

**Desire, freedom, and pain in English learners' emotional responses to SLA:
A holistic look at English learners' multilingual identity construction**

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2020.02.10>

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Abstract

The paper examines Hungarian English majors' emotional and identity responses to second language acquisition (SLA) and proposes that the two are inherently linked. The theoretical underpinnings of the study draw on the holistic post-structuralist approach that looks at learners in their entirety and complexity (Kramsch 2009) and language learning as an embodied experience (Damasio 1994) that can be more or less transformative for the learner. The participants' multilingual identities are mapped in terms of desire (Kristeva 1980) and pain (Lacan 1977) in SLA, imagination (Anderson 1983), symbolic language use (Kramsch 2009), and conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). The paper is based on a multiple case study that involved 31 English majors as participants from the University of Pécs, in Hungary. Data were collected via a structured written task that contained three open-ended questions about the participants' language learning experiences and preferences. The questions addressed the participants' emotional and identity responses to SLA. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis in an iterative manner. The findings confirmed that language learners respond emotionally to language learning and these emotional responses shed light on their identities associated with SLA. The magnitude of the learner's transformation resulting from SLA corresponds to the magnitude of their emotional responses, shaping their multilingual identity accordingly. Emotions were frequently captured with the help of metaphors as a result of conceptual blending. Three recurring emotional responses emerged from the data addressing the experience of desire, pain, and freedom associated with English learning.

Keywords: *identity, emotions, post-structuralist research, imagination, desire in SLA, symbolic pain, conceptual blending*

Introduction

Traditionally, studies in English applied linguistics have often examined aspects of second language acquisition (SLA) or those of the second language (L2) learner in isolation (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope 1986, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels 1998, Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand 2000). This approach often entailed the application of quantitative research. There is vast literature on research methodology used in the field of applied linguistics (Creswell 2003, 2007, Dörnyei 2007, 2010, Griffee 2012, Hammersley 2013, Mackey & Gass 2012, Nunan & Bailey 2009). In essence, quantitative research has always been a scientifically accepted research method due to its rigorous research design involving the testing of hypotheses with the help of variables and statistical procedures that make sense of numerical data provided by a large number of respondents (approximately 100-1000). The results of such analyses are generalizable and often representative of a greater population describing the phenomena under study in a scientific manner. However, these results do not shed light on why and how such phenomena have arisen and cannot explain subtle details. Such approach does not consider a single individual's case, but the average of the answers provided by many respondents. Quantitative studies yield generalizable results in an effort to facilitate L2 teaching and learning, often, without considering the interconnectedness of learner factors and the environment.

Besides quantitative research, qualitative research has been gaining acceptance and momentum in the new millennium. In contrast with quantitative research, qualitative research, particularly case study research, focuses on special cases that cast light on subtle details explaining why and how phenomena have emerged. Consequently, the results of such research designs are rarely generalizable to a greater population but rather specific and unique to the participants. Instead of using a rigorous research design involving variables and statistical procedures, qualitative research methods rely on an interpretive approach making sense of textual data in an iterative fashion. Many researchers find the two methods incompatible and exclusive. However, I believe the two methods can be reconciled with the help of mixed methods that can offset the disadvantages of one method and provide benefits where the other method cannot (Fekete 2018, 2019).

With the spread of qualitative research, applied linguists have started to take a holistic and complex look at language learners and their learning experiences that are situated in a specific environment. Therefore, three holistic approaches have been adopted in the field of applied linguistics. **Language ecology** (Cao 2011, Fekete in press, Kasbi & Shirvan 2017, Steffensen & Kramsch 2017) focuses on the interaction between the learner, the L2, and the learning environment considering the learner's past and present experiences along with their future goals and desires. **Complexity theory** (de Bot 2017, Dörnyei 2017, Fekete 2018, Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2017, Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008) regards learners, teachers, the language, and the environment as complex dynamic systems that keep interacting with one another, leading to emergent phenomena. **The post-structuralist approach** (Kramsch 2009, Kristeva 1980, Norton 2013) deems the users of the language inseparable from the language and proposes that SLA involves the whole being of the learner involving their brain, mind, and body, resulting in emotional and identity responses.

The study seeks to fill a theoretical gap by adopting a holistic perspective that does not separate learners from the language they learn or from the environment in which they learn the language. This holistic view also necessitates the application of qualitative research drawing on a case-study design. Therefore, the theoretical foundations of the study rely on the post-structuralist approach taking a holistic look at language learners' experiences with SLA. In this view, success in SLA is not measured in terms of proficiency level or linguistic knowledge but in terms of the linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural transformation experienced by the learner (Kramch 2009). In other words, SLA is construed as a life-changing experience.

Therefore, when talking about in what ways L2 learning has shaped and transformed their lives, language learners respond emotionally. These emotional responses, based on imagined and real-life experiences, provide insights into their identities associated with SLA. Although learners' inwardly generated identity is often imagined, it becomes real when it results from their real experiences and when it guides their emotions, attitudes, and behaviour (Kramsch 2009). Consequently, the study proposes that emotions, imagination, and identity construction are inherently linked and thus constantly feed into one another. It is also argued that metaphorical language use by language learners, drawing on conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), indicates strong emotional involvement in SLA, and, as a result, a stronger identity response to language learning.

As for the structure of the paper, the theoretical background presents the post-structuralist approach taken by the study involving the discussion of becoming a *multilingual subject (MLS)* via L2 learning, *symbolic language use*, the experience of *desire* and *pain in SLA*, *the embodied nature of language learning*, and *conceptual blending* inherent in creative and metaphorical thinking. The literature review is followed by the presentation of the research background. In the Discussion section, I answer the research question regarding the participants' emotional and identity responses to SLA. Finally, the main findings of the study are summed up and conclusions are presented based on these findings.

Theoretical background

The post-structuralist view of SLA

Language learning may be perceived not as successful or unsuccessful in relation to language attainment or language proficiency level but as an experience that is more or less meaningfully lived by the learner and which may be more or less transformative for the learner (Kramsch 2009). Kramsch (2009) argues that to understand learners and their learning processes is to understand their idiosyncratic meaning-making processes, their subjective and creative associations, and their resonances related to learning an L2. Language learning triggers emotional responses in learners constructing their feelings, fantasies, desires, beliefs, fears, or attitudes towards learning and using the new language, making SLA an embodied experience that involves the whole being of learners.

Concerning the psychology of L2 learners, drawing on Neisser's (1988) different Selves, Kramsch (2009) coined the term *Reflexive Self* that is conscious of the other Selves, the outside world, and its experience of the outside world, allowing for the Self to reflect on these experiences, including SLA. The *Conceptual Self* has a concept about the individual in a familiar world, for example, my Conceptual Self knows that I am Hungarian, I am a woman, and I am a researcher. In the same vein, L2 learners have various concepts about themselves. Thereby, drawing on these Selves, L2 learners can meaningfully reflect on themselves and their learning experiences, shedding light on their linguistic identities constructed in the process of SLA.

Moreover, Kramsch (2009: 6-7) views **language learning as a symbolic activity** and language learners as multilingual subjects. *Multilingual subject* is understood as an individual speaking more than one language whose identity is constantly shaped and constructed in and via language and in interactions with other people. Being *multilingual* in the study is, therefore, construed in terms of knowledge of any number of languages besides the mother tongue irrespective of proficiency level and the context of learning. Consequently, success in language learning is not measured in terms of proficiency level but in terms of the transformation experienced by learners in the process of SLA.

Kramsch (2009) explains that there are **two types of symbolic language use** drawn on by L2 learners. First, language use is symbolic because language is made up of a set of symbols that represent the social and psychological reality of a speech community agreed upon by social convention. Language learners utilize the new language in a symbolic way by using the language as a system of symbols conforming to linguistic and cultural conventions agreed upon by a speech community. Thereby, they are granted symbolic power to enter a historical speech community and become an accepted member in that particular community.

By speaking a new language, MLSs may have ideas and thoughts they have never had before. Nevertheless, having to conform to linguistic and cultural rules may limit the realm of the sayable in the new language. Due to this type of symbolic language use, **language and culture are inseparable** and, therefore, the two are interwoven in the process of SLA (Kramsch 1998, 2009). Risager (2005), for example, puts forth the concept of *langaculture* pointing out the interconnectedness of language and culture on different levels. When addressing the intertwined nature of language and culture, I refer to the process of learning pragmatic and connotative meanings in the target language prescribed by linguistic and social conventions that go beyond grammatical accuracy and the denotative meaning of words.

The second type of symbolic language use by learners lies in the foreignness of the new language, which enables MLSs to find unconventional and subjective meanings they associate the language with that may not conform to the way native speakers (NSs) make meaning (Kramsch 2009: 6-7). This duality permits MLSs to get closer to and distance themselves from the L2 at the same time. These are idiosyncratic meaning-making practices that trigger emotional responses in language learners, which are

manifest in their reflections on the learning experience providing insights into their linguistic identities. These reflections of the participants provide the qualitative data for the study. The terms '*linguistic identity*' and '*multilingual identity*' are used synonymously and interchangeably in the paper referring to language learners' identity construction in the process of SLA.

Imagination and imagined communities

Imagination plays a fundamental role in the process of becoming a MLS, as L2 learners use their imagination to create their subjective and unconventional resonances and emotional responses to L2 learning that construct their multilingual identity. Learners' inwardly generated identity is often imagined but it becomes real when it guides and orients their thoughts, emotions, feelings, attitudes, and their behaviour when using the L2 (Kramsch 2009: 17). Learners' identity is linked to their identification with other L2 speakers or groups of L2 speakers. In identifying with certain L2 speakers or groups of L2 speakers, learners draw on their imagination because they cannot get to know all L2 speakers; thus, they generate an image about them in their head. This way they live in an *imagined community* (Anderson 1983: 48) of English speakers.

An extended version of Anderson's imagined community is a *community of practice* (Wenger 2000) that individuals strive to be part of. For example, some English learners seek entrance to the imagined communities of English majors, English teachers, or native British or American speakers. Language learners' inwardly created identity is often imagined but it becomes fathomable and palpable in their utterances, actions, and feelings. L2 learners' identity construction may be explored by mapping into their emotional and symbolic language use, which constitutes the focus of the study.

Desire and pain in language learning

In the field of semiotics, Kristeva (1980: 23-35) proposed that language is much more than a social code embedded in the structure of the language, because such an approach separates the language from the speaker; therefore, she focuses on how the speaking subject uses the language, making language and the speaking subject inseparable. On the other hand, learning the native language is a painful activity, according to Lacan, because the child learns the language of the Other along with a consciousness that comes with it: "one cannot even speak of a code without it already being the Other's code" (Lacan 1977: 683). Taking both Kristeva's and Lacan's views into consideration, the desire to identify with the Other in an effort to create one's own identity touches the core of who the individual is, and it creates a powerful desire for self-fulfillment in and through language (Kramsch 2009: 14).

Kramsch (2009: 14-25) adopted Kristeva's concept of desire in the context of SLA to denote **the learner's desire for self-fulfilment in and via learning an L2** by which the learner can create an **inwardly generated identity** drawing on imagination, fantasies, projections, and fears, as well as real life experiences with the L2 and the speakers of the L2. According to *the first type of desire*, learners learn the L2 to provide themselves with a new mode of (self-) expression from a repertoire of more than one language and thus can rid themselves of the linguistic, social, and cultural constraints of the L1, as language and culture are interwoven in language learning. The Other they wish to identify with may be a NS or a non-native speaker (NNS) of the L2, an imagined representation inspired by real people, or an imagined version of the learner. The desired Other is oftentimes the product of imagination, for learners may create an imagined community (Anderson 1983) or an imagined community of practice (Wenger 2000) with other L2 speakers.

In the case of *the second type of desire*, learners refuse to identify with the Other in and through the L2 and thus return to the meaning-making practices afforded by their familiar mother tongue. This happens owing to the transformative potential of language learning that poses a threat to the integrity of the learner's identity. Learners claiming that learning an L2 is simply giving different labels to things in

the world is indicative of the magnitude of the threat posed by the L2 on the learner's existing identity. The type and quality of learners' desire in language learning is in line with the transformation they have experienced in SLA. **The transformative potential of L2 learning** is evidenced by learner testimonies in the study.

Emotions in SLA

Emotions or affect, as it is often referred to in applied linguistics, has always been deemed an important field in SLA research, but how learners' emotions and their emotional responses are viewed has significantly changed as a result of neurobiological studies in the field of SLA. Examining **the neurobiological foundations of emotions**, Damasio (1994) pinpoints that both the mind and the body are linked to generating emotions and feelings. Emotions trigger neurobiological responses in the brain as well as physical reactions in the body. For instance, a threat is registered in the body when seeing a scary object, so the eyes visually register the threat and the body sends a signal to the brain that produces hormones (adrenaline or cortisol), which, then, results in further bodily reactions such as rapid heart rate, perspiration, and a readiness for fight or flight.

The same process is true for all emotions and feelings with variations in the strength of the neurobiological and physical response. In the process of SLA, learners are likely to experience a wide range of emotions such as anxiety or fear when taking an exam or not knowing how to say something in the target language, or happiness or pride when experiencing success in learning, or excitement or frustration when facing novelty in the new language, or shame, humiliation or resignation when experiencing failure or poor attainment in language learning. These emotions are registered both by the brain and the body of the learner. Similarly to everything else in life, language learning also generates emotional responses in individuals. Consequently, SLA is perceived as an **embodied experience** and the study of L2 learners' **emotional responses to SLA** provides insights into their learning processes and their identity construction associated with the L2. The embodied nature of language learning explains why the participants in the study responded emotionally when they were asked about their language learning experiences.

Blended space theory

Conceptual blending is a subjective and symbolic activity that all humans do. However, in the case of L2 learners conceptual blending is magnified by the use of more than language. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) elaborated on *blended space theory* arguing that the mind creates meaning drawing on three operations: identity, integration, and imagination in a complex, emergent, and dynamic way that most of the time takes place unconsciously (6-7). The integration of identity and difference takes place in the imaginative mind through brain simulation. Biologically, the mind is metaphorical and is capable of matching and aligning the elements of two domains or two mental spaces, but people are not aware of the imaginative work that such integration entails (p. 12). Conceptual integration of different domains is part of the way humans think and live to create new blended meanings that are the result of imaginative integration (389-391).

Since conceptual blending and metaphorical thought are part of our everyday life, it is highly intriguing how MLSs blend various domains, concepts, meanings, and mental spaces drawing on one or more languages to create new blended meanings in the process of becoming an MLS. Conceptual blending is in evidence in the data, because the participants blended elements of different domains in their L1 and L2 to create subjective meanings (symbolic language use type 2) that subvert conventional symbolic language use (type 1).

Methodology

Aim and context of study

The aim of the study is to **explore Hungarian English majors' emotional and identity responses to SLA** drawing on the **holistic post-structuralist approach** elaborated on in the theoretical overview.

Research questions

In this study, I seek an answer to the following research question:
What characterizes the participants' emotional responses to English learning that construct their multilingual identities?

Participants

This inquiry is part of a big **classroom research project** (Fekete 2018) involving first-year English majors studying at the University of Pécs (UP), in Hungary. The participants came from three Listening and Speaking Skills II courses that I taught at UP. Out of the total 42 students, 31 completed the assignment generating data for the research. The only criterion for selecting participants was at least intermediate proficiency level in English besides the mother tongue, which enabled students to reflect on their experiences in English. Being English majors at university, the participants' language proficiency ranged from intermediate to advanced level (based on the university's admission requirements and my expert opinion), making them multilingual in the context of the term used in the study. Speaking languages in addition to English and the mother tongue was not required; however, some students had learnt additional languages. I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity.

As for the gender ratio of the participants, 23 students were females and nine were males. The participants' gender and linguistic knowledge are not considered as separate factors, because the study does not focus on emotions and identity in relation to linguistic knowledge or gender; instead, it takes a holistic approach to scrutinize how transformative language learning is in learners' life and how meaningfully it is lived by them, triggering emotional and identity responses in the participants.

As for the participants' nationality and mother tongue, all but three undergraduates were Hungarian citizens speaking Hungarian as their mother tongue. One student, Brandon was a Hungarian and U.S. citizen who had lived the first ten years of his life in the U.S.A. before moving to Hungary. His parents were Hungarians who had immigrated to the U.S. before he was born. The other non-Hungarian student, Hyun came from South-Korea and spent only one semester at UP as an ERASMUS student. The third student, Samir came from Libya and was a full-time student at UP.

Data collection instrument

The research instrument used to gather data for this inquiry was a **structured writing task** including three open-ended questions that the students answered in writing. The instrument contained in the Appendix served two purposes: 1) it was a home assignment for students to improve their English language skills at C1 level and to provide a meaningful context for an in-class discussion, and 2) it served as a data source for my research. The three open-ended questions addressed the respondents' emotional and identity responses to L2 learning. The inquiry relied on a **bottom-up approach**, because the **emerging patterns** in the data provided the rationale for the holistic approach employed in the study.

Procedures

In the framework of the structured writing task, the participants were invited to answer three written questions at home as a home assignment. The task was clarified to students in the seminar, and they were sent a word document containing instructions and the three questions (see Appendix) in an email.

They were kindly asked to answer the questions in writing and send their answers back to me via email or bring their answers to the next seminar. The questions addressed in the home assignment were further elaborated on in class to improve the participants' speaking skills and to raise their awareness of their multilingual identities.

Research methods

Holistic approaches to identity research tend to employ qualitative research methods to explore the subtleties of the construct on a small scale (Fekete 2016 in press, Kramsch 2009, Norton 2013, Pavlenko 2003). Qualitative research seeks to reveal why and how a phenomenon has arisen and explores the subjective and subtle aspects of the issue under scrutiny drawing on special cases rather than variables and averages in an iterative manner (Dörnyei 2007: 39-41). This study is a qualitative inquiry drawing on textual data gathered with the help of a structured writing task. The data were analysed in an iterative manner using **qualitative content analysis** to seek **emerging patterns** and **uniqueness** in the data. This bottom-up approach led to the inclusion of multiple disciplines and perspectives in the study.

For the qualitative research design, I chose case study research and involved over 30 students in the study, which is a relatively large number in qualitative research. The participants were treated as special cases providing unique and idiosyncratic data; therefore, the study qualifies as a **multiple case study** (Creswell 2007: 74) that addresses a central subject matter drawing on several cases. The study is also **classroom research** and **action research**, since it was conducted in the classroom and the person implementing the research and the teacher teaching the three courses were one and the same person (Nunan & Bailey 2009: 226). With action research the researcher-teacher fulfilled two goals: 1) she conducted research to ameliorate her teaching practice and make learning more meaningful and motivating to the students in her classes, and 2) she communicated her research findings to a wider audience by publishing her study in an international journal.

Results and discussion

Emotional responses to language learning

The results confirm the findings of neurobiological and applied linguistic studies pinpointing the embodied nature of SLA. Out of the 31 respondents, 23 students responded emotionally to the three questions in the structured writing task. **Three recurring themes** emerged in the datasets that are put under scrutiny in the study. The experience of **desire, freedom, and pain associated with SLA** turned out to be an immense emotional response. The data also revealed that powerful emotional experiences were frequently explicated using metaphors. **Metaphorical thought** results from **conceptual blending**. The feeling of freedom and pain was often described with the help of mixing or joining elements of different domains or blending the different connotative meanings of words drawing on two languages.

Desire for self-fulfilment in and via the second language

Conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner: 2002) may take place by joining or aligning an element of different fields or concepts to create new meanings using only one language. Language learners often employ this technique to describe their learning experience. These new meaning-making processes correspond to the second type of symbolic language use that subverts conventional meanings. The learners' such creative and unconventional processes reflect their desire for self-fulfilment in and via language. The findings revealed that strong emotional responses to SLA often resulted in metaphorical descriptions based on conceptual blending. Learning English triggered powerful emotional responses in three participants, which provides evidence for the magnitude of the transformation these language learners have experienced in the process SLA.

I have an English-myself, that was born when I started to learn the language and it developed and was getting stronger and stronger with every single English word I acquired.

(Italics in original) Sandra

I am different because I was born without this knowledge and I didn't use it. Jennifer

Sandra and Jennifer are conscious of their inwardly generated identity (Kramersch 2009) in and through English. Sandra proposes that her English Self was "born" when she started to learn English. She covertly refers to the metaphor of nurturing a baby into adulthood. Metaphorically speaking, English is a baby that needs to be fed by learning new words so that it can become a fully-fledged entity. In her account, Sandra blends two concepts when she compares nurturing a child to learning a new language. She uses the new signs as icons of reality, focusing on an analogy between the language and another concept (Kramersch 2009: 41). The analogy between nurturing a baby and nurturing English indexes a mother-child relationship between Sandra's Hungarian and English Self. The creation of an inwardly generated identity through the new language is analogous with the conception of a child. Similarly to Sandra, Jennifer draws on another powerful metaphor to address her English Self. She reflects on becoming more or gaining something new by means of learning English. The metaphor of self-growth is indicative of self-enhancement, which refers to the improvement of the Self through L2 learning (Kramersch 2009: 63-64).

Amanda compares the use of English to taking up a new persona and becoming another person.

I also feel different when I speak in another language than my mother tongue because I use different phrases and expressions that it feels like I'm not even Hungarian, I think differently, I sing Hungarian and English songs in a different way. Amanda

Amanda's account of her feelings describes a person who is in transition: moving away from being a monolingual Hungarian with thoughts and ideas afforded and limited by the mother tongue to becoming a multilingual speaker with novel ideas, experiences, and feelings provided by the L2. This stage also indexes a transition from convention-governed language use to the creation of unconventional meanings allowed by the use of more than one language.

These three learner testimonies provide **evidence for the transformative potential of language learning** (Kramersch 2009) and signal important changes in their multilingual identities resulting from SLA. The theme of self-enhancement via English is in line with Kramersch's (2009) findings, pointing out that the theme of self-growth is a major and recurring theme associated with SLA. It is also in evidence in the testimonies that **the mind is metaphorical** and relies on conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) in the area of language learning as well, generating emotionally powerful metaphors. Becoming a mother to a child, comparing English learning to raising a child, and taking up a new persona are thought-provoking metaphors that reflect the strength of the learner's **emotional involvement in SLA**. In the process of conceptual blending, learners rely on their imagination and emotions, which points out that the learner's **body and mind are equally involved in language learning** (Damasio 1994).

The three accounts pinpoint how transformative L2 learning can be and how meaningfully it may be lived by learners. The transformation experienced by learners derives from their **desire for self-fulfilment in and via English**. The new language provides spaces for them to liberate themselves from the linguistic and socio-cultural conventions and expectations of the first language. This may be a massive experience that can be accurately and meaningfully conveyed with the help of metaphors drawing on conceptual blending.

Traditionally, these three learners may not be regarded as most successful based on their linguistic knowledge with an English proficiency level of B2-C1. However, the post-structuralist view adopted by the study provides a holistic perspective to evaluate their success. Accordingly, they cannot be deemed moderately successful language learners if learning English has completely changed their lives.

Therefore, understanding **success in relation to the transformation experienced by learners**, which is a highly meaningful and emotional experience, can be a more meaningful measure of success in SLA.

The experience of freedom via language

Desire for freedom

Conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) may also be achieved when learners join, blend, or contrast the different connotations of words with the same denotative meaning in different languages to conceive novel and subjective meanings. These idiosyncratic meaning-making processes subvert linguistic and social convention governing meaning in one language and, therefore, create unconventional meanings that reflect the learner's desire for self-fulfilment, which, then, translates into their multilingual identities in and via the L2. Thereby, **subjective connotation becomes objective denotation** for the learner altering their reality via language (Kramsch 2009).

An important pattern of conceptual blending drawing on English and Hungarian emerged in the data. **A blended meaning of freedom** relying on the word's different connotative meanings in Hungarian and English was created by four students. Rosemary's account sheds light on how speaking English exempts her from the expectations imposed on her by Hungarian social, cultural, and linguistic conventions.

When I use English, I feel like I'm thinking differently. Maybe it's because of the fact that our culture, behaviour, attitude differ from one another. To be honest, I think I can express myself in English better. I can talk more freely, which gives me more confidence. When I am abroad and use English..., it feels like a fresh start. Rosemary

Rosemary's real or imagined ability to express her thoughts and ideas better in English does not result from her proficiency level or linguistic knowledge but from her unique and personalized experience of freedom that is based on her imagined and real-life experiences with English. In English, she does not feel limited by linguistic, social, and cultural conventions imbedded in the Hungarian language. The psychological experience of freedom is intensified by the physical experience of freedom when she stays in another country where English is used for communication. This is a heightened experience of freedom. Speaking English is perceived, by her, as **a liberating experience of self-fulfilment** via the L2. This finding strongly resonates with the desire of becoming another person via English, resulting in a metaphorical and emotional response to English learning.

Similarly to Rosemary, other students reported the feeling of being at ease when speaking English rather than Hungarian.

English is an easy language and most of the time I think in English because that is faster and easier. Jane

I often feel that it is more comfortable to use it [English] than Hungarian. Kailee

Well, sometimes I feel that I can express myself much more accurately in English than in my mother tongue. Donna

The liberating experience of speaking English perceived by Jane, Kailee, and Donna resonates with Rosemary's experience. The feeling of being at ease when speaking English may originate from the feeling of freedom generated by the imagined and real connotations of English cultural products associated with the language rather than native-like proficiency level in English. The preference for using English rather than the native language may lie in **the cultural connotations of English** that often evoke **freedom and economic opportunity** in English learners. Movies depicting some version of the American dream, as well as TV shows and sit coms showing easy-going and funny interactions, situations, and contexts convey linguistically and culturally the image of freedom. Therefore, the word freedom is often associated with the English language and English-speaking cultures. The ease of speaking in English for these learners may only be imagined based on the cultural connotations of English depicted in popular media rather than their linguistic knowledge of English being far from native-like.

Consequently, these learner accounts confirm that **language and culture are intertwined in SLA** (Kramsch 1998). The culture that is learnt by learners in and via the L2 may only be imagined based on cultural phenomena and cultural products. Learners rely on their imagination to make sense of culture and the imagined communities associated with that culture.

Desire to escape

The desire to learn a new language often results from **learners' desire to escape the linguistic and cultural constraints of their mother tongue** (Kramsch 2009, Kristeva 1980). Nonetheless, they often distance themselves from the L2 by creating their subjective meanings of and resonances about the L2. Kramsch (2009) puts forth that language learners can only own the L2 when they can distance themselves from it and find spaces to subvert conventions and conceive creative and subjective meanings that are idiosyncratic.

Donna uses English to escape the old world of her mother tongue and through the distance offered by English she distances herself from her problems experienced in Hungarian.

Well, I have a habit which is the following: when I feel that my head is full of crap (friendship-dramas, family-dramas or boyfriend-dramas) and I need to clear it, I often write all the stuff out of my head and it helps leave things behind or at least put them away for a short period of time. Well, sometimes I feel that I can express myself much more accurately in English than in my mother language. I just find more fitting expressions in English and it just comes to my mind in English, sometimes I cannot even find a word or phrase in Hungarian. Donna

Kramsch (2009) stresses that language learning is often motivated by the promise of escape from the constraints of the L1. Donna cannot physically escape her problems, but she can find refuge in using English, which provides sufficient distance for her from her problems in Hungarian. By distancing herself from them, she can look at her issues from the perspective of an outsider rather than from that of an insider. This is a liberating experience for her: "I feel that I can express myself much more accurately in English... I just find more fitting expressions in English ... I cannot even find a word or phrase in Hungarian." The powerful emotional response, merging the feeling of excitement, freedom, and exhilaration triggered by English, is in evidence in the reiteration of the experience. Donna draws on conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) by creating a **hybrid meaning of freedom** for herself: she frees herself from her problems (Hungarian meaning of 'freedom'); nevertheless, she uses English instead of Hungarian to do so (drawing on the English meaning of freedom).

Owing to the tormented history of Hungary the cultural connotation of freedom in Hungarian often refers to freedom from restraint or being free from domination. By contrast, due to the global spread of cultural products advertising freedom and opportunity, the cultural connotation of freedom in English has become freedom to act, do, or become something/somebody (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/freedom>). L2 learners oftentimes start blending the cultural connotations of words in their different languages whose dictionary meaning seems to be the same to create hybrid meanings for themselves. Others might replace the cultural connotation of a word in one language with that of another one in another language. For example, these Hungarian English learners might replace the Hungarian meaning of freedom (freedom from something) with the English meaning of freedom (freedom to do something); thus, cultural connotation becomes denotation and the subjective becomes the objective reality. The participants' feeling of freedom associated with the feeling of being at ease or the ability to talk and think faster also comes from their conceptual blending of the cultural connotations of English and Hungarian rather than their linguistic knowledge of English that does not compare to their mother tongue.

Symbolic pain in SLA

The experience of pain in SLA

On the other end of the emotional continuum, the symbolic pain of learning the language of the Other that comes with a foreign consciousness (Lacan 1977) is evidenced by the following testimonies. The painful process of SLA can be manifest in **physical, psychological, or symbolic pain** that needs to be alleviated by the learner.

The other activity when I prefer my second language is writing my diary or just putting my thoughts and ideas on a piece of paper. Sometimes it is painful to recognize your mistakes, but if you admit them in a different language: they are not your sins anymore. You confess them and do not at the same time, and it gives you relief. (Italics in original) Sandra

According to the transmission model of language (Graddol 1994), written and print medium focuses on form (grammar) and information (lexical structures) that can be analysed and taught. Once they are learnt, the learner is capable of communicating in the new language relying on the referential meanings of words. Foreign language teaching and learning often prioritize this model over the social model that emphasizes communication and dialogue to make meaning by using the L2. Sandra, who is a high achiever and a perfectionist in English classes (my own observations and personal communication with the student), believes in this model because it offers attainable boundaries of the learning process, promising a predictable future in the unpredictable and volatile process of language learning which seems so dreadful to her. Sandra's pain of speaking English that belongs to other people (Lacan 1977) is heightened by the fear of an unpredictable future. Freeing herself from the constraints of form and referential meanings can only take place privately and creatively through writing a diary when she is not obligated to meet the requirements of educational institutions and gate-keeping mechanisms (Kramsch 2009: 156-7). Sandra's testimony is immensely emotional in tone, the genre of her narrative is similar to a religious confession in which she privately confesses her linguistic sins, causing her symbolic body immense symbolic pain, and then she receives redemption, in return.

Sandra's strategy for self-expression and the creation of her symbolic Self when speaking English is identical to the strategy that she applies in writing.

I have a strange habit; I love talking to myself. If I do it in Hungarian, it sounds a bit crazy. But if I communicate with myself in English, it is like talking to another person. I really love speaking in English, but I am terribly afraid of making mistakes in public, so this is the solution for this problem too. (Italics in original) Sandra

By talking to herself, she can evade meeting the conventions of the L2 as set by the transmission model of language. Talking to herself is the spoken version of writing a diary: a private and creative way of self-expression that is free of constraints enforced by rules and gatekeepers.

In the same vein, Emma's testimony provides clear evidence for the **struggle** between the learner's obligation to conform to conventions and their desire to break away from them in an effort to create subjective meanings for themselves.

[Native speakers] understand their mother tongue through my knowledge. When I use English, I have this feeling that I have another person deep inside that we make the sentences not only me. Because I have to think about English sentences to convert from Hungarian. Even if my speech becomes a little Hunglish, I feel the same with a smile on my face. Emma

Emma confirms that she has gained symbolic access to a speech community of native English speakers by conforming to the linguistic and cultural norms agreed upon by the community. However, having to conform to conventions restricts the sphere of the sayable. The mutual understanding between NSs and L2 learners lies in the misconception that by speaking the common tongue we mean the same. This is a fallacious ratiocination for several reasons. Since language and culture go hand in hand with each other

(Kramersch 1998), learning English in an English-speaking culture is not the same as learning English in a Hungarian-speaking culture. Language is a product of culture because it expresses the cultural reality as agreed by a speech community (Kramersch 1998). Finally, the subjective meanings that language learners attach to the L2 are unconventional from the perspective of native speakers (Kramersch 2009). Precisely due to the freedom rendered by the second type of symbolic language use, Emma is allowed to break away from linguistic conventions and become “Hunglish” even if it should be disapproved of by native English speakers. The struggle between what Emma is expected to do and what she can or would prefer to do is indicated in her statements “I have another person deep inside” and “even if my speech becomes a little Hunglish, I feel the same”. It is impossible, however, for her to “feel the same” because she is learning the language of the Other (Lacan 1977). The language can only be hers if she can access the symbolic order where she can find a space to subvert the tradition and create her own meanings associated with the language (Kramersch 2009: 101). In other words, she can only gain ownership of English by distancing herself from the language through symbolic forms.

In Janet's statement the duality of positive and negative emotions is detectable. The pain of speaking the Other's language and the transformative potential of SLA may be seen as both terrifying and painful.

I act differently when I'm talking in English.... I get more open with people when I am talking in English, but I feel more like myself when I speak in Hungarian. Janet

When I speak Hungarian, I am not so patient but it's different in English because I have to pay attention to my pronunciation and that helps me to [speak] a bit slower and be more patient with the people I talk to. Rachel

Due to the foreignness of English and her limited proficiency level in English, Rachel has to monitor what she says and how when she speaks a language that belongs to other people. She even enforces a different behaviour on herself when she speaks English owing to the foreignness of the new language as well as due to the monitoring activity she performs. Using the new language requires her to work more if she is to express her ideas and thoughts in English. Janet and Rachel both feel impeded in their self-expression and limited by the new language that they do not yet fully own. Therefore, their **desire for self-fulfilment takes places** not via the L2 but **via the familiar mother tongue**.

Emotions and pain in SLA

In contrast with the learner testimonies discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3, learner accounts in 4.4 threw light on how freedom may be experienced in and via the mother tongue instead of the L2. However, **symbolic pain can become emotional pain** because language learning is an embodied experience. The use of the L2 may seem a rather painful experience when it comes to the expression of emotions in intimate situations. The expression of intimate feelings may have little to do with the linguistic knowledge of emotional phrases but rather with the novelty and the transformative potential of the L2. Words and phrases expressing romantic and affectionate feelings have different meanings and are contextualized differently in different languages. This may be an uncharted and thus unsafe territory for L2 learners trying to voice their intimate emotions. Therefore, returning to familiar meaning-making practices in the native language in the domain of emotions may be preferred, as it was the case in the accounts of two learners.

I spent two weeks in England and I got to know a boy. We talked a lot and spent that time together. On the last day he said to me that he really liked me and if he had been able to, he wouldn't have hesitated to come with me. I liked him too or maybe it was more than a like. I tried to express clearly my feelings but I didn't find the best words. That was the time when I realized that from my point of view exists a limit which you get over by learning. I really like to tell my boyfriend about my feelings. And I can't imagine that I would do it in another language. Estela

I feel like I cannot express my anger in a second or third language, so if I get into a fight, I will probably use Berber curses... If I am in an intimate moment, I will not be using English or Arabic, I do not know why! It just does not sound right. Samir

Primary emotions (Damasio 1994), such as love, happiness, or anger, are deeply rooted in Estela and Samir and they are strongly linked to their first language socialization and enculturation and thus to their first language cultural and linguistic identity. Therefore, novel and uncharted meanings conveyed by the L2 or the L3 are perceived as threatening and unsafe by learners. The feeling of insecurity may be magnified in intimate situations in which individuals may see themselves as vulnerable. Returning to the emotional and linguistic comfort zone of the mother tongue can evade the threat.

Summary of findings

In this inquiry, I presented the special and unique cases of some of the students who participated in the research. Their reflections on their English learning experiences and preferences pointed out their **intensive emotional involvement in SLA** and their **symbolic language use** that enabled them to create their own subjective and unconventional meanings associated with English learning. The participants' emotional responses to English learning confirm the embodied nature of SLA, which can be manifest in their attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, and thoughts.

Three recurring emotional themes emerged in the data: the experience of desire, freedom, and pain associated with English learning. The data pointed out that the participants experienced **powerful emotional responses to learning and speaking English**, which reflected their **desire to achieve self-fulfilment in and via English** (Kristeva 1980). Most participants embraced and exploited the **transformative potential of English learning**, which shaped their **multilingual identity** accordingly.

The second theme was the **reinterpretation of the meaning of freedom** by learners in and via English. Freedom was associated with the ease of speaking and thinking in English triggered by the promise of self-fulfilment in and via English. The hybrid meaning of freedom conceived by learners was associated with the **cultural connotations** of the word in English and in Hungarian **based on the learners' imagination**.

Conceptual blending applied by the participants was a way of creating subjective meanings in English to subvert linguistic and cultural convention. Conceptual blending, therefore, marked the second type of symbolic language use by the participants. These creative meaning-making processes allowed them to **alter their subjective reality**, which, then, was transformed into objective reality in the form of utterances, thoughts, and actions.

Finally, the third theme touched upon the experience of **pain in SLA**. Symbolic pain as a theme emerged in relation to the struggle for subjective meanings and self-expression via English. Pain, therefore, was also linked to the second type of 'desire' (Kramsch 2009). **Emotional pain** emerged in connection with the expression of private emotions in intimate situations. Such emotions constituting the core of the learner were threatened by the novel meaning-making practices of English, resulting in a preference for using the mother tongue in intimate situations.

Conclusions

The findings of the study pointed out the **validity and the feasibility of the holistic approach** in the study of language learners and their learning experiences afforded by the **post-structuralist approach**. Looking at language learners and their learning processes in their complexity and entirety, this approach is suitable for mapping into language learners' emotional and identity responses in the process of SLA.

The findings also pinpoint how **SLA is an inherently emotional experience** involving the brain, the mind, and the body of the learner. Consequently, **language learners' emotional responses are**

inherently linked to their linguistic identity construction; thus, the two are intertwined and should be examined together.

It also became unequivocal in the study that the novelty of English learning is tackled, by learners, drawing on their **imagination** and their subjective resonances to the new language, as well as their real-life experiences. Consequently, emotions and feelings associated with the L2 are also inherently linked to imagination, creativity, and metaphorical thinking based on conceptual blending. Therefore, making sense of learners' **language learning metaphors** associated with their emotional responses to SLA taps into their **linguistic identity construction**.

The use of metaphors by learners to describe their experiences with English is indicative of the transformation they have experienced in the process of SLA. This transformation is accompanied by emotional responses to SLA that further shape learners' identities in and via language. Conceptual blending taking the form of metaphorical language use relies on the **interconnectedness of language and culture in SLA**. In the process of conceptual blending language learners draw on the **cultural connotations and cultural associations of the L2** to create **unconventional or hybrid meanings that subvert linguistic and social conventions**. This process corresponds to their desire for self-fulfilment in and via the L2.

Regarding the **theoretical gap** the study sought to address, the post-structuralist view of language learning focusing on the transformative potential of SLA does not categorize learners as good or bad learners, or successful or unsuccessful learners, or motivated or unmotivated learners. These adjectives only scratch the surface of what is really going on in learners in the process of SLA. An in-depth understanding of these processes and experiences requires a holistic view that is very much advocated by the post-structuralist approach that places learners' identity construction in the centre of scrutiny. Since identity construction fuelled by emotions is constantly changing and volatile, it is in constant interaction with other learner characteristics such as motivation, willingness-to communicate in English, or anxiety, as well as environmental factors. The interactional and dialogic relationship between the learner, the language, and the environment inherently **links traditional SLA research to holistic identity research**.

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Appendix

STRUCTURED WRITING TASK

Dear Students,

Please answer the following three questions in as many words as you like. Having done so, please bring this sheet to the next class or send it back to me via email. Your answers will be treated confidentially. Thank you!

1. Some people feel they are different persons when they use their various languages. Can you reflect on your experiences? How are you a different person using your various languages?
2. Please tell me about situations in which you felt more comfortable using your second or third language rather than your mother tongue. Explain why.
3. Will you please recall situations when you felt you could not fully express something in your second or third language as well as in your mother tongue? Why?