
**SOCIO- PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SOCIETAL INFLUENCES ON USERS OF ENGLISH AS
A SECOND LANGUAGE**

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-psychological impacts of societal influences on non-native speakers of English. It evaluates the role of societal pressures—including societal attitudes, anxiety, biases, and stereotypes—on language use and the psychological well-being of English users. The research focuses on the complex dynamics between societal pressures and individual experiences, shedding light on the challenges faced by second-language users in navigating linguistic and cultural expectations. The Social Identity Theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for analysis. A total of 30 participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique for data collection. Findings from the analysis show that the socio-psychological effects of societal influences on users of English as a second language are reflected in their attitudinal dispositions, including fear of making mistakes, negative self-perceptions of language ability, and apprehension about being judged or evaluated by others. The study recommends a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between language, society, and the human psyche. It highlights the need to prioritize effective communication over grammatical perfection and to promote inclusive social cohesion.

Keywords: language attitudes, identity, anxiety, societal influence, social cohesion

Introduction

The most widely encountered symbol of emerging nationhood is language. Ofoegbu (2012) defines language as “the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Language, like human beings, is inherently social and ought not to exist in isolation. According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), language is essentially a human system of communication that is shaped by both linguistic behaviour and extralinguistic norms across different social groups. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. Ofoegbu (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as man’s means of communication. That it is only humans that communicate with language. Also in Ofoegbu (2024) “language is man and man is language”. Life has no meaning without language. Society provides the context, the various meanings of the same signs in different situations, and language is deeply rooted in culture, customs, and values of a society. It reflects the way people think, behave, and interact by talking to one another. Ofoegbu and Udoe (2011) posit that humans use language to communicate emotions and feelings which are reflected in their everyday language use. Through this interactive function, language is used to establish and maintain social function, and by this function, social groups get going, identified and reinforced, and or achieve a social cohesion. Thus, it is social, being that it is governed by rules agreed upon by all members of the community using the language. On that basis, it is used regularly to produce effects on behaviour by representing the mind and will of the speaker, and therefore, it is not limited to mere self-expressions or the automatic response to outer stimuli. This therefore suggests that language requires human interaction to exist, and is shaped by the social context in which it is used, conforming to the fact that it is not just a neutral means of communication. Again Ofoegbu (2025) posits that Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures and that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication.

Hence, Nweke et al, (2025) contend that language is put together to communicate meaning for a particular purpose. Alongside this importance, and as a means of understanding ourselves and our society, and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction, there is another importance we attach to language. It is seen as the primary outward sign of a group’s identity, and problems often arise while in a

multiplicity situation, when diverse language communities choose one language over another, probably, as a unifying element. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) opine that it is a means by which humans alone communicate. This means that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication. In a place like Nigeria, English as a Second Language becomes a significant index of diverse group's linguistic identity. One reason is undoubtedly that it is such a widespread and a unifying feature of both minority and majority ethnic community life.

It is therefore important to recognize the extent to which national diversity can give rise to linguistic issues, the effect on some second language speakers of English nursing inferiority complex towards the attainment of the language. This to a great extent can reduce the confidence of expressing in it and this psychological barrier becomes the obstacle in practicing the English language, despite the growing importance of the language as a global language. This paper, in essence, considers the socio-psychological effects of societal influences on non-native speakers of English. In a multilingual setting, worldwide therefore, and sequel to the increasing globalization of communication in English language, there is a need to understand the complex socio-psychological dynamics that shape the experiences of non-native English speakers.

In terms of psycho-social effects, it is very important to note also that the acquisition and use of ESL are not without challenges. It is certain that once a second language user becomes aware of their identity, the probability of experiencing some consequential issues, be it linguistic or non-linguistic is real. Truly, societal influence can have a profound impact on language use among ESL users, on the instance that they may experience language anxiety, stereotypes, conflict in cultural identity, self-perception and confidence such as low self-esteem, negative self-talk, due to the societal pressure, the dominance of English as a global language and the pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations. Of course, these significant consequences highlight the complex and dynamic relationship between language, culture and society. The factors also interact with each other in complex ways, influencing an individual's language use, attitudes, and behaviour. Therefore, among second language users in a social milieu, it becomes important to recognize the extent to which societal influence on the language can give rise to psychological effects on ESL users. This research, hence, serves as a potential remedy of the psycho-socio effect of the societal influences on the language use of the ESL speakers, to enhance social cohesion.

The following three research questions guided this work:

1. What are the dominant socio-psychological effects of societal influences on users of English as a Second Language?
2. How do emotional, cognitive, and behavioural effects of the societal influences shape ESL users' language use and identity?
3. What are the implications of societal influences for language education and social cohesion?

To go about this research, the study adopted a quantitative approach for data collection and analysis. The design adopted for the study is a survey research design wherein the perspectives and opinions of the participants are gained through structured questionnaires to collect data on participant's language use experiences and attitudes. Using a purposive sampling method, a sample size of 30 speakers of varying levels of English mastery, participated in the survey.

English in an ESL Situation

The relation between the participants involved in the act, however, determines the designs of language that would be used (Nweke, 2024a) – that is, the language used to reflect interaction with other people - interaction between the hearer and the speaker (Nweke, 2024b). The argument, therefore, is that our relationship with whom we know and what we know about a participant will command the kind of language to be employed in interactions. This unravels the need for the learning and the use of English by every second language individual as a unifying element in case of coming in contact with an individual from a different ethnicity. English remains a vehicle for most international communication.

Historically, despite that English is the instrument of communication for many languages in contact, yet, research shows that the use of English presents challenges for non- speakers in an ESL situation. In the aspect of interpersonal communication, it ought not to be so, and according to Cook (1989, as cited in Nweke, 2024a) language use is viewed as communicating something felt to be coherent which may, or may not correspond to a correct sentence or series of correct sentences. His emphasis is that language use does not have to be grammatically correct - it can be anything from a grunt or even simple expletive, through short conversations and scribbled notes. Thus the reason, Hymes (1972) from the earliest time introduced the concept of communicative competence which emphasizes the ability to use language effectively in social contexts, rather than merely following rules. In essence, conformity to rules is not what matters, but the fact that it communicates and is recognized by its receivers as coherent. This upholds the fact that when one thinks, speaks or writes in one's language, one puts the words in a certain order depending on the thought expressed (Nweke, 2022). Of course, we use language to talk about our experience of the world, including the worlds in our own minds, to describe events and states involved in them (Okpala & Chukwu, 2022).

Every human is born with a desire to communicate, and generally speaking, communication is understood to be the bedrock of any relationship (Sustaining human relationship). Nweke & Nweke, (2025) also hold the view that effective communication is the bedrock upon which lasting organizational ability for sustainability is built. In other words, language and communication play a crucial role in shaping relationships (Nweke, 2025a). This in turn serves as a remedy to social psychological feelings of the second language speakers of English, leaning on its stand against grammatical correctness over simple communication. Ezeifeke contends that it is a communication which forms the knowledge base of social institutions, and or as conventional ways of seeing and talking about the world that characterizes particular social settings (2018). On the other hand, this focuses on language functioning as an immense help to understanding society and human responses, and also a key to understanding language itself (Olateju, 2004), and focuses on language as shaping social order and shaping individual's interaction with society (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999). Therefore, different language uses are the various ways of representing the world which are associated with different positions assumed by the participants at different points in time. Thus, this presupposes that different social institutions have their own unique ways of constructing experiences, assigning roles and relationships, circulating ideologies, exercising power and generally giving expression to the meanings and values of an institution (Ezeifeke, 2018).

Societal Influence on Language: The recognition of a relationship between language and society has existed from the very beginning. It is deduced that language use shows language user's perception of a society, and this supposes that language use produced by different people either orally or written vary with recognizable patterns, depending on their social domains of life. This relates with the potential of a language to express content or subject matter of discourse in terms of the speaker's experiences of the world and that of the speech community (Nweke, 2024a). An instance of that is that language is a social medium or one's primary socialization agent for family which is the microcosm of every society (Nweke, 2024b). In a second language environment, the situation warrants that the dominant language serves as a means to control people and to influence what they think and do (Bolinger, 1990). The impact of societal influences on language can reflect and reinforce power imbalances in communication and relationship between individuals. Hence, language is a key factor in interpersonal relationship (Nweke & Nweke, 2025b), and the knowledge of its use, according to Okpala and Chukwu (2023) is the knowledge of how to use language appropriately.

Psychological Factors Affecting ESL Speakers in English language Acquisition

Language Anxiety: Certain personality traits influence how one responds to vocal instructions and commands. Such can get one tongue-tied or disables one to find the appropriate words in predicted situations, which the end results are often despair and an overall sense of failure. It is in such a situation as in second language acquisition that David (1994) sees as a complicated endeavour that is prone to human anxiety, characterized by emotions of unease, dissatisfaction, self-doubt, and fear. Anxiety in the words of Horwitz (2010) explains the feeling of apprehension, worry, or nervousness that language learners experience when they are engaging in language learning or using language. In his view, due to anxiety, a non-native speaker of English can avoid language learning situations or activities, and he or she does this for fear of committing linguistic errors. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) uphold the view that anxiety can lead to decreased motivation and interest in language learning as well as negatively impact language performance, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Also, the major contributor to anxiety is fear. In considering fear as the greatest challenge human beings face, Nweke and Nweke (2020) argue that fear makes one grow, not shrink and fear is one of the greatest motivators for the human mind. They uphold that fear of loss, pain, rejection, harm, and the unknown can go a long way in preventing one from making many terrible decisions, from childhood to adult life. Additively, a copious instance is that the fear of failure in examination can prompt one to read hard and have good grades or result. In other words, as regards to using a second language, fear of making mistakes can motivate one to acquire the skill, more., or not all due to anxiety feelings.

Language Attitude: Attitude is another critical factor to consider when attempting to comprehend the significance of social background in acquiring English language. In most cases, a second language learner's approach to English language use determines how well the learner learns the language and adapts to society. Bai & Wang (2023) claim that a learner's perspective on the foreign language, the people who speak it, and the classroom/environment all play significant roles in the learner's eventual success or failure. Gardner (1985), says positive language attitudes enhance learner's motivation, while negative aspects of it leads to decreased motivation and language learning anxiety. In a similar view, positive attitude promotes learners; confidence as well as self-esteem, while negative attitude leads to self-doubt (Horwitz, 2001 and Norton, 2000). It is the attitude that controls the learners' language learning strategies. However, to curb negative attitude towards reading, Nweke (2025b) sees creating an awareness as an effort to help improve vulnerable readers and support efforts that will yield improved early exposure to learning good reading habit. As such, if a learner holds positive attitudes towards the target language, he will be more often engaged in language learning activities.

Language Motivation: Halliday, in his conception of systemic functional theory aired the view that language is not just a formal activity ..., but a means through which its users perform actions and fulfill their social purposes and obligations (Ezeifeke, 2018, as cited in Nweke & Okeke, 2025). Since language is fundamentally a tool in which its forms and expressions construe meaning, it becomes reasonable enough to assume that its structures are best analyzed and understood with reference to the function they carry out, including the task of conveying meaning and contextual information. Language being the basic tool also consolidates the fact that it is a cultural heritage of any organization with which all forms of human communication are carried out (Nweke & Nweke, 2025). However, experiencing language anxiety decreases learners' motivation by feeling overwhelmed and self-conscious about their language abilities. This portrays the fact that in the presence of decreased motivation, there is a decreased language learning outcome and increased learner's frustration.

Using descriptive analysis, the research questions were attended in the following manner, below:

Research question 1: What are the dominant socio-psychological effects of societal influences among users of English as a second language?

Table 1: Question Statements on Language Attitudes, Societal Influences and Expectations

1. Have you ever tried to change your language use or accent to fit in with a certain group?
2. Do you take English as the most important language in the world?
3. Do you feel it is very important to speak English fluently?
4. Have you ever judged someone's background based on their English language abilities?
5. How important is it for you to conform to societal expectations of English language proficiency?

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Responses on Language Attitudes, Societal Influences and Expectations

Percentage	Reports
80%	reported having changed their language use or accent to fit in with a certain group.
90%	accepted English as the most important language in the world.
90%	shared the feeling that it is very important to speak English fluently.
60%	reported having judged someone's background based on their English language abilities.
60%	approved of the importance to conform to societal expectations of English language proficiency.

Research question 2: How do emotional, cognitive, and behavioural effects of the societal influences shape ESL users' language use and identity?

Question statements on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural effects of the societal influences.

1. Have societal pressures to speak English fluently affected your self-esteem?
2. Do you feel pressure from your family or friends to speak English fluently?
3. Do you feel anxiety when speaking English in public?
4. How does using English as a second language make you feel about your identity?
5. Has being conscious of being judged ever deters you from speaking in English?

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Responses on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural effects of the societal influences.

Percentage	Reports
50%	reported that societal pressures to speak English fluently 80% agreed that it affected your self-esteem.
50%	reported feeling pressure from your family or friends to speak English fluently.
80%	reported feeling anxiety when speaking English in public.
60%	reported feeling of inadequacy in expression using English
70%	reported that the conscious of being judged deters me from speaking in English

Research Question 3: What are the implications of societal influences for language education and social cohesion?

Question statements on language education and social cohesion:

1. I feel like I'm not good enough when talking in English.
2. Which, between grammar and pronunciation, is the difficulty you face when speaking English?
3. I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes in English.
4. Can language differences between high proficiency English speakers and low proficiency speakers create social divisions and exclusion?
5. Have you ever experienced social exclusion due to language barriers?

Section C: Language Anxiety and Self-Perception

1. I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes in English.
2. I feel anxiety when speaking English in front of other people.
3. I feel I'll never be fluent in English.

Language Attitudes

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Responses on language education and social cohesion:

Percentage	Reports
70%	Reported dissatisfaction with their current level of English proficiency.
60%	Reported feeling self-conscious about their grammar when speaking English
90%	reported feeling embarrassed when making mistakes in English.
40%	were of the view that differences between high proficiency English speakers and low proficiency speakers create social divisions and exclusion.
60%	reported experiencing social exclusion due to language barriers.

Discussion of findings

The survey results reveal dominance of societal pressure with negative implications on the non-speakers of English. Specifically, the result indicates a significant proportion of ESL users (60%) experience anxiety when speaking English in formal settings. They expressed fear of being judged or evaluated based on their language proficiency. The respondents mostly used words like nervous, anxious, and embarrassed when describing their language speaking experiences. For example, a respondent says "I feel nervous when speaking English in public because I'm afraid of making mistakes", another said, "I've had people correct my grammar or pronunciation, which makes me feel embarrassed." The other said, "I've been told that I need to improve my English to get a better job in the future which implies I'm not competent enough. I'm terrified of saying something wrong and people laughing at me. This finding is consistent with previous research on language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). Thus this portrays the fact that the pressure to speak English perfectly and the fear of being judged or evaluated may contribute to the anxiety.

Despite that a very distinctive feature of man is his ability to communicate through the use of language Nweke & Nweke (2022, as cited in Nweke & Nweke, 2025) hold still that some respondents reported feeling excluded or marginalized due to language barriers. A respondent said, "when I'm in a group conversation, I feel like I'm on the outside looking in because I don't speak English fluently. The analysis also reveals some challenges of forming relationships due to language differences among respondents. A respondent thus acknowledged, 'it's hard for me to make friends because I'm not confident in my English skills'. In a similar vein, some respondents expressed that they are pressured to conform to native speaker norms following cultural expectations. This triggered off responses like "I feel like I need to sound like a native speaker to fit in". The findings also highlight the importance of addressing language proficiency and social exclusion in essence to promote social cohesion. The research reveals that those satisfied with their language proficiency have increased confidence and self-esteem, encouraging social participation than those with low satisfaction, experiencing frustration, decreased motivation, and social withdrawal. A greater number of individuals with limited skills as responded in table 3, above, thus descend to experiencing social exclusion, marginalization and disconnection from the community due to language exchange opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper examines the psycho-social effects of societal influences on language use among ESL users of English. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between societal influences, language use, and socio-psychological outcomes among ESL users.

The findings indicate that ESL users experience language anxiety, self-doubt, and decreased motivation to use English as a result of societal pressures. These findings underscore the importance of promoting and supporting ESL users' communicative competence.

The study highlights the need for multilingual communities to prioritize effective communication over grammatical correctness and to promote positive language attitudes that foster social cohesion.

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