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Unlocking latent productive competence in adult second-language learners

1. Introduction

The discrepancy between passively acquired knowledge and active language skills has long been recognized as a persistent challenge for foreign language learners, rather than a recent phenomenon (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 2008). This has a significant impact on their communicative confidence and spontaneous language production. Despite many years of language study, which is often assumed to build solid receptive competence (Brown, 2000) but was not directly measured in the present study, a significant proportion of learners experience persistent difficulties in speaking and writing. This often results in what the present study conceptualizes as *latent productive competence*, whereby extensive linguistic knowledge remains difficult to access during spontaneous communication. This trend highlights the need to understand why accumulated language knowledge often fails to develop into effective communicative ability. Research in the field of second-language acquisition (SLA) increasingly suggests that the transition from receptive to productive proficiency is not automatic but rather the result of a complex interplay between cognitive, affective, biological, and social factors. Among these, communicative anxiety, fear of making mistakes, cognitive overload, and a lack of systematic productive practice play a particularly significant role.

The purpose of this study is:

- to identify, from adult second-language learners' self-reports, the affective, cognitive, and instructional factors they associate with persistent difficulties in productive language use despite extensive prior language study;

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- to examine, through inferential analysis of the survey data, whether these self-reported difficulties are associated with duration of study, self-assessed proficiency, and frequency of authentic language use; and
- to draw out, from learners' own perceptions of what would help them overcome these barriers, tentative pedagogical implications for supporting productive language use, to be tested directly in future research.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on the models of Krashen (1985), Ellis (2008), Swain (2005), and VanPatten and Williams (2015), which examine the interrelationship between language input, cognitive processing, and productive output.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the present study introduces the concept of *latent productive competence*. The term refers to a condition in which adult second-language learners are assumed to possess, on the basis of extended language study, substantial receptive knowledge that remains largely inaccessible during spontaneous language production. The findings suggest that this phenomenon is sustained through the interaction of three interrelated mechanisms: affective inhibition, insufficient opportunities for authentic language output, and perfectionism reinforced by traditional instructional practices. The concept is proposed as an analytical framework for interpreting the findings of the present study rather than as a replacement for existing models of second-language acquisition.

The concept of latent productive competence should be situated in relation to several established constructs rather than treated as an entirely new form of competence. It is distinct from the declarative-procedural distinction and the process of proceduralisation in skill acquisition (DeKeyser, 2020; Segalowitz, 2010), which concern the automatization of already-acquired knowledge through practice rather than its accessibility under affective load. It is also related to, but not equivalent to, the receptive-productive vocabulary gap documented in lexical studies (Nation, 2022; Webb, 2008; Barcroft, 2015), which addresses lexical-level asymmetries rather than the broader communicative blockage examined here. Models of L2 speech production that emphasize retrieval speed, formulation, and monitoring under time pressure (Kormos, 2006; Levelt, 1989) offer a complementary processing-level account, and executive-function accounts emphasizing inhibitory control (Dabóczy-Molnár, 2026) offer a related cognitive-control perspective on how retrieval and self-monitoring may be constrained under affective load, while affective-conative constructs such as foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998) capture the emotional and motivational dimension of the phenomenon, consistent with the broader tradition of individual-differences research in SLA (Dörnyei, 2005). Latent productive competence is therefore proposed not as a

replacement for these constructs but as a descriptive, integrative label for the specific empirical pattern examined in the present study: the co-occurrence of long-term receptive exposure, self-reported linguistic adequacy, and behavioural avoidance of production.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

This section proceeds in four steps. It first establishes the conceptual distinction between receptive and productive language skills that motivates the present study. It then reviews two classic, competing accounts of how learners move from reception to production – Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis and Swain’s (2005) Output Hypothesis – alongside cognitive-processing perspectives (Ellis, 2008; VanPatten-Williams, 2015). Building on this, it situates the present study’s construct of latent productive competence in relation to several distinct established constructs with which it might otherwise be conflated (declarative–procedural knowledge, receptive–productive vocabulary, L2 speech-production models, and affective-conative constructs), addressing directly why an additional integrative label is used rather than an existing one. Finally, it turns to more recent, quantitative syntheses of the affective and behavioural mechanisms – L2 anxiety and willingness to communicate – that the empirical study below investigates.

Within the fields of applied linguistics and second-language acquisition (SLA) theory, a distinction is made between receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) (Brown, 2000; Laufer–Goldstein, 2004). Although they are conceptually distinct, we can argue that there is a complex interrelationship between these two components. To achieve genuine communicative competence, a balance between them must be established. The comprehensive development of the four language skills requires the simultaneous integration of psycholinguistic and socio-emotional factors (Rose et al., 2018; Sreena–Ilankumaran, 2018).

Yilmaz and Kavanoz (2025) examine the relationship between receptive and productive skills through the lens of lexical knowledge. Their research shows a significant positive correlation between receptive and productive vocabulary and overall language proficiency. According to the authors, while the size of receptive vocabulary is a key component for successful reading and listening, productive vocabulary directly influences the ability to express oneself freely. For this reason, from a methodological perspective, there is a need for an integrated approach that combines reception with production as early as the reading instruction stage to ensure more effective progress for learners (Masduqi, 2016).

The transition from reception to production, however, remains one of the most debated issues in SLA. According to Krashen’s (1985) classic Input

Hypothesis, productive skills develop naturally on the basis of accumulated receptive experience. From this perspective, comprehensible input rather than forced production is given priority in the learning process. This thesis finds empirical support in studies such as that by Lakshani (2015), which establishes a moderate positive correlation between receptive and productive skills among intermediate-level students.

Based on research conducted to date, it can be argued that the isolated development of receptive language skills is often insufficient for real-world communication. To explain this language barrier, contemporary theory turns to Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, it is precisely the active use of language that compels the learner to shift from semantic (meaning-oriented) to syntactic (form-oriented) processing, which helps them become aware of gaps in their knowledge. The lack of systematic productive practice leaves the language resource in a passive state (Swain, 2005). While Ellis (2008) seeks the solution in the balance between implicit and explicit knowledge, VanPatten and Williams (2015) offer a cognitive explanation for this difficult transition, linking it to limitations in input processing, in which learners often neglect grammatical forms in favour of pure meaning extraction.

More recent, quantitative syntheses reinforce the affective and behavioural mechanisms outlined above. In a meta-analysis of 97 reports ($N = 19,933$) across 23 countries, Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) found a robust negative association between L2 anxiety and language achievement ($r = -.36$), with the effect strongest among lower-proficiency and less experienced learners – a pattern consistent with the persistence of anxiety reported by the present sample despite years of study. Similarly, a meta-analytic structural equation modelling study by Jin and Lee (2022) identified self-perceived communicative competence, communication anxiety, and motivation as the three high-evidence correlates of willingness to communicate (WTC) in L2 learners, lending contemporary empirical support to the avoidance behaviours documented in the present study's WTC findings.

The theoretical framework outlined above reveals the complex interaction between linguistic input, cognitive processing, and productive output. To investigate how these psycholinguistic processes manifest in real-world practice and what specific barriers contemporary learners face, an empirical study was conducted; its methodological parameters are presented below.

3. Research methodology

The empirical part of the study was designed as an exploratory pilot quantitative survey study based on an online survey. It included 80 adult second-language learners, constituting a purposive sample. As an exploratory pilot study, the

research was intended to identify recurring patterns and generate preliminary evidence rather than produce statistically generalizable findings. Demographically, the participants represented a broad range of professional backgrounds and language-learning experiences, with the majority belonging to the 35–54 age group – a stage of adulthood that, in andragogical research, is often associated with increased psychological barriers to foreign language communication. Gender was not recorded as part of the survey instrument; further demographic detail, including the distribution of participants' duration of language study and self-assessed proficiency level, is reported in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

The research instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire containing both closed-ended questions (including Likert-type scales measuring subjective perceptions) and open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' personal experiences. The open-ended responses were used illustratively to contextualize the quantitative findings; they were not subjected to systematic qualitative analysis (e.g., coding or thematic analysis) and therefore do not constitute a fully integrated mixed-methods component of the design. The questionnaire was organized into four main sections:

- Frequency and context of second-language use in everyday life and professional settings;
- Level of communicative confidence and self-assessment of language competence;
- Subjective preferences regarding receptive and productive language use;
- Perceived cognitive and affective barriers (e.g., fear of making mistakes and communication anxiety) that hinder oral and written language production.

The statistical analysis presented in Sections 4.1–4.11 is descriptive in nature (frequencies, percentages, and one mean score). Given the exploratory, pilot character of the study and the purposive sampling method used, the relationships suggested between variables in those sections (e.g., between years of study and self-reported confidence) are interpretive and should be read as descriptive patterns rather than confirmed statistical associations unless they are among the specific relationships subsequently tested with inferential statistics in Section 4.12.

4. Key findings from the surveys

Sections 4.1–4.11 below report the descriptive, item-level distributions for each questionnaire section and are intended primarily to characterize the sample and situate the study's central claims. Readers most interested in the associations among key variables – and in which of the patterns described below are statistically supported – are directed to Section 4.12, which reports the inferential (chi-square) analyses testing these relationships directly.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive results reported in Sections 4.1–4.11; the prose in those sections is limited to brief comment on the most noteworthy figures, with the full statistical testing of relationships among these variables reported in Section 4.12.

Table 1. Summary of descriptive survey results (N = 80)

Section	Focus	Key descriptive result(s)
4.1	Linguistic profile	English as L2 for 58% of respondents; German, Russian, Spanish next most common.
4.2	Duration of study	>5 yrs: 56%; 3–5 yrs: 20%; 1–3 yrs: 17.3%; <1 yr: 6.7% (N = 75; 3 respondents excluded for selecting multiple categories).
4.3	Self-assessed proficiency	M = 53.8/100; 23.1% self-rate as beginners, 23.1% as advanced.
4.4	Frequency of real-life use	Daily: 20.5%; several times/week: 16.7%; almost never: 43.6%.
4.5	Communicative contexts	Travel abroad: 55.1%; professional: 39.7%; passive reception (films/reading): 41%; online written: 34.6%; informal spoken: 21.8%.
4.6	Confidence / affective barriers	59% often/constantly feel “not good enough”; only 10.3% report full confidence.
4.7	Anxiety and perfectionism	91% report some degree of fear of making mistakes; only 9% report feeling free of this stress.
4.8	Avoidance behaviour (WTC)	46.2% often avoid speaking situations; 28.2% occasionally; only 5.1% report high willingness to communicate.
4.9	Situational anxiety triggers	Speaking in front of an audience: 70.5%; native-speaker contact: 51.3%; phone/informal conversation: 33.3% each.
4.10	Emotional state while speaking	Only 11.5% report comfort; 88.5% fall within negative affect range (30.8% / 33.3% / 24.4%).
4.11	Self-identified causal factors	Lack of real-world practice: 80.8%; excessive focus on grammatical accuracy: 51.3%.

4.1. Linguistic profile of respondents

Target Question: “Which foreign language have you studied or are you currently studying?”

An analysis of the participants’ linguistic profiles reveals a clear dominance of English, which was cited as a second foreign language by 58% of respondents. This distribution is entirely expected given English’s status as a global lingua franca and a primary tool in professional and academic spheres for the 35–54 age group.

Among the remainder of the sample, there is a relatively even distribution among several major European languages, with German, Russian, and Spanish ranking highest in terms of frequency of study. Languages such as French, Turkish, and Portuguese are represented by only a few responses and constitute a minimal, peripheral share of the study group. Given this profile of the

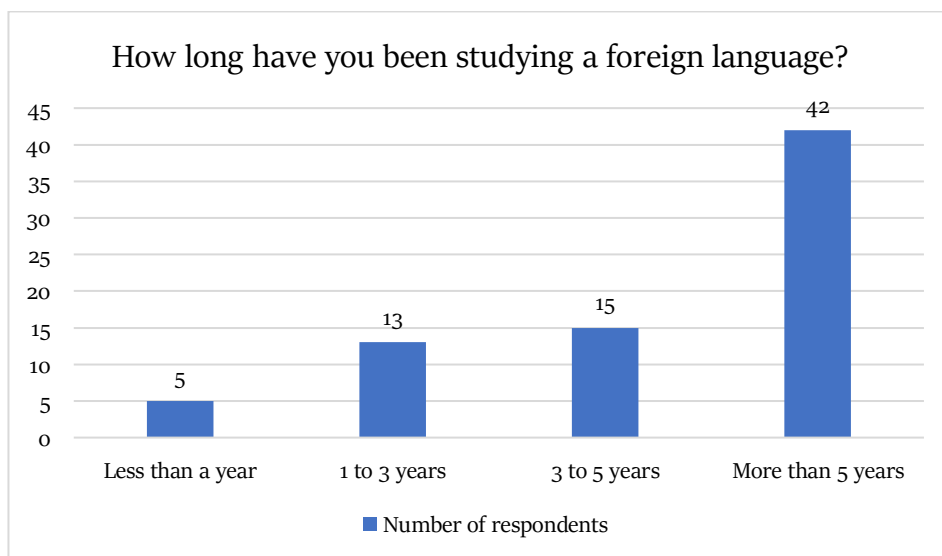
respondents, the findings are most directly relevant to the context of learning English and the other major European languages represented in the sample.

4.2. Duration of study

Target Question: “How long have you been studying this foreign language?”

The data regarding the duration of the respondents’ language training confirm the long-term nature of their learning experience. Three respondents selected more than one duration category (e.g., both “3–5 years” and “more than 5 years”) and were excluded from this item as internally inconsistent, leaving $N = 75$ respondents with a single, unambiguous response. As shown in the distribution (Figure 1), the majority of these participants have studied the language for more than 5 years (56%). The second-largest group consists of those with between 3 and 5 years of experience (20%). Against this backdrop, the share of those who studied the language for between 1 and 3 years is 17.3%, while relative beginners with less than one year of study account for only 6.7% of the sample.

Figure 1. Years of studying a foreign language among the participants



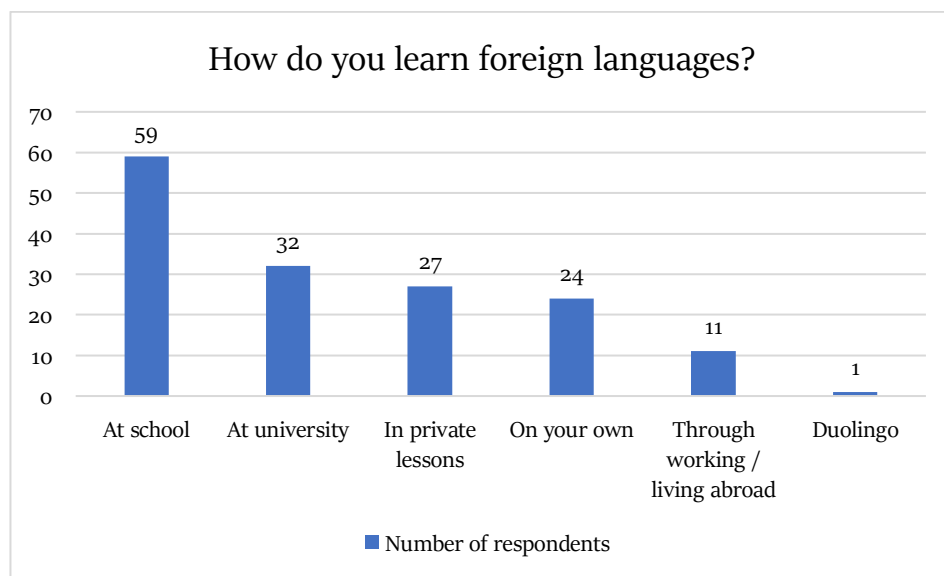
Over three-quarters (76%) of respondents have studied their language for more than three years, yet, as the following sections show, this does not correspond to a similar level of communicative confidence – consistent with the phenomenon of “blocked” passive resources (see Section 4.12 for a direct statistical test of this relationship).

4.3. Self-assessment of language competence

Target Question: “How would you rate your overall level of foreign language proficiency?”

The respondents’ subjective perceptions of their own level of language proficiency reveal an interesting polarization. With a mean self-assessment score of $M = 53.8$ (on a scale from 0 to 100), the distribution by proficiency level shows two identical peaks at opposite ends of the spectrum: an equal proportion of respondents identify themselves as beginners (23.1%) and as advanced learners (23.1%). The remaining participants occupy intermediate positions. This highlights a significant differentiation in proficiency levels within the sample, which – when compared with previous data – does not always correlate directly with the duration of study. The fact that nearly a quarter of respondents perceive themselves as beginners despite their many years of experience is an early indicator of the presence of psycholinguistic or methodological barriers. With regard to the educational context and the ways in which language knowledge is acquired, the data indicate a predominance of institutional learning.

Figure 2. Methods of learning foreign languages



Note: The question allowed for more than one answer.

Most respondents’ language foundation was built through secondary (75.6%) or university (41%) education, with comparatively little immersion experience (14.1%) or use of self-directed digital tools (Duolingo, 1.3%) – an educational

profile historically associated with receptive-oriented instruction, though the present data cannot establish this link directly.

4.4. Frequency of active language use in real-life situations

Target Question: “How often do you use this foreign language in real-life conversations?”

Data on the intensity of language practice in real-life situations reveal a significant deficit in oral communication. The distribution of responses shows that while 20.5% of participants use the language daily and 16.7% use it several times a week (which is likely related to professional commitments), the proportion of respondents who almost never engage in real-life conversation remains critically high (43.6%).

This result is key to understanding the phenomenon under study, as it illustrates a state of clear communicative deprivation (lack of practice). For a significant portion of the learners, the language exists solely as latent competence – a theoretical and receptive resource accumulated over the years, which, however, remains passive.

These findings are consistent with Swain’s (2005) Output Hypothesis, according to which productive automatization requires regular active use rather than receptive exposure alone (see Section 6 for further discussion).

4.5. Specifics of communicative contexts and the “reception–production” dichotomy

Target Question: “In what situations do you most frequently use this language?”

An analysis of the specific contexts in which respondents use their foreign language skills reveals a clear dependence on pragmatic and external factors. The primary areas of language use are travel abroad (55.1%) and the professional environment (39.7%). These results indicate a predominance of utilitarian (instrumental) motivation among learners, in which language is perceived primarily as a means to achieve practical goals rather than as an object of interest in its own right.

A closer examination of the internal distribution of daily language activities, however, illustrates the true nature of the dichotomy under study. Outside of direct professional commitments, the language is used primarily passively. The highest proportion is accounted for by independent receptive activities, such as watching movies, videos, and reading literature (41%). These forms of passive reception significantly outnumber active written communication in an online environment (34.6%), while the proportion of spontaneous personal conversations in informal settings remains critically low (21.8%).

Taken together, these figures suggest that language input is mediated largely through passive, screen-based channels rather than live spontaneous

interaction, leaving comparatively little opportunity to practise real-time retrieval (see Section 6).

4.6. Subjective perception of linguistic confidence and affective barriers

Target Question: “Do you feel like you are not ‘good enough’ at the language even when you actually have the knowledge?”

One of the most significant and diagnostically alarming findings of the study relates to the learners’ internal attitudes and psycho-emotional state regarding their own communication skills. The data reveal a profound crisis in the respondents’ linguistic self-confidence, manifested in a persistent sense of linguistic inadequacy. The majority of respondents (59%) report that they often or constantly experience the subjective feeling that they “are not good enough” to communicate freely. It is striking that this insecurity manifests itself even when respondents perceive themselves as possessing the lexical and grammatical knowledge necessary to carry out the conversation in question. In stark contrast to this widespread trend, only 10.3% of the study participants report complete confidence in their oral or written communication.

This imbalance between self-reported linguistic knowledge and subjective self-confidence is consistent with Krashen’s (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis (see Section 2).

High levels of this internal filter are theorized, within Krashen’s framework, to act as a cognitive barrier associated with reduced access to the transformation of acquired language knowledge (learning) into spontaneous oral production. In this way, learners may be more susceptible to the trap of perfectionism and hypercorrectness.

4.7. Psycholinguistic barriers: communication anxiety and perfectionism

Target Question: “Are you afraid of speaking a foreign language because you think you will make a mistake?”

A closer look at the factors that contribute to low linguistic self-esteem draws attention to the high intensity of what is known as foreign language anxiety. The results of the study confirm that the persistent fear of negative evaluation and of making mistakes is the main psycholinguistic barrier to active speech production.

The combined percentage of respondents who, to one degree or another, experience anxiety about making language mistakes reaches a critical 91%. This exceptionally high affective filter functions as a powerful mental barrier at the very moment of speech production. From a cognitive standpoint, intense anxiety consumes a significant portion of the learner’s working memory capacity. Instead of directing available cognitive resources toward formulating the message and

quickly retrieving lexical items, they are wasted on constant internal monitoring, self-censorship, and self-criticism.

Only 9% of respondents reported feeling entirely free of this stress, underscoring how widespread the barrier is in this sample; possible pedagogical implications are addressed in Section 6. This is consistent with the characterization of Horwitz et al. (1986) of foreign language anxiety as a distinct affective construct.

4.8. Behavioural manifestations: communication avoidance strategies (WTC)

Target Question: “Have you avoided situations where you had to speak a foreign language, even though you had the opportunity?”

High levels of subjective anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are associated with learners’ behavioural patterns, prompting them to consciously or unconsciously employ so-called avoidance strategies. The study shows that a lack of confidence manifests itself in communication-avoidance behaviour, which severely limits social interaction. Nearly half of the respondents (46.2%) state that they often avoid real-life situations requiring oral production in a foreign language, while another 28.2% employ this defensive strategy occasionally. In contrast to these figures, only 5.1% of the respondents demonstrate a high level of willingness to communicate (WTC), engaging in conversation without prior psychological inhibitions (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

In light of interactionist theories in applied linguistics, this defensive behaviour has detrimental consequences for the subjects’ language development. According to Swain’s Productive Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005), in order to transform passive knowledge into an active and flexible skill, the learner must continuously generate speech output. It is precisely through this output that they are able to test their linguistic hypotheses in real time, receive feedback from their interlocutor, and adjust their speech accordingly. Within this theoretical framework, when avoidance strategies dominate behaviour, learners would be expected to lose a key opportunity for automatizing their skills; the present cross-sectional data are consistent with such a self-reinforcing cycle linking avoidance, reduced practice, and persistent anxiety, but do not establish this cyclical mechanism directly, since avoidance, output, and anxiety were all measured concurrently rather than tracked over time.

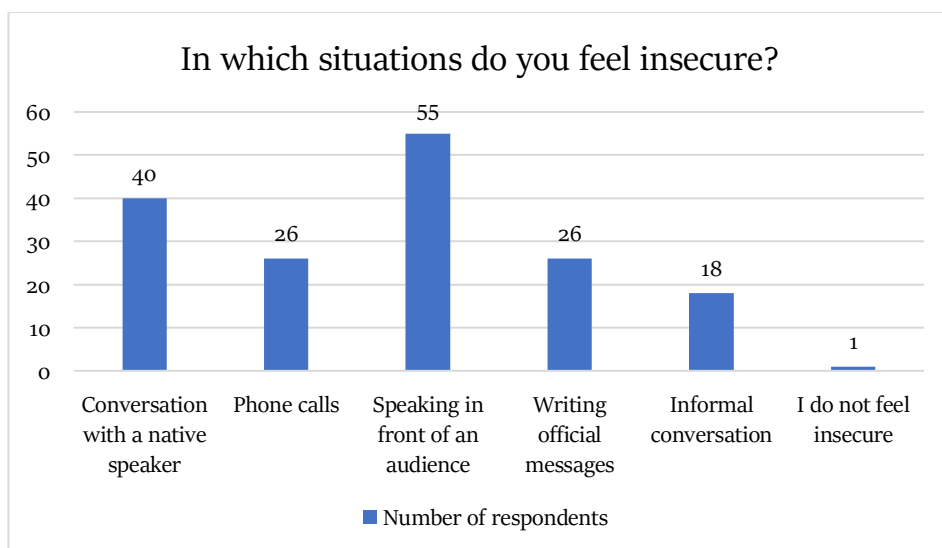
4.9. Situational anxiety, social exposure, and triggers of communicative stress

Target Question: “In which of the following situations do you feel most insecure? (You can choose more than one)”

A detailed analysis of the specific contexts associated with the highest levels of subjective insecurity suggests that language anxiety tends to be greater in situations involving higher levels of social exposure and a greater perceived risk

of negative evaluation. The empirical data reveal a clear pattern across these situations, with public contexts generally associated with higher levels of communicative stress than interactions within a closer social circle.

Figure 3. Situations in which participants feel insecure when speaking a foreign language



Note: The question allowed for more than one answer.

Speaking in front of an audience elicited the highest reported anxiety (70.5%), consistent with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) situational model of communication readiness. Direct contact with a native speaker (51.3%) and, to a lesser extent, telephone and informal spontaneous conversation (each 33.3%) were also frequently cited as high-anxiety situations, plausibly reflecting perceived asymmetry in linguistic status and reduced nonverbal support.

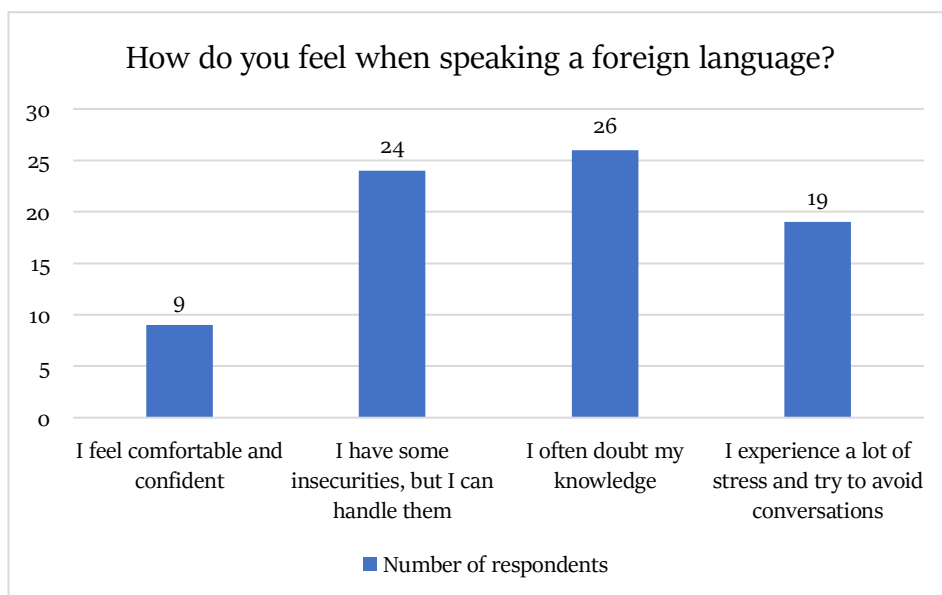
4.10. Comprehensive assessment of emotional state during language production

Target Question: "Which of the following statements best describes your feeling when speaking a foreign language?"

To summarize the empirical analysis, it can be concluded that the overall picture of learners' emotional state at the moment of language production is marked by systematic cognitive doubt and affective discomfort. The internal distribution of emotional experiences during speaking clearly illustrates the extent of the psychological barrier faced by the respondents. The data show that only 11.5% of them experience genuine psychological comfort when producing oral output. The remaining 88.5% of the sample fall entirely within the spectrum

of negative affective states — ranging from moderate insecurity (30.8%), through persistent doubt in their own linguistic competence (33.3%), to high levels of stress accompanied by attempts to avoid conversations (24.4%).

Figure 4. Self-reported feelings when speaking a foreign language



This distribution suggests that the barrier to productive language use extends beyond vocabulary or memory limitations to include an affective dimension (see Section 6). These patterns are consistent with a possible self-reinforcing cycle linking affective discomfort, avoidance, and reduced practice, discussed further in Sections 6 and 7.

4.11. Self-identified factors and systemic deficits

Target Question: “What has hindered you the most from developing confidence in speaking a foreign language? (You can choose more than one)”

The final stage of the empirical analysis is aimed at identifying the specific factors that the respondents themselves recognize as the main causal barriers to their communicative confidence. The results highlight two fundamental problems that correlate directly with the traditional methodological approaches criticized in contemporary literature.

The leading factor is the systemic lack of real-world practice, cited by the vast majority of respondents (80.8%). This high percentage suggests a possible structural gap in the contemporary educational process, although the descriptive nature of the data does not allow this interpretation to be

statistically confirmed. The findings may reflect shortcomings in educational practices in which language is taught primarily as a system of rules rather than as a tool for authentic social communication.

The excessive focus on grammatical correctness, cited by 51.3% of respondents, illustrates Skehan's (1998) cognitive model. According to this model, the limited capacity of working memory forces adult learners to choose between accuracy and fluency, and didactic pressure for errorlessness would, on this model, be expected to come at the expense of oral fluency.

These findings are consistent with the interpretation that language block is not an individual defect or a lack of linguistic ability on the part of the learner. Rather, it may, at least in part, reflect a broader pattern associated with linear-type instruction, which intensively stimulates reception but may under-provide the psychological and practical preparation necessary for effective productive output.

4.12. Inferential analysis of key relationships

To address the descriptive nature of the analysis noted above, chi-square tests of independence (with Fisher's exact test for 2×2 tables) were subsequently conducted on the raw survey data ($N = 78$; two of the 80 respondents were excluded listwise from this analysis owing to missing responses on one or more of the tested items) to test whether the relationships suggested by the descriptive statistics reach statistical significance. Categories with very low cell counts were collapsed prior to testing to ensure adequate expected cell frequencies.

Duration of study and affective barriers. Consistent with the concept of latent productive competence proposed in this study, the duration of language study was not significantly associated with fear of making mistakes ($\chi^2(1) = 1.20$, $p = .273$) or with the subjective feeling of "not being good enough" ($\chi^2(1) = 0.97$, $p = .324$). This indicates that, in this sample, time spent studying the language alone did not predict lower affective inhibition, supporting the claim that productive language blocks are not simply resolved by accumulated study time.

Duration of study and real-world use. Duration of study was significantly associated with the frequency of real-life language use ($\chi^2(1) = 6.22$, $p = .013$; Fisher's exact $p = .007$; Cramér's $V = .29$): respondents who had studied the language for more than three years were more likely to report regular use (65%) than those with three years or less (28%). This suggests that longer study is associated with greater opportunity for practice, even though, as shown above, it is not on its own associated with reduced anxiety.

Self-assessed proficiency and affective barriers. Self-assessed proficiency level was significantly associated with fear of making mistakes ($\chi^2(2) = 17.47$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .47$) and with the feeling of "not being good enough" ($\chi^2(2) = 6.97$, $p = .031$, Cramér's $V = .30$). Confidence increased with self-assessed level,

as would be expected. Notably, however, even among respondents who rated their own proficiency as advanced, 67% (12 of 18) still reported experiencing fear of making mistakes at least sometimes, indicating that the affective barrier persists to a meaningful degree even at higher self-assessed proficiency levels.

Frequency of use and affective barriers. Respondents who used the language regularly were significantly more likely to report feeling confident and less likely to report feeling “not good enough” than those who almost never used it in real-life conversation ($\chi^2(1) = 4.59$, $p = .032$, Fisher’s exact $p = .018$, OR = 6.00; and $\chi^2(1) = 4.15$, $p = .042$, Fisher’s exact $p = .017$, respectively). This finding is consistent with Swain’s (2005) Output Hypothesis and supports the pedagogical emphasis on authentic productive practice proposed in this study.

Taken together, these inferential results refine rather than contradict the descriptive picture presented above. The absence of a significant association between duration of study and affective barriers supports the study’s central claim that passive accumulation of linguistic knowledge does not, by itself, resolve the anxiety and self-doubt that block productive output. At the same time, the significant associations between self-assessed proficiency, frequency of authentic use, and lower anxiety reinforce the pedagogical implication that structured opportunities for productive practice – rather than time alone – are what activate latent productive competence. Given the sample size and the number of comparisons conducted (six tests, without correction for multiple comparisons), these results should be interpreted as preliminary and would benefit from replication in a larger, probability-based sample.

5. Strategies for activating passive language resources

The transition from passive receptive knowledge to active speech production requires pedagogical interventions that simultaneously target cognitive retrieval mechanisms and affective barriers. To identify the optimal conditions for mobilizing latent linguistic resources, the empirical survey examined both the learners’ subjectively perceived needs for developing speech fluency and their underlying motivational drivers.

5.1. Subjectively perceived conditions for overcoming the language barrier

Target Question: “What would help you speak more confidently?”

When asked what factors would most effectively enhance their speaking confidence, respondents overwhelmingly pointed toward contextual immersion and direct communicative practice rather than traditional formal instruction.

The dominant factor identified by the sample is direct interaction with native speakers (64.1%), followed closely by living or working in an environment where the target language is spoken (55.1%). These findings indicate that adult learners

perceive authentic, real-time necessity as a potentially helpful condition for overcoming retrieval latency; such environments may reduce the excessive self-monitoring typical of adult L2 production, though this study did not test learners under such conditions directly. Furthermore, 42.3% of participants highlighted conversation courses or discussion groups as key tools, demonstrating a strong demand for low-anxiety, highly interactive peer contexts outside standard grammar-oriented classrooms.

Parallel to these environmental factors, socio-emotional adjustments emerged as crucial preconditions for output activation. A substantial portion of the sample emphasized internal psychological mechanisms, specifically the reduction of fear of making mistakes (33.3%) and the cultivation of greater self-confidence (28.2%). Crucially, a negligible baseline of only 1.3% of respondents reported already feeling confident when speaking. This low baseline is consistent with the study's broader pattern of widespread self-reported speech inhibition among adult learners in this sample, though as a single self-report item it should not be read as establishing prevalence beyond the sample itself.

5.2. Learner motivation profile and psycholinguistic implications

Target Question: "What are your main motivations for learning this language?"

An analysis of the participants' motivation reveals a heavily pragmatic and instrumental profile. Adult learners pursue foreign language acquisition primarily as a tool for immediate practical outcomes rather than as an abstract academic end in itself.

The primary motives reported by respondents are personal development (67.9%), professional fulfilment and career opportunities (62.8%), and travel or mobility (57.7%). Secondary situational drivers include cultural interest (29.5%) and academic pursuits or studying abroad (10.3%). Strikingly, intrinsic interest in the foreign language as a linguistic system accounts for a mere 1.3% of responses (Note: The question allowed for more than one answer).

From a psycholinguistic standpoint, this pronounced instrumental profile offers one plausible interpretation for the passive-active bottleneck. Adult learners construct extensive receptive networks driven by goal-oriented needs (e.g., career, travel, reading professional materials). However, in the absence of an active, immersion-based environment, these linguistic resources may remain unpractised at the procedural level; when sudden oral production is required, this could plausibly combine with high affective filters and fear of failure to produce the cognitive overload and speech blockage reported by respondents, though the present cross-sectional design cannot establish this causal sequence directly.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study provide further evidence that the transition from receptive language knowledge to spontaneous productive language use is neither automatic nor solely dependent on the amount of linguistic knowledge acquired. Although most participants reported several years of foreign language study, many continued to experience considerable difficulty communicating spontaneously. This discrepancy suggests that productive language development is influenced by a complex interaction of affective, cognitive, and instructional factors rather than by linguistic competence alone.

One of the most prominent findings concerns the role of communication anxiety. A substantial proportion of participants reported fear of making mistakes and insecurity when speaking a foreign language, indicating that emotional factors remain a significant obstacle to productive language use. This finding is consistent with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation may prevent learners from accessing language that has already been acquired. Rather than reflecting insufficient language knowledge, the reported communication difficulties appear to result from reduced willingness and confidence to use existing linguistic resources in real-time interaction.

The findings also support the importance of authentic language production emphasized by Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis. Many respondents indicated that they rarely use the target language in authentic communicative situations despite years of formal language instruction. Limited opportunities for meaningful output may therefore restrict the development of automaticity and communicative fluency. While receptive exposure contributes to vocabulary growth and language comprehension, productive competence appears to require repeated opportunities to formulate, test, and refine language through interaction.

Another important finding concerns the influence of perfectionism and instructional practices. Many participants associated successful language learning primarily with grammatical accuracy and expressed reluctance to speak unless they were confident that their language was error-free. Such responses suggest that traditional accuracy-oriented instruction may unintentionally encourage excessive self-monitoring, resulting in reduced fluency and greater communication avoidance. These observations are consistent with previous SLA research emphasizing the importance of balancing linguistic accuracy with communicative effectiveness.

Taken together, these findings support the concept of latent productive competence proposed in the present study. Rather than interpreting communication anxiety, limited productive practice, and perfectionism as independent barriers, the proposed framework conceptualizes them as mutually

reinforcing psycholinguistic mechanisms that restrict access to already acquired linguistic knowledge during spontaneous communication. The concept therefore offers an integrated perspective for understanding why many adult learners who report extensive language study continue to experience persistent difficulties in productive language use.

The findings also have important pedagogical implications. They suggest that successful adult language instruction should extend beyond the transmission of grammatical knowledge and provide learners with regular opportunities for authentic communication in psychologically supportive learning environments. Instruction that encourages experimentation, tolerates errors as part of the learning process, and emphasizes meaningful interaction may facilitate the activation of learners' existing linguistic knowledge and contribute to greater communicative confidence.

7. Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample ($N = 80$) was recruited through purposive, non-probability sampling and relied entirely on self-report, so findings should be read as indicative patterns from an exploratory pilot study rather than as generalizable or causal conclusions; the questionnaire's reliability was not separately assessed, and the cross-sectional design does not allow developmental claims.

A further limitation concerns measurement: complex constructs such as anxiety, perfectionism, confidence, and willingness to communicate were each assessed through single, unvalidated questionnaire items rather than established multi-item scales (e.g., the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; Horwitz et al., 1986). This reduces measurement precision and may inflate or attenuate the associations reported above; future studies should employ validated multi-item instruments for these constructs. Relatedly, several relationships described in the Discussion (e.g., between avoidance behaviour and reduced automatization, or between accuracy-oriented instruction and self-monitoring) are interpreted through the lens of established SLA theory but were not directly tested and should be read as theoretically motivated interpretations of cross-sectional associations rather than as demonstrated causal mechanisms.

A further, more fundamental limitation concerns the operationalization of receptive competence itself. Neither receptive nor productive competence was measured directly anywhere in this study; the assumption that participants possess substantial receptive knowledge rests entirely on self-reported years of study, a proxy whose limits are illustrated by the sample itself: nearly a quarter of respondents (23.1%) self-identified as beginners despite, in many cases, years

of prior study (Section 4.3), and self-assessed proficiency did not straightforwardly track duration of study. The data can therefore establish that respondents perceive a gap between their linguistic background and their spontaneous productive ability, and that this perceived gap is associated with anxiety and avoidance (Section 4.12); they cannot establish that a receptive-productive performance gap exists in any objective sense, since no independent measure of either receptive or productive skill was administered. Future work should incorporate direct receptive and productive measures (e.g., a proficiency test alongside a speaking task) to test whether the self-reported pattern documented here corresponds to an objectively verifiable one.

A number of individual item formulations also warrant revision in future work. The item “Do you feel like you are not ‘good enough’ at the language even when you actually have the knowledge?” (Section 4.6) presupposes that respondents possess the relevant knowledge, an assumption the study does not independently establish (see above); a revised item would ask separately about self-assessed knowledge and about the feeling of inadequacy, allowing the relationship between them to be examined empirically rather than assumed by the question wording. Similarly, the item “Are you afraid of speaking a foreign language because you think you will make a mistake?” (Section 4.7) is double-barrelled, since a respondent could fear speaking for reasons unrelated to error-making (e.g., time pressure, unfamiliar interlocutors), making it unclear which underlying construct the resulting 91% figure reflects. The response scale for this item (“Yes, very much” / “Sometimes” / “No, I feel confident”) further mixes a frequency dimension with a confidence dimension within a single ordinal scale, complicating interpretation. Information on the development, piloting, and content validity of the questionnaire was not systematically documented and should be provided in any future use of this instrument, alongside revision of the items noted here and in the Appendix.

Future research should employ probability sampling, validated instruments, and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs that combine self-report with direct measures of productive performance.

8. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the transition from receptive language knowledge to spontaneous productive language use is not an automatic process. Although adult second-language learners in this sample reported extensive language-learning experience, many continue to experience persistent difficulties in speaking; notably, self-assessed proficiency did not track years of study in a simple way (Section 4.3), underscoring that duration of study alone cannot be

equated with demonstrated receptive competence, which was not directly measured in this study. The findings indicate that this discrepancy is influenced by the interaction of affective, cognitive, and instructional factors rather than by insufficient linguistic knowledge alone.

The study identified three interrelated mechanisms that appear to hinder productive language use among adult learners: affective inhibition, reflected in high levels of communication anxiety and fear of making mistakes; insufficient opportunities for authentic language output, which limit the development of automaticity and communicative confidence; and perfectionism reinforced by traditional instructional practices, which encourages excessive self-monitoring and reduces fluency during spontaneous communication.

8.1. Theoretical contribution

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of latent productive competence, understood not as a novel psycholinguistic mechanism but as an integrative label for a specific empirical pattern that existing constructs each capture only partially. The concept is proposed as an analytical framework for explaining why extensive receptive knowledge frequently remains inaccessible during spontaneous language production. Rather than treating communication anxiety, limited productive practice, and perfectionism as independent barriers, the proposed framework conceptualizes them as mutually reinforcing psycholinguistic mechanisms that constrain productive language use. It is intended to complement, rather than replace, established theories of second-language acquisition by providing an integrated perspective on adult learners' productive language development.

8.2. Pedagogical implications

The findings suggest that adult learners' productive language development may be enhanced when instruction shifts from an exclusive emphasis on grammatical accuracy toward learning environments that prioritize meaningful communication, authentic interaction, and repeated opportunities for productive language use. Creating psychologically supportive learning environments may also reduce the affective barriers that prevent learners from activating their existing linguistic knowledge. These implications resonate with broader concerns about how prospective language teachers are prepared to implement communicative, learner-centred approaches in practice; Lőrincz and Lőrincz (2026), for instance, found that EFL student teachers' beliefs about contemporary language-teaching approaches do not always align consistently with communicative principles, suggesting that teacher education itself may be a lever for the kind of instructional shift proposed here.

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Unlocking latent productive competence in adult second-language learners

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This study investigates the persistent gap between receptive language knowledge and spontaneous productive language use among adult second-language learners. Although many adult learners accumulate years of language study, they often continue to experience difficulties in speaking despite possessing the necessary linguistic knowledge. The study draws on key theories of second-language acquisition, including Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, Swain’s Output Hypothesis, and cognitive models of language processing, to examine the affective, cognitive, and instructional factors associated with this phenomenon. The empirical investigation was based on a questionnaire administered to 80 adult learners, mostly aged 35–54 years, complemented by chi-square tests examining associations between key variables. Descriptive analysis of the data revealed that communication anxiety, fear of making mistakes, limited opportunities for authentic language output, and perfectionism associated with traditional instructional practices constitute the principal barriers to productive language use. Notably, inferential analysis showed that the duration of language study was not significantly associated with either fear of making mistakes or feelings of linguistic inadequacy, whereas higher self-assessed proficiency and more frequent authentic language use were significantly associated with lower levels of

anxiety. Based on these findings, the study introduces the concept of latent productive competence as an analytical framework for explaining why linguistic knowledge accumulated through years of study frequently remains inaccessible during spontaneous communication. Rather than replacing existing models of second-language acquisition, the proposed framework integrates affective, cognitive, and instructional perspectives to explain productive language development in adult learners. As an exploratory pilot study based on a purposive, non-probability sample, the findings should be regarded as indicative rather than generalizable, and further research involving larger, probability-based samples is recommended. The findings also have practical implications for language teaching, highlighting the importance of authentic communication, productive language practice, and psychologically supportive learning environments that reduce affective barriers to speech production.

Keywords: *adult second-language learners, latent productive competence, second-language acquisition, productive language skills, receptive competence, speaking anxiety, authentic language output.*

Активізація латентної продуктивної мовленнєвої компетентності дорослих у процесі вивчення другої мови

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У статті розглянуто стійкий розрив між рецептивними мовними знаннями та спонтанним продуктивним використанням мови серед дорослих, які вивчають другу мову. Попри багаторічне вивчення мови та наявність необхідних знань, чимало дорослих і далі відчують труднощі в усному мовленні. Дослідження спирається на ключові теорії вивчення другої мови, зокрема гіпотезу афективного фільтра Крашена, гіпотезу мовного продукування Свейн та когнітивні моделі мовної обробки, з метою вивчення афективних, когнітивних і методичних чинників, пов'язаних із цим явищем. Підкреслено, що емпіричне дослідження ґрунтувалося на анкетуванні 80 дорослих респондентів, віком від 35 до 54 років, та було доповнене застосуванням критерію χ^2 для перевірки зв'язків між ключовими змінними. Описовий аналіз даних показав, що комунікативна тривожність, страх припуститися помилки, обмежені можливості для автентичного використання мови та перфекціонізм, пов'язаний із традиційними методами навчання, становлять основні бар'єри для продуктивного мовлення. Водночас статистичний аналіз висновків показав, що тривалість вивчення мови не мала статистично значущого зв'язку ні зі страхом припуститися помилки, ні з відчуттям недостатньої мовної компетентності, тоді як вищий рівень самооціненої мовної компетентності та частіше автентичне вживання мови були пов'язані зі значно нижчим рівнем тривожності. На основі отриманих результатів у дослідженні запропоновано поняття латентної продуктивної компетентності як концептуальної основи для пояснення того, чому мовні знання, накопичені впродовж багатьох років навчання, часто залишаються

недоступними під час спонтанного спілкування. Зазначено, що запропонована рамка не покликана замінити наявні моделі засвоєння другої мови, а натомість інтегрує афективну, когнітивну та методичну перспективи для пояснення розвитку продуктивних мовних умінь у дорослих здобувачів. Наголошено на тому, що це розвідувальне пілотне дослідження ґрунтується на цільовій вибірці, отримані результати слід розглядати як орієнтовні, а не як такі, що можуть бути узагальнені на ширшу сукупність. У подальших дослідженнях доцільно залучати більші вибірки, сформовані шляхом випадкового відбору. Результати дослідження також мають практичне значення для навчання мов, оскільки підкреслюють важливість автентичної комунікації, продуктивної мовної практики та психологічно оптимального навчального середовища, що сприяє зниженню афективних бар'єрів у процесі спілкування.

Ключові слова: вивчення другої мови дорослими, латентна продуктивна компетентність, засвоєння другої мови, продуктивні мовні навички, рецептивна компетентність, тривожність під час говоріння, автентичне використання мови.

A látens produktív kompetencia aktiválása felnőtt másodiknyelv-tanulók körében

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Jelen tanulmány a receptív nyelvi tudás és a spontán produktív nyelvhasználat közötti tartós szakadékot vizsgálja felnőtt másodiknyelv-tanulók körében. Bár számos felnőtt tanuló hosszú éveken keresztül tanul egy adott nyelvet, gyakran továbbra is nehézségeket tapasztal a beszéd során annak ellenére, hogy rendelkezik a szükséges nyelvi ismeretekkel. A kutatás a másodiknyelv-elsajátítás meghatározó elméleteire, többek között Krashen affektívszűrő-hipotézisére, Swain outputhipotézisére, valamint a nyelvi feldolgozás kognitív modelljeire támaszkodik, és az e jelenséggel összefüggő affektív, kognitív és oktatási tényezőket vizsgálja. Az empirikus kutatás egy 80 felnőtt tanuló körében végzett kérdőíves felmérésen alapult, akik többnyire a 35–54 éves korosztályba tartoztak, és a vizsgálatot a főbb változók közötti összefüggések elemzésére alkalmazott khi-négyzet-próbák egészítették ki. Az adatok leíró elemzése azt mutatta, hogy a kommunikációs szorongás, a hibázástól való félelem, az autentikus nyelvhasználat korlátozott lehetőségei, valamint a hagyományos oktatási gyakorlatokhoz kapcsolódó perfekcionizmus jelentik a produktív nyelvhasználat legfontosabb akadályait. A következtetési statisztikai elemzés ugyanakkor azt mutatta, hogy a nyelvtanulás időtartama nem állt szignifikáns kapcsolatban sem a hibázástól való félelemmel, sem az elégtelen nyelvi kompetencia érzésével, míg a magasabb önértékelt nyelvtudásszint és a gyakoribb autentikus nyelvhasználat szignifikánsan alacsonyabb szorongásszinttel járt együtt. Az eredmények alapján a tanulmány bevezeti a látens produktív kompetencia fogalmát mint olyan elemzési keretet, amely magyarázatot kínál arra, hogy az évek során felhalmozott nyelvi tudás miért marad gyakran hozzáférhetetlen spontán kommunikációs helyzetekben. A javasolt keret nem a másodiknyelv-elsajátítás meglévő modelljeinek felváltására törekszik, hanem az

affektív, kognitív és oktatási megközelítések integrálásával kívánja magyarázni a felnőtt tanulók produktív nyelvi készségeinek fejlődését. Mivel a kutatás feltáró jellegű pilotvizsgálat, amely célzott, nem valószínűségi mintán alapul, az eredmények inkább jelzésértékűnek tekintendők, és nem általánosíthatók szélesebb populációra. A további kutatásokhoz nagyobb, véletlenszerű mintavétellel kialakított minták bevonása javasolt. Az eredmények a nyelvoktatás szempontjából gyakorlati következtetésekkel is szolgálnak, hangsúlyozva az autentikus kommunikáció, a produktív nyelvhasználat gyakorlása, valamint a beszédprodukció affektív akadályait csökkentő, pszichológiailag támogató tanulási környezet fontosságát.

Kulcsszavak: *felnőtt másodiknyelv-tanulók, látens produktív kompetencia, másodiknyelv-elsajátítás, produktív nyelvi készségek, receptív kompetencia, beszédsszorongás, autentikus nyelvhasználat.*