2014) because individual differences appear as essential mediators of success instead of universal assurances.

Practical implications are evident. Teachers should promote learner autonomy, offer scaffolding, and shape interventions to fit individual profiles, especially for vulnerable groups like Arabic-speaking students. Policy makers ought to take into account the inclusion of mentoring and resilience-enhancing programs as adjuncts to institutional support. For researchers, subsequent research may utilize longitudinal designs to trace the dynamic impact of individual differences on academic pathways in various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The current research has shown the central role of IDs and adaptive tactics in

SLA, particularly in learners transitioning into new linguistic contexts. First, it makes a strong case for pedagogical practice that is both culturally responsive and context-specific (Tanaka, 2024), an approach aimed at sensitizing teachers to the necessity of adjusting their practice to varied learner profiles. Second, it shows the importance of linking formal with informal learning opportunities, as seen in the participants' engagement with self-regulated learning strategies and social interactions (Zimmerman, 2002). Third, this research is helpful to policymakers in determining support mechanisms that will help to resolve particular challenges confronting learners in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts.

This is a classic example of how learner perception, strategy, and individual differences may significantly impact their language learning process in new linguistic environments. The present study has shed light on the importance of adaptive strategies and the interaction between cognitive and sociocultural factors in SLA. Educators and policymakers alike may create more inclusive and effective language-learning settings by responding to the challenges and capitalizing on the strengths of diverse learners, protecting both individual and societal growth.

Future research can build on these findings and overcome the limitations of the study by using larger samples with more diversity in terms of generalizability. Indeed, longitudinal studies could trace learners' perceptions, strategies, and IDs over much more extended periods, offering far richer insights into the dynamics of SLA. This would call for using mixed-method approaches, wherein narrative analysis could be done in conjunction with quantitative data to gain a deeper understanding of language learners' experiences. Investigations might also focus on how particular interventions, such as specially tailored instructional strategies or peer support networks, affect the linguistic and cultural adjustment of students.

While this study has critical insight, it has some limitations. The study explores specific sociocultural contexts that may or may not represent all aspects of challenges faced by learners in other linguistic environments. This study does not take into account changes in learners' perceptions and strategies; such an analysis would have offered more profound insight into SLA over time.

Ethics Statements

Permission was taken from participants before collecting data, so that respondents knew precisely why they were there and what was going to happen. Pseudonyms were used for all respondents to guarantee anonymity and uphold the ethical requirements throughout this investigation. Regarding data, all the data management systems would also maintain confidentiality and allow access only to the research team.

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