# Ecolinguistics as a Framework for Understanding the Role of Learners' Identity and Agency in Foreign Language Acquisition

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**Abstract.** This paper proposes the application of ecolinguistics as a conceptual framework for understanding the role of learners' identity and agency in foreign language acquisition. Rooted in the ecological view that language, identity, and learning environments are interconnected, the study uses theoretical synthesis and critical analysis to examine how learners negotiate meaning, reposition themselves socially, and construct dynamic identities within multilingual and globalised contexts. Integrating perspectives from language ecology as well as theories on identity and agency, the research highlights how learners' investments, aspirations, and self-regulatory practices are shaped by sociocultural and institutional ecosystems. Adapting an ecolinguistic lens reveals foreign language acquisition as a socially mediated, transformative process in which learners exercise symbolic power, resist imposed roles, and co-construct linguistic and professional identities. The paper proposes an ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition, illustrated in a diagram, demonstrating how identity, agency, languaging, and ecological environments interact to shape foreign language acquisition.

**Keywords:** ecolinguistics; symbolic power; foreign language acquisition; learners' identity; learners' agency.

## Introduction

The link between language acquisition, identity, and agency has been examined profusely in academic circles (Lantolf, Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko, Blackledge, 2004; Norton, McKinney, 2010; Duff, 2012; Darvin, Norton, 2015). Still, most models fail to capture the intricate, evolving interrelation of ecological contexts and foreign language learners. Based on Haugen's (1972) concept of language ecology, ecolinguistics offers potential in this area. Studies have emphasized the role of identity and agency in foreign language acquisition (Norton, 2000; Norton, McKinney, 2010; Duff, 2012; Darvin, Norton, 2015), as well as the impact of globalisation on foreign language acquisition (Block,

Cameron, 2002; Kramsch, Whiteside, 2008). Yet attempts to establish a meaningful link between the afore-mentioned aspects and ecolinguistics are still lacking.

With this in mind, the article aims to apply the concept of ecolinguistics to foreign language acquisition, delving deeper into understanding the role of foreign language learners' identities and agency in the acquisition of foreign languages. The research employs the synthesis of theories and a critical review of literature from the relevant domains including works in ecolinguistics (Haugen, 1972; Steffensen, Fill, 2014; Fill, 2018), the identity of language learners (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, Blackledge, 2004; Block, 2003, 2007), agency (Bandura, 2001; Lantolf, Pavlenko, 2001; Darvin, Norton, 2015), and foreign language education (Swain, 2006; Dörnyei, Ushioda, 2011; Duff, 2012). Using the scholars' ideas surrounding identity negotiation and agency as foundational concepts, this work aims to advance understanding ecological perspectives on foreign language acquisition. By integrating foreign language learners into the framework, this work also fills the gap of "human dimension in current ecolinguistics", which Zhou (2021, p. 463) describes as yet "underestimated and unexplored" in the field.

The primary objective of this paper is to employ ecolinguistics as both a theoretical and methodological framework in exploring the identity and agency of foreign language learners, whose language acquisition journey and proficiency are influenced by their experiences across diverse educational and sociocultural contexts. To accomplish the goal, the following research tasks have been set forward:

- to trace the historical development and theoretical foundations of ecolinguistics both as a discipline and a potential perspective to be applied in foreign language acquisition;
- to establish how learners' investments, aspirations, and self-regulatory practices are enacted and influenced through their identity and agency within sociocultural and institutional ecologies;
- to investigate how educational institutions, viewed as ecosystems, shape and are shaped by learners' identities and agency;
- to propose an ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition;
- to analyse the implications for foreign language instruction and policy, proposing potential solutions to the identified issues.

By emphasising foreign language learners' active meaning-making, repositioning, and identity construction, this paper adds to a more holistic, process-discursive model of foreign language acquisition, particularly relevant in a world of increasing globalisation and multilingualism.

## 1. Research design and analytical framework

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology based on a combination of critical analysis and synthesis of relevant academic literature. Relevant sources were selected to address foreign language learners' agency and identity in language acquisition from the perspective of ecolinguistics. Attention was paid to ensure that the selection

would be substantive by giving priority to peer-reviewed journals featuring both older publications and works of more recent scholars emerging in the field.

The reviewed literature was examined through an ecolinguistic lens to discern patterns and major concepts that could be attributed to learners' identity, agency, symbolic power and social positioning. The ecological metaphor underpinning this critical analysis is centred on ideas of interconnectedness, dynamism, and co-construction of meaning. The findings were distilled into an integrated framework that represents the levels of flexibility and degrees of transformative processes at work in acquiring a foreign language.

This methodological approach is in line with the study's aim of framing foreign language acquisition not solely as an intellectual skill, but as a socially mediated and situated process in which learners exercise agency and negotiate identities. The attempt to address and solve the problem adds a new dimension to the research. It creates a synthesis model that considers macro-level sociopolitical and sociocultural factors and micro-level learner factors.

## 2. Ecolinguistics: the background

### 2.1 Historical evolution of ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics can be said to have roots in the work of Ernst Haeckel, who already in 1866 coined the term "ecology" to refer to the relation between organisms and their environment (Fill, 2018, p. 1). This view was later developed further by Tansley, who formulated the concept of "ecosystem" and stressed that organisms and their environments mutually influence one another (Tansley, 1935, p. 299). These were the forerunners to ecological thinking with regard to language.

The idea of "ecolinguistics" began to be popularised in the late 20th century. Fill (2018, p. 2) acknowledges that its early usage took place in the first half of the 20th century, when researchers such as Salzinger, Gobard, and Marcellesi started to discuss the interface between language and ecology, focusing on its social and psychological implications. Haugen, however, provided a seminal interpretation of language ecology in reference to which Cheng (2022, p. 188) cites it as "regarding the interactions between language and its environment". Haugen (1972, p. 325) proposed that language is moulded by the society that speaks it, providing the basis for what is now recognised as the Haugenian strand of ecolinguistics (Fill, 2018; Cheng, 2022, p. 188).

Another vein, the Hallidayan strand, carried into 1990 with Halliday's address at a conference, which, as Fill (2018, pp. 4–5) recounts, challenged linguists to examine how language "constitutes ecological reality" (ibid., p. 5). Halliday did not often use the word "ecological", but his treatment of grammar, discourse, and sustainability contributed to ecolinguistics (Halliday, 1990, p. 7). Ecolinguistics has since emerged as a transdisciplinary field. Finke (2018, p. 409) contends that its value is to encourage a cosmocentric view, where "everything is connected" (ibid.). Along the same lines, Scollon (2007, p. 15) shifts the attention from texts per se to the social activities they mediate.

Therefore, it can be argued that ecolinguistics is no longer a subfield – it has become a paradigm of the 21st-century discussions that takes into account the connection between language and society along with their constituent components.

## 2.2 Ecolinguistics in the 21st century

In the 21st century, ecolinguistics has developed within radical global shifts in perspectives on communication, migration, and identity. Indeed, while interconnectivity is on the rise worldwide, the complexity of linguistic ecologies is also increasing. Language, culture and identity have traditional boundaries that need reassessment, in a time of globalisation and the general increase of multilingualism. As a result, ecolinguistics today does not just concern itself with the natural environment and the socio-symbolic landscapes inherent in global dynamics, technological innovations, and linguistic differentiation.

One of the most significant linguistic changes of the global era has been the ascendancy of English as a *lingua franca*. As noted by Lukač-Zoranić and Fijuljanin (2013, p. 57). English is now a global language of communication that is deeply rooted in the fields of economics, diplomacy, education, and media. However, this linguistic domination has profound ecological implications. Even as English becomes a passport to global communication, it can be a key to linguistic erosion and pressure on minority languages.

The ramifications of this power dynamic in the ecolinguistic context of the 21st century are significant. For example, a graffiti quoted by Block and Cameron (2002, p. 7) – "If you dream in English, you are an international person" – demonstrates how contemporary cosmopolitan identity is tied to proficiency in English. In ecolinguistic terms, these are stories that are not just linguistic fashions; they are, rather, patterns of discourse or, as Stibbe (2015, p. 5) refers to them, "stories we live by." Thus, when a dominant language like English is associated with development and/or with contemporary identity, it also shapes language policy and usage and the imagined paths of its users' lives.

This symbolic authority of English is especially noticeable in Eastern Europe, where the post-Soviet era has seen a reorientation of the nations to the West. Pavlenko and Norton (2007, pp. 673–674) point out that English has rapidly gained value as a symbol of modernity and globalism. In Latvia, for instance, Druviete (2014, p. 85) notes that English, although not enshrined in law, has become a signifier of *European-ness* and the desire to join Europe – a symbol of European identity.

However, as the article further argues, identity is not static but inherently dynamic. In the context of the 21st century, it means that multilingual speakers navigate various socio-cultural contexts, which allows them to inhabit multiple symbolic spaces (Weedon, 1987; Kramsch, Whiteside, 2008, p. 664). This fluidity enables them to challenge monolingual ideologies and redefine the parameters of belonging in innovative ways. Such semiotic adaptability aligns with the principles of ecolinguistics, which advocate for the creation of alternative narratives that celebrate linguistic diversity and resilience in the face of dominant cultures (Stibbe, 2015). Consequently, it can be argued that English is not intrinsically hegemonic; instead, its ecological nature emerges from how well it integrates

into specific linguistic environments. When utilised to promote additive multilingualism and facilitate identity negotiation, English can empower foreign language learners and enhance their symbolic competence. However, when it marginalises other voices and dictates language choice, it can reinforce the very disparities that ecolinguistics seeks to overcome.

In conclusion, ecolinguistics in the 21st century faces new global realities of multilingual globalisation and English dominance. Most of the academic work so far, however, has emphasised the ecological concerns and discourse analysis, while neglecting the experiences and "stories" (Stibbe, 2015) of language learners and the symbolic struggles inherent in foreign language acquisition. This is an issue the present paper intends to address by taking the theory of ecolinguistics a step further and connecting it to foreign language learners' identity and agency as the two key factors influencing the process of foreign language acquisition.

## 3. Ecolinguistic perspective on foreign language acquisition

### 3.1 Language as a form of capital

A useful perspective for understanding how language serves as a tool of social power is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of cultural capital, whereby language is viewed as a form of symbolic power rather than merely a neutral medium of communication, with certain speech patterns denoting greater status and authority (ibid., p. 37). Since specific modes of expression pertain to elements of prestige and authority, individuals who master the language of the dominant class often gain social advantages, as their linguistic style is perceived as legitimate and authoritative (ibid.).

This approach is helpful in understanding why English has become the dominant language in the world, a kind of linguistic capital. Bourdieu (1991, p. 43) contends that the value of a language is not its structure, but the historical and political powers invested in its authority. With English having become the key to access to world education, business and scientific development, and the gate to economic and social mobility, Kaplan (2017, p. 95) notes that this mastery is a result of politics and not of the particular language.

In other words, language functions both as symbolic and economic capital. As Bourdieu (1991) contends, linguistic exchanges are inscribed within broader structures of inequality; therefore, competence in high-status tongues such as English may wield significant leverage. The next chapter discusses the conceptual ideas of identity approach to foreign language, dynamic systems theory, and *languaging*, that is, how individuals use language to develop identity and to negotiate social experiences.

### 3.2 Process of foreign language acquisition as an act of repositioning oneself

In the current context of the 21st century, foreign language acquisition can be framed in terms of active interaction and identity negotiation rather than passive absorption of

particular linguistic structures. Based on an ecological view of language acquisition, the foreign language learner should be situated as an active rather than a passive entity – a participant in a dynamic process of meaning-making. As worded by van Lier (2004, p. 6), learning takes place through constant interactions between the learner and their social, cultural and physical contexts, wherein this internal development is influenced by external affordances. This view is consistent with dynamic systems theory, which views language as an emergent phenomenon brought about by complex, adaptive dynamics rather than a product of sequential input and output (Ellis, 2007; van Geert, 2008).

Within this dynamic model, the process of *languaging* is put at the very heart of the matter. Swain introduced the notion of languaging as "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 96). *Languaging* is not just the product of communication; it is also how language is used to mediate thought, to think about ideas, and to make sense of the world. Accordingly, foreign language learners produce knowledge through *languaging* – they actively construct the knowledge and change their cognitive and social selves as they engage in *languaging*, whether through speaking, writing, or internal dialogue (ibid.). This process elucidates that identity construction is inherent to foreign language acquisition. In the words of Norton (2000, p. 5), every speaking act is a positioning act: an individual positions oneself in relation to others, to cultures, and to imagined futures.

Furthermore, the identity approach to foreign language acquisition (Norton and McKinney, 2010) emphasises that learning a language is not only a linguistic endeavour but also a social and emotional one. As Norton and McKinney (2010) highlight, learners engage in language acquisition to position themselves as having or gaining access to desired identities, communities, or material resources. From this perspective, *languaging* becomes a personal and strategic practice – an act of agency in the pursuit of belonging, equity, or transformation.

## 4. Foreign language learners' identity and agency through the lens of ecolinguistics

### 4.1 Becoming through language: the ecological interplay of identity and agency

Identity approach to foreign language learning provides valuable insights into nuances of learners' involvement in foreign language acquisition, regarding it not simply as a matter of mental or linguistic activity, but also as a profoundly social, emotional, and transformative process. As Norton and McKinney (2010, p. 73) suggest, language learning is related to learners' participation in various social practices, their alignment with different positions in social hierarchies, and the symbolic and material resources available to them. Identity in this framework is not a fixed category but rather a process that is continuously contested, negotiated, and performed through discourse and social practices.

The concept of identity is closely related to the notion of investment, a foundational principle of the identity approach to foreign language acquisition, addressing motivational issues as to why learners are willing to learn a new language. According to Norton and McKinney (2010, p. 75), the investment is based on learners' assumption that acquiring the target language is likely to provide them with access to desirable cultural, social, or economic capital. More specifically, learners invest in a language in order to join not only current communities but also imagined communities – the group of language users they wish to join, even if the community is nowhere near (Wenger, 1998; Norton, 2001; Lantolf, Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko, Norton, 2007; McKinney, 2010, p. 76). For example, learners' visions of being a part of future institutions of higher education, future careers, or life outside of their home country constitute their motivation and identity construction (Darvin, Norton, 2015, p. 39).

Agency, another cogent construct within foreign language acquisition regarding learners' capacity to make choices, navigate their learning ecosystem and directly pursue their goals (Duff, 2012, p. 417), enables learners to act on their aspirations. It indicates that they have control over choices, can take actions, and can shape their learning trajectories. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001, p. 148) describe agency as a sociogenetic capacity that is enacted in interaction, which is especially crucial for the context of foreign language acquisition as an interaction-based experience.

Together, identity and agency constitute how learners experience the process of foreign language acquisition. They shape learners' engagement, willingness to face challenges, and capacity to relate learning to their personal and professional aspirations.

## 4.2 Learner agency as situated ecological action

From an ecolinguistic perspective, learner agency is considered a locally emergent, dynamic capacity co-constructed through interaction with social, institutional and linguistic affordances. Instead of being a dispositional quality, agency is produced through learners' engagement with the opportunities and limitations of their ecosystem. As Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001, p. 148) note, agency does not simply emerge but is the result of participating in social practice where learners (re)negotiate meaning, motive or purpose and identity over time. Examples of specific actions in foreign language acquisition might be investing time and energy into certain language skills, resisting roles or ideologies that are forced upon an individual, and strategies applied to deal with learning in a personal way or according to one's ambitions and values (Huang, 2013, p. 71).

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 16) contend that learners' beliefs in their own efficacy are absolutely essential for fostering motivation, especially in the case of long-term language acquisition. As they argue, the conviction that one can make choices that affect how events play out in the world is at the very core of what it means to be an agent and exercise agency. Nevertheless, this process does not occur in isolation. Foreign language acquisition is grounded in layered ecologies, such as classrooms, peer networks, digital spaces, and imagined communities.

To conclude, in ecolinguistic terms, understanding how foreign language learners are (and want to be) represented involves shifting the focus from individual acts in isolation (or from alternative choices per se) to the broader systems in which those acts occur and recur. Therefore, seeing agency as an ecological process can give educators greater tools to support foreign language learners in both aspects of developing linguistic competence and enabling learners to become reflective, agency-driven individuals who can navigate or even change the multilingual world in which they live.

## 5. Educational institutions as ecological sites of representation

Ecolinguistics highlights that language functions within multiple interconnected ecologies (Steffensen, Fill, 2014, p. 7). These include symbolic ecology (the use of multiple symbolic systems), natural ecology (connections between language and environmental contexts), sociocultural ecology (the reciprocal relationship between language and social structures), and cognitive ecology (the interaction between language and cognitive processes) (ibid.).

Within educational insitutions, sociocultural ecology is particularly influential, since language shapes and is shaped by broader societal structures such as institutions, economies, and cultural frameworks (Steffensen, Fill, 2014, p. 12). Hökkä, Eteläpelto, and Rasku-Puttonen (2012, p. 85) assert that agency and social structures are deeply interwoven. Steffensen and Fill (2014, pp. 7, 13) contend that learners' identities and agency evolve through "affordances" – physical, social, and symbolic – present in their environment or ecosystem, which offer opportunities for engagement and action.

Addressing the impact of "social and institutional practices", Miller (2004, p. 295) refers to the notion of "local sites of representation," which Carrington and Luke (1997, p. 100) define as semi-autonomous, structured social spaces within which discourse and social activity occur. In them, identities are enacted, cultures and languages are given expression, and social incorporation or exclusion is practised (Miller, 2004, p. 295). Such contexts establish under what circumstances voices are heard or silenced, and individuals are included or excluded from social formations (Ibid.). As Miller (Ibid., pp. 290–297) points out, identity negotiation in these sites is deeply entangled with social and institutional norms that locate learners in certain positions - positions that some learners may accept, while others may work to resist.

In her research of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, who were also TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) students in higher education settings, Huang (2013, pp. 301–303) identified key factors shaping learners' self-identity and agency: perceptions of teacher-student relationships, learner motivation, challenges – both linguistic and contextual, and the influence of academic "subcultures". These subcultures encompassed exam-driven practices, institutional goal-oriented discourse, limited teacher autonomy, rigid administrative structures, and the development (or lack thereof) of student agency and autonomy (Ibid., pp. 251–305).

Although educational institutions are usually conceived as neutral sites of language acquisition, in an ecolinguistic sense, they participate in the production of symbolic power and linguistic hierarchies. Therefore, recognising educational institutions as multi-layered sociocultural ecologies provides important insights for developing more adaptable educational policies that enable sustainable and equitable educational practices.

## 6. Ecolinguistic framework for foreign language acquisition: implications for educational practice and policy

To integrate the discussed theory into practice, this paper puts forward an ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition, which portrays the learner as an active ecological agent nested in and influenced by several interrelated systems. As Figure 1 illustrates, at the core of the model are three interrelated central concepts: identity, agency and investment, all of which are mediated by *languaging* – a situated, emergent process of meaning-making and foreign language learners' identity construction through language.

These core dimensions are nested within two larger ecological ecosystems – symbolic ecology, which encompasses structures of power, including dominant ideologies such as the link between the target language, success, modernity, and power, and sociocultural ecology, which includes community norms, social networks, and institutional practices.
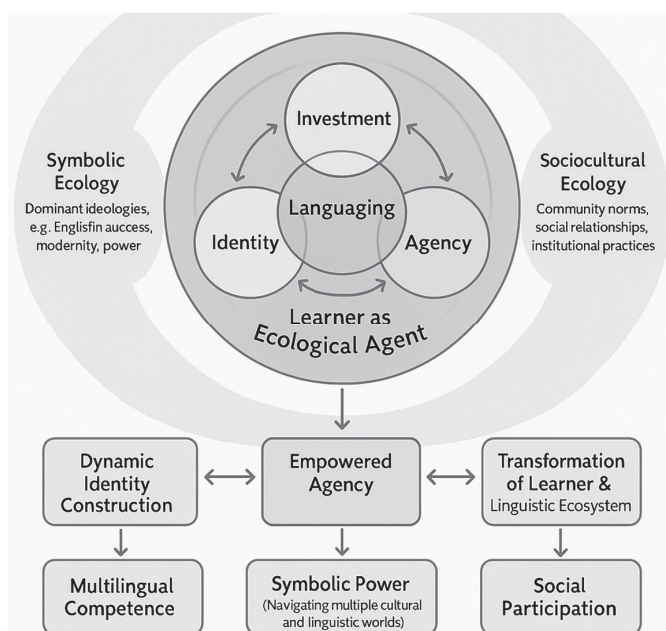


**Fig. 1.** An ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition[1]

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[1] Figure 1 produced with the help of *ClickUpBrain*.

The two-way arrows in the diagram emphasise the dynamic roles learners play in these ecologies. Through this ongoing ecological interaction, foreign language acquisition is likely to result in several transformative processes: dynamic identity construction, empowered agency, and the transformation of both the learner and the language ecology. The ultimate outcomes of this process are multilingual proficiency, symbolic power, and increased opportunities for social participation.

Such a framework recommends foreign language education that addresses the development of linguistic competence and nurtures the learner's ability to reflect on, resist, and transform the world. It urges educators to establish classrooms where these diverse and layered student identities are affirmed and given opportunities for authentic expression and identity work. In practice, this could include multilingual class materials, projects that permit students to interweave language acquisition with personal narratives, and co-authored work that allows learners to adopt identities as decision makers.

Moreover, foreign language instruction can achieve the goal of developing symbolic competence along with linguistic proficiency. In the modern era of globalisation, it is of special importance for learners to be trained on how to manage different cultures and communicative situations. For instance, an appropriate lesson could be conducted with respect to language ideologies and their relations with different power dynamics, thus enabling the learners to evaluate critically their use of language and their social roles.

In regard to policy-making, understanding learners as ecological agents emphasises the necessity to connect language acquisition with its application in social interactions, professional activities, and within the community that students aspire to join. It might involve affording students a range of ways into learning that corresponds to their end destination and assessment models that recognise and reward multilingualism and the language repertoires that students bring with them. For instance, language programs could provide students with specialised pathways that focus on the communicative competencies most pertinent to careers in academic research, international business, or community service. Some potential assessment methods include portfolios and presentations in several languages, as well as digital storytelling and community engagement projects, which assess translanguaging in authentic contexts.

The considerations outlined above are practical in nature and demonstrate how an ecolinguistic perspective can enhance foreign language acquisition while also providing viable solutions to the challenge of language education in a globalised, multilingual context. However, while the ecological view articulated in this paper provides a persuasive ideal of a more inclusive and equitable language education, it is important to acknowledge that the extent to which learners can use their agency is often dependent on other broader economic, cultural, and political conditions. Nonetheless, ecolinguistics provides a rich context for envisioning foreign language education in line with the principles of sustainability, equality, and social justice.

## Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to advance the understanding of ecolinguistics as a powerful yet still largely underutilised lens for exploring the process of foreign language acquisition, placing the role of learners' identity and agency at the heart of this process. By integrating ecological, sociocultural, and identity-focused theories, the paper has shown that language acquisition should not be framed simply as a linear cognitive process but rather as an ecologically, socially, and dynamically mediated process.

In combining ecolinguistics with the concepts of identity and agency, the study has elucidated how learners construe their own positioning, deploy symbolic power, and negotiate meaning across changing sociocultural and institutional ecologies. Agency and identity appear as mutually shaping and extremely context-relative, shaped by the institutions, the capital that is accessed and the aspirations of learners. Meanwhile, the notion of *languaging*, which is key to this process, explains how foreign language learners coconstruct their linguistic identities and futures through engagement with their ecosystems.

This matters in terms of the educational practice policy, since educational institutions and educators should not only focus on teaching certain skills but also make an effort to create learning environments that enable active identity formation, value multilingualism, and foster learners' sense and development of agency. In more practical terms, the proposed ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition encourages classroom practice that affirms students' diverse repertoires, offers spaces for translanguaging, and supports the development of reflective and critically aware language makers.

Importantly, this work also has implications for the field of ecolinguistics itself in that it tackles a shortcoming of the field – the human dimension. This paper highlights the importance of an approach to educational contexts where the lived experiences, aspirations, and identities of learners intersect with linguistic and symbolic power. Recognising learners as agentive, identity-driven participants who operate in ever-evolving language ecologies provides a more holistic comprehension of foreign language acquisition in the 21st century. From an ecolinguistic perspective, policymakers, educators, and researchers need to reconsider foreign language acquisition as a transformative and agentive process with real-life sociopolitical consequences. In doing so, the synthesis of the reviewed contributions in the field, along with the proposed ecolinguistic model of foreign language acquisition, can hopefully generate practical and pedagogical utility.

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