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The Social, The Emotional, and The Digital: Tracing the Epistemological Shifts in English Language Education Research

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ABSTRACT

In the field of English language education, there have been salient changes as a result of cognitive-computational approaches and transdisciplinary systems. This study focuses on a comprehensive analysis of 6,815 articles published in the Web of Science database in top-tier 14 journals with highest SJR scores through bibliometric analysis. The findings suggest an increasing emphasis on social dimensions of language education, with research attention gradually expanding from teaching methods toward identity-related topics as well as concepts such as intercultural interaction, and social justice. After the pandemic, research attention increasingly turned to AI and well-being. The corpus also indicates increasing methodological diversity, particularly through the growing use of Mixed Methods Research. Asian research centers have gained momentum in the latest studies.

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The field of English Language Education (ELE) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has experienced a fundamental epistemological transformation known as the social turn (Block, 2003; Johnson, 2006). Historically, the discipline was dominated by a computational metaphor that viewed language learning as an isolated, mentalistic process (Firth & Wagner, 1997). However, recent scholarship has moved towards a transdisciplinary framework, as advocated by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), which integrates cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions to address the complex realities of language learning. Within this framework, learning is reconceptualized not as the internalization of abstract rules, but as identity work and participation in communities of practice (Norton, 2010).

This theoretical shift has been accompanied by a bi/multilingual turn (Ortega, 2013), which challenges the native speaker's fallacy and target deviation perspectives (McKay, 2010). Instead of viewing learners through a deficit model, contemporary research emphasizes the validity of diverse World Englishes (Mufwene, 2010) and views competence as a complex, dynamic system (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007). Furthermore, the research landscape has been reshaped by the emotional turn, which highlights the role of positive emotions like enjoyment in learning (Dewaele & Li, 2020), and by rapid technological advancements, specifically the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education (Zhai et al., 2021).

Despite these significant theoretical and contextual shifts, mapping the holistic evolution of the field remains a challenge. Bibliometric analysis serves as a crucial tool for visualizing these trends. Previous bibliometric studies (e.g., Lei & Liu, 2019) have successfully mapped trends up to 2016, providing early signals of the social turn. However, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis focusing on the 2011–2025 period, which encompasses the digital disruption caused by the pandemic, the Generative AI revolution, and the mainstreaming of concepts like Translanguaging. This specific timeframe is critical as it captures the discipline's trajectory through the mainstreaming of mobile-

assisted language learning, the global migration crises affecting learner demographics, and the preparatory phase of digital integration that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to fill this gap by taking the most current snapshot of the field's methodological diversity (qualitative/mixed methods) and thematic evolution. Unlike previous bibliometric reviews that focused primarily on isolated linguistic sub-domains or regional trends (e.g., Liu & Hu, 2021; Cherian, 2024), this study adopts a holistic view to capture the convergence of the social, emotional, and technological turns within a unified transdisciplinary framework.

The significance of this study lies in its systematic examination of how the field has become increasingly diverse in terms of research topics, methodologies, and geographical participation. As specifically noted by Hyland (2016), the production of knowledge shifted its geographical distribution because Asian regions started producing more knowledge while teachers conducted action research activities.

Furthermore, the research holds essential value for studying the methodological development which Hyland (2016) and Afshar and Ranjbar (2023) described through their work on Mixed Methods Research (MMR) and qualitative approaches including narrative and ethnography. Finally, the research establishes a vital framework which suggests how computer-assisted instruction subjects from the past have developed into present-day interests in positive psychology and generative AI and ChatGPT (Zhai et al., 2021; Dewaele & Li, 2020).

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of 6,815 articles published between 2011 and 2025 from the top 14 journals in the field of language education, as ranked by the SJR score in the Scimago Journal Ranking. Utilizing data from the Web of Science database and employing the Bibliometrix library (in R) and VOSviewer, the study seeks to map the longitudinal growth of scholarly output, evaluate the performance of nations and institutions, and visualize the conceptual structure of the field through keyword and citation analysis.

Research Questions

Based on the analytical procedures outlined in the methodology and the trends observed in the literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the longitudinal trends in publication output and citation growth in the field of English Language Education from 2011 to 2025?
2. How is the international collaboration network structured?
3. How has the thematic focus of the field evolved over time, particularly regarding the shift from cognitive/instructional themes to social, affective, and AI-related topics?
4. What methodological shifts are observable in the corpus, specifically regarding the prevalence of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches?
5. What are the current motor, basic, niche, and emerging themes shaping the future of the discipline?

Theoretical Framework

The research bases its foundation on the "social turn" that emerged in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English Language Teaching (ELT), challenging the earlier dominance of cognitive approaches which studied language learning as a solo mental operation. Historically, the field operated under the "computational metaphor" of information processing until Firth and Wagner (1997) published their critique, demonstrating how this approach failed to identify social and contextual aspects of language usage. Consequently, acquisition research now views language acquisition as community participation instead of rule learning because it moves away from the native versus non-native speaker classification system (Block, 2003). This sociocultural perspective also applies to teacher education, as Johnson (2006) supports a transition from positivism to "praxis," which acknowledges that teachers create their own legitimate knowledge through their actual teaching activities in particular educational contexts.

The socially constructed framework depends on poststructuralist methods which change researcher perspectives about learners by studying their identity formation and their ability to act independently. Regarding psychological variables, the field now uses new methods because identity functions as a complex system comprising multiple elements that transform over time while creating internal conflicts (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Specifically, Norton (2010) created her sociological theory of "investment" to describe why students maintain their interest in speaking through social position changes amidst existing power differences. The investments made by learners stem from their connection to "Imagined Communities," which explains their classroom silence when they lack interest in the current learning environment even though they show strong learning motivation (Norton, 2010). To capture these nuances, researchers conduct qualitative research through ethnography and narrative analysis because these methods enable them to study intricate identity patterns which standard quantitative assessment tools cannot measure (Block, 2003).

Furthermore, the research examines language education through globalization to demonstrate how Global English functions within one unified standardized language context. However, Mufwene (2010) explains that English language growth occurs through indigenization, which allows the language to transform according to its new environment. This perspective supports World Englishes because it opposes the "native speaker fallacy"; according to McKay (2010), EIL should teach bilingual abilities and language comprehension instead of native speaker competencies. Moreover, the value of English has evolved through globalization because it now functions as exchange-value instead of use-value, as noted by Block (2010), who shows English functions as a marketable skill for worldwide employment. Ultimately, the social turn requires educational methods which base their approach on student personal experiences and their natural language development instead of following predetermined curricula (Sutter, 2012). Therefore, the definition of literacy requires expansion to include digital and

multimodal practices because it needs to link student literacy skills from outside school to their academic assignments (Bauer & Theado, 2014).

2. Literature Review

The field of Applied Linguistics, alongside Second Language Acquisition (SLA), experienced an epistemological shift known as the "social turn" during the last twenty years. This shift challenged the dominance of purely quantitative, cognitive, and positivist research approaches. Specifically, the Douglas Fir Group (2016) explains this concept through their "transdisciplinary framework," which unites cognitive science with sociology and education to study language learning as an identity development process that requires learners to manage their duties toward their present society and their future community. This new method supports Ortega (2013), who promotes a "bi/multilingual turn" that opposes the traditional "target deviation" assessment method which evaluates students through comparison to monolingual native speakers. Consequently, the definition of competence has evolved into a complex concept because it now includes all semiotic abilities which students bring to their learning process. Furthermore, the transition from using fixed models in language study receives additional support from Complexity Theory because this theory shows language functions as an adaptable social system which transforms through human social interactions (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007). Reflecting these trends, research on sociocultural and identity-related subjects has grown according to bibliometric data, whereas universal grammar and other formal linguistic subjects have become less popular (Lei & Liu, 2019). This new way of understanding knowledge requires researchers to develop new methods for studying and to establish new locations where knowledge will be created. Since Hyland (2016) suggests that research methods function as fundamental scientific beliefs about language, MMR has emerged as the preferred approach to study the intricate growth of novel research methodologies (Afshar & Ranjbar, 2023; Hashemi &

Babaii, 2013). Simultaneously, research methods have expanded while teachers now conduct their own classroom-based research, producing knowledge that applies to their specific teaching environments (Hyland, 2016). The research field is undergoing a simultaneous transformation geographically; while Western institutions continue to lead, Asian institutions—including China, Iran, and Türkiye—produce more research, leading to an increased focus on "Global Englishes" (Lei & Liu, 2019; Liu et al., 2025). In this context, the research tool VOSviewer enables scientists to study the growing intellectual field which continues to develop (Liu et al., 2025). However, while recent scholarships have successfully mapped specific methodological turns (Afshar & Ranjbar, 2023) or specific journal outputs, there remains a need to synthesize these fragmented insights to understand how methodological diversity correlates with the rise of affective and digital themes globally.

Finally, the current research environment faces two main influences which result from technological progress and the current scientific interest in emotional studies. First, the learning environment has undergone a substantial transformation because of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and deep learning technological advancements, yet research indicates these systems produce unpredictable results based on student feedback instead of established academic success (Zhai et al., 2021; Golonka et al., 2014). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, together with technological advancements, has shifted education away from its conventional curriculum development process to establish online learning platforms and hybrid educational systems (Cherian, 2024). Complementing this digital focus is a "positive renaissance" regarding the internal states of learners. Research by Dewaele and Li (2020) extends beyond past anxiety studies, demonstrating that students need various emotions including enjoyment and pride to achieve learning success. Ultimately, the study of affect stands as a fundamental component of the transdisciplinary approach, which shows that the emotional-cognitive-social brain functions as the primary

system for language learning (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

3. Method

Bibliometric research depends on quantitative assessment methods as its core foundation (Linnenluecke et al., 2020). These research methods allow scientists to display their findings through multiple visualization techniques, which demonstrate annual publication patterns, show national and institutional research output, display term evolution, and expose reference connection patterns (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). For this specific study, the research used R (R Core Team, 2021) and VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010) to analyze 6,815 articles published between 2011 and 2025 from the top 14 journals in the field of language education, as ranked by the SJR score in the Scimago Journal Ranking. The analysis examined multiple elements, including the long-term pattern of academic publication growth, how different countries and institutions performed relative to each other, and the connections between frequently used terms and the emergence of new research areas.

Data Collection

The Web of Science database was selected as the source of information for this study due to its comprehensive coverage of high-quality academic literature, including rigorously reviewed abstracts and citation data from well-established journals. To ensure methodological rigor, the compilation of records for the bibliometric analysis adhered to the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), an internationally accepted framework that structures the processes of locating, filtering, and finalizing studies for inclusion in systematic and meta-analytic investigations (Page et al., 2021).

Tools for Data Collection

The analysis relied on two core software tools: the Bibliometrix library implemented in R and the

VOSviewer visualization system. Using this dual approach, statistical and computational methods were employed to examine the body of publications extracted from the finalized dataset. By leveraging these platforms, bibliometric indicators could be mapped visually, enabling an evidence-based exploration of academic discourse in the domain. Assessing highly cited and impactful studies with these tools helped uncover pivotal advances that have shaped the field's evolution. Ultimately, these applications produce a wide range of visual representations that support a comprehensive interpretation of the scholarly landscape.

Database, Terms, Criteria for Inclusion or Exclusion

The dataset examined in this study was obtained from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database through a systematic refinement procedure. To ensure the inclusion of high-impact and scientifically rigorous scholarship, the sampling strategy relied on the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) indicator. Specifically, the top 14 journals classified under the 'Linguistics and Language' and 'Education' categories, which explicitly focus on English Language Education (ELE) and Applied Linguistics, were selected. This criterion was applied to minimize selection bias and to guarantee that the analysis captures the most influential research outputs in the field. The complete list of the selected journals is presented in Appendix 1. This journal-based filtering produced 23,447 records.

The dataset was subsequently narrowed by restricting the document type to Articles, which reduced the number of publications to 11,013. Further refinement was applied using the Citation Topics Meso classification, retaining only studies categorized under Language & Linguistics, resulting in 7,841 documents. The sample was then limited by publication year, covering the period from 2011 to 2025, which yielded 6,815 records. Finally, after applying additional eligibility criteria, including language restrictions and relevance screening, the dataset was reduced to a final corpus of 6,815 articles, which constituted the basis for the bibliometric analysis (Figure 1).

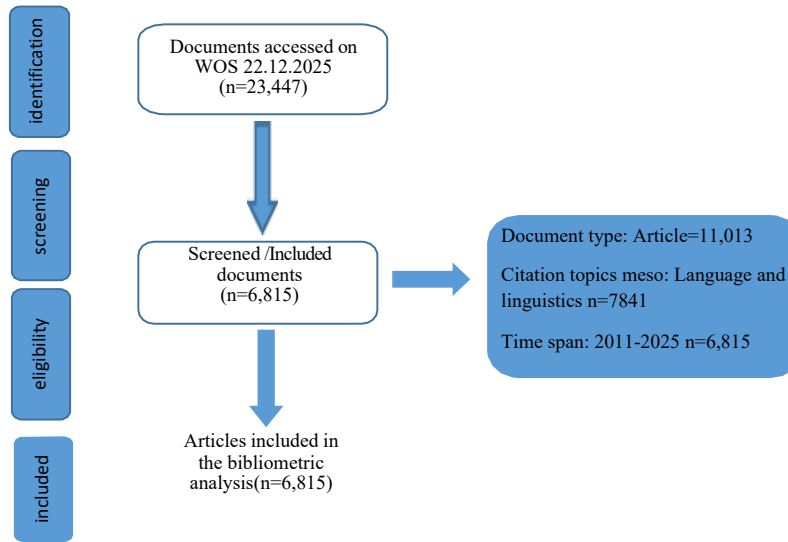


Figure 1
PRISMA Flow Diagram Steps in the Research

Analysis of Data

The bibliometric study followed a structured, multi-step procedure. It began with the formulation of a central research inquiry, followed by a comprehensive review of academic works consistent with the study’s aims. Next, an appropriate data source was chosen, publication titles were specified, and criteria for including or excluding documents were established. The subsequent step involved selecting the bibliometric

methodology and identifying the analytical instruments to be applied. Relevant records were then gathered and systematically arranged in line with the research objectives and methodological design. Afterward, the compiled data were analyzed and assessed using dedicated software packages. The process concluded with the creation of visual outputs, interpretation of the results, and presentation of the overarching conclusions. Table 1 presents a consolidated summary of the main information derived from the reviewed studies.

Table 1
Main Information about Data Analysis

Documents (articles)	6,815
Document Average Age	5.8
Average citations per doc	29
References	152,075
Author's Keywords (DE)	11593
Authors	7,575
Authors of single-authored docs	1652
Co-Authors per Doc	2.14
International co-authorships %	24.39%

As displayed in Table 1, the analysis incorporated 6,815 articles, comprising a total of 152075 cited references. These works were authored by 7575 researchers.

Prior to analysis, author keywords were screened for minor variations in spelling,

capitalization, and singular–plural forms to improve consistency across the dataset. Keyword normalization was conducted manually where necessary to merge equivalent terms while preserving conceptually distinct constructs. Thematic clusters generated through Bibliometrix

and VOSviewer were interpreted based on co-occurrence strength, network centrality, and density measures. Visual outputs were not treated as stand-alone results; rather, they were used to support the interpretation of thematic development, collaboration patterns, and emerging research directions across the corpus.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the bibliometric analysis of 6,815 publications related to ELE.

Country Collaboration Network

The international collaboration network shows a tightly connected system which positions the USA

as the leading central research center worldwide. In this capacity, the United States works with numerous countries to facilitate international scholarly coordination and knowledge sharing. In addition, China functions as a primary network hub which maintains strong partnership connections between Western nations and Asia-Pacific countries. Likewise, the UK and Canada also function as vital connection points which allow various areas to collaborate through their established network framework. Additionally, the core cluster includes Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, and Sweden, as these nations maintain active research collaborations with each other. In Figure 2, the country collaboration networks in ELE-related studies are presented.

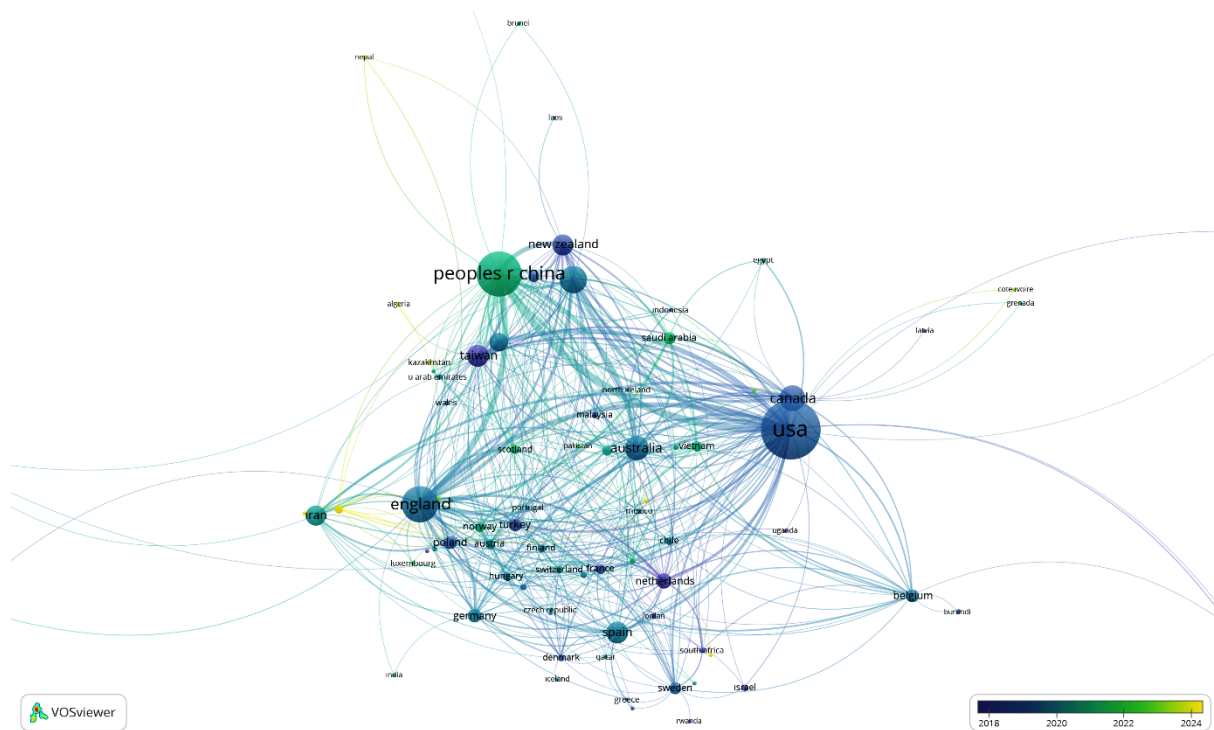


Figure 2
The Country Collaboration Networks in ELE-Related Studies

The visualization shows how Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Scotland, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Norway, and Indonesia have become more important throughout the time, as indicated by the color

gradient representing more recent activity. This pattern reflects a gradual expansion of international participation beyond traditionally influential research nations and suggests a shift toward a more

globally distributed knowledge production system. On the other hand, the network perimeter shows Burundi, Rwanda, India, Brunei, Laos, and Nepal with limited research connections that indicate their developing or specialized research activities. Overall, the collaboration map shows how research has evolved into a global field which now includes vital countries that lead the field together with new members who build up a more diverse international academic network.

Authors' Countries

An examination of the SCP/MCP distribution reveals marked differences in international collaboration patterns across countries. The United States stands out as the most productive country overall, with a substantial volume of publications; however, its output is overwhelmingly dominated by single-country production (1,518 SCP versus 326 MCP), indicating a strong reliance on domestic research capacity rather than international collaboration. A similar pattern is observed for

China, which, despite its high total output, shows a predominance of SCP (976 SCP compared to 326 MCP), suggesting that national research networks remain the primary drivers of knowledge production.

In contrast, several European countries demonstrate a more balanced or collaboration-oriented publication profile. The United Kingdom (395 SCP; 185 MCP) and Australia (181 SCP; 79 MCP) exhibit relatively strong levels of multiple-country production, reflecting their well-established international research networks and long-standing engagement in cross-border academic collaboration. Likewise, countries such as the Netherlands (66 SCP; 38 MCP), Germany (54 SCP; 30 MCP), and Belgium (50 SCP; 30 MCP) show comparatively high proportions of MCP, underscoring their openness to international partnerships and their integration into global research consortia. Figure 3 shows the corresponding author's countries on ELE research.

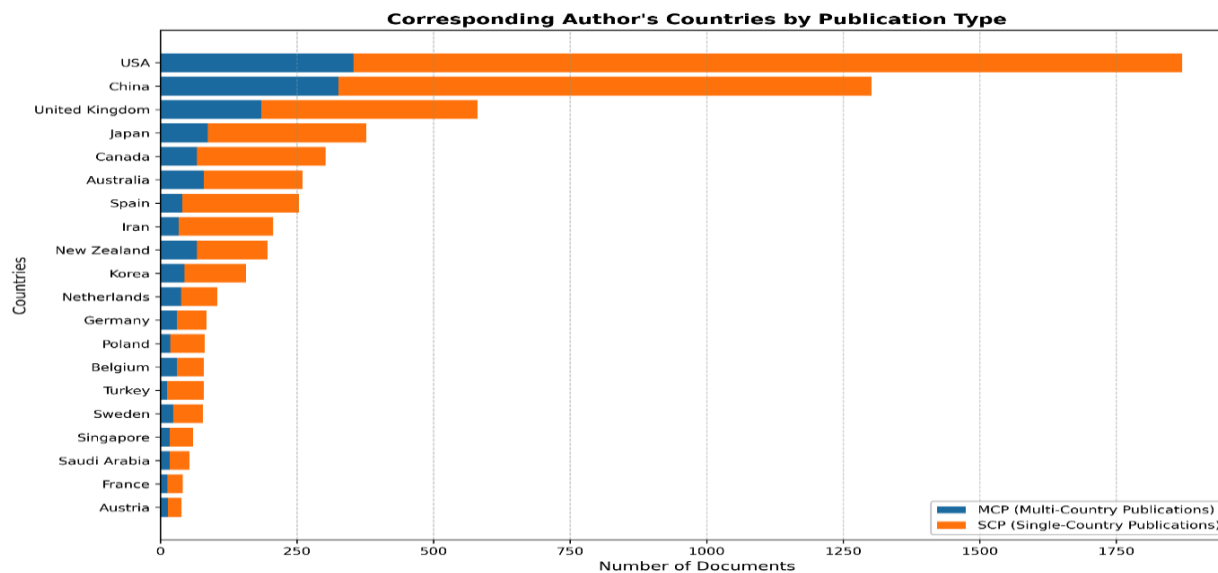


Figure 3
The Corresponding Author's Countries on ELE Research.

A notable middle group includes countries such as Canada (235 SCP; 67 MCP), New Zealand (129 SCP; 67 MCP), Spain (213 SCP; 40 MCP), and Japan

(290 SCP; 87 MCP), which combine substantial national research output with moderate levels of international collaboration. These patterns suggest stable but selective engagement in multi-country

research, often shaped by regional networks and thematic specialization. Meanwhile, countries such as Iran (173 SCP; 34 MCP), Korea (113 SCP; 44 MCP), and Poland (63 SCP; 18 MCP) demonstrate growing participation in international research, though their publication profiles remain more nationally oriented.

At the lower end of the spectrum, countries including Türkiye (67 SCP; 12 MCP), France (28 SCP; 13 MCP), Austria (25 SCP; 14 MCP), Singapore (43 SCP; 17 MCP), and Saudi Arabia (36 SCP; 17 MCP) exhibit relatively limited MCP output, indicating emerging or still-developing international collaboration capacity. Overall, the SCP/MCP distribution highlights a research landscape in which a small number of highly productive countries dominate total output, while varying degrees of international collaboration reflect differences in research infrastructure, funding mechanisms, language accessibility, and strategic priorities. The gradual increase in MCP among several countries points toward an increasingly interconnected and internationalized research field. These differences may also reflect broader inequalities in global knowledge production. Countries with extensive research funding, established publication infrastructures, and access to international academic networks are

generally better positioned to participate in collaborative projects. In contrast, higher levels of single-country production may reflect structural constraints rather than a lack of scholarly capacity. Consequently, collaboration patterns should be interpreted not only as indicators of research productivity but also as markers of unequal access to global knowledge networks.

Niche and Trend Topics

The trend topic analysis shows how research themes in this field have followed a specific time-based pattern of development. The first period from 2011 to 2013 saw researchers investigate fundamental constructs and technological aspects, including online communication, negative feedback, age-related studies, computer-based learning, and foreign language education. Collectively, this first set of topics focuses on fundamental teaching methods which combine digital resources with language learning spaces. Figure 4 shows trend topics on ELE research.

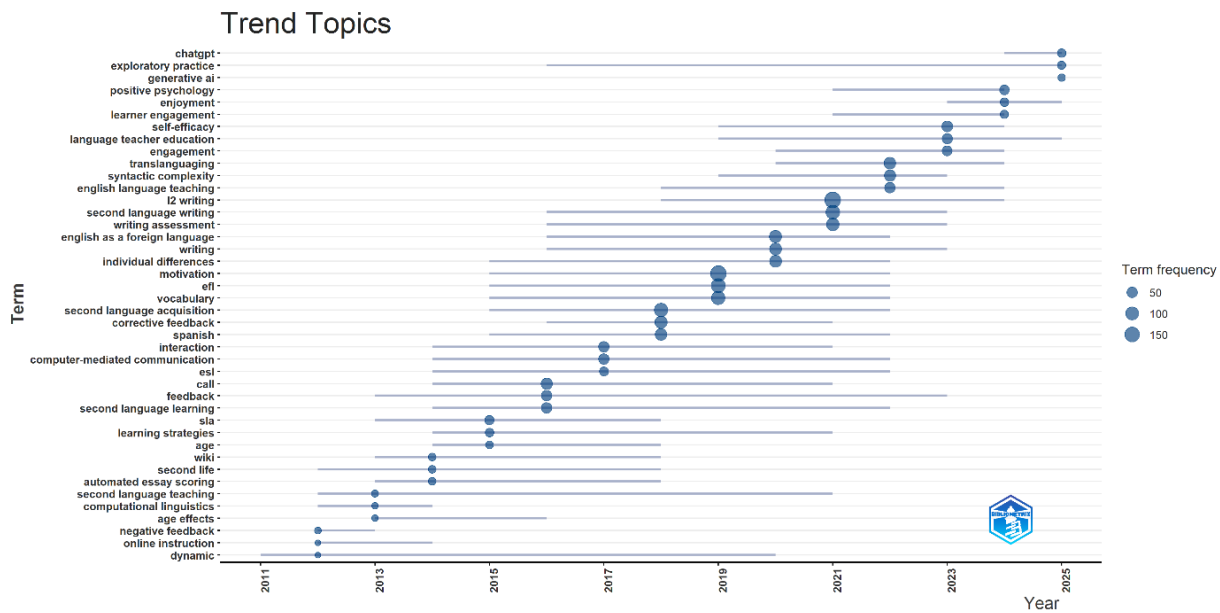


Figure 4
Trend Topics on ELE Research

Subsequently, the research investigation spanned from 2014 to 2017, during which researchers studied essential elements of second language learning. These included learning strategies, feedback, CALL, computer-mediated communication, interaction, and corrective feedback. Simultaneously, the research emphasis concentrated on vocabulary studies, motivation analysis, individual difference exploration, and EFL/ESL education. Notably, the study of learner-centered methods and cognitive-affective elements in language acquisition gained increasing popularity during this research period.

The field of study underwent a significant change in its research focus after 2018 when scientists began studying advanced social-based concepts. The research field showed growing interest in high-frequency subjects—indicated by larger bubble sizes—which included writing assessment, second language writing, L2 writing, English as a foreign language, and syntactic complexity. Specifically, the research focuses on three main themes, including engagement (and learner engagement language teacher education, and translanguaging, to study classroom

interactions, teaching methods, and language diversity in educational settings.

Finally, the research topics exhibiting the most significant growth between 2021 and 2024 include positive psychology, enjoyment, self-efficacy, generative AI, ChatGPT, and exploratory practice. This thematic clustering may reflect broader developments in the field; the emergence of 'positive psychology' and 'enjoyment' appears to be associated with the growing scholarly attention to the affective dimensions of language learning and learner well-being during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, the rapid appearance of 'Generative AI' and 'ChatGPT' reflects the discipline's growing attention to address the disruptions caused by Large Language Models (LLMs). In summary, the research trajectory has evolved from an initial focus on instrumental teaching approaches toward a complex matrix integrating advanced digital literacy with deep socio-emotional inquiry.

Figure 5 shows thematic map of studies on ELE research.

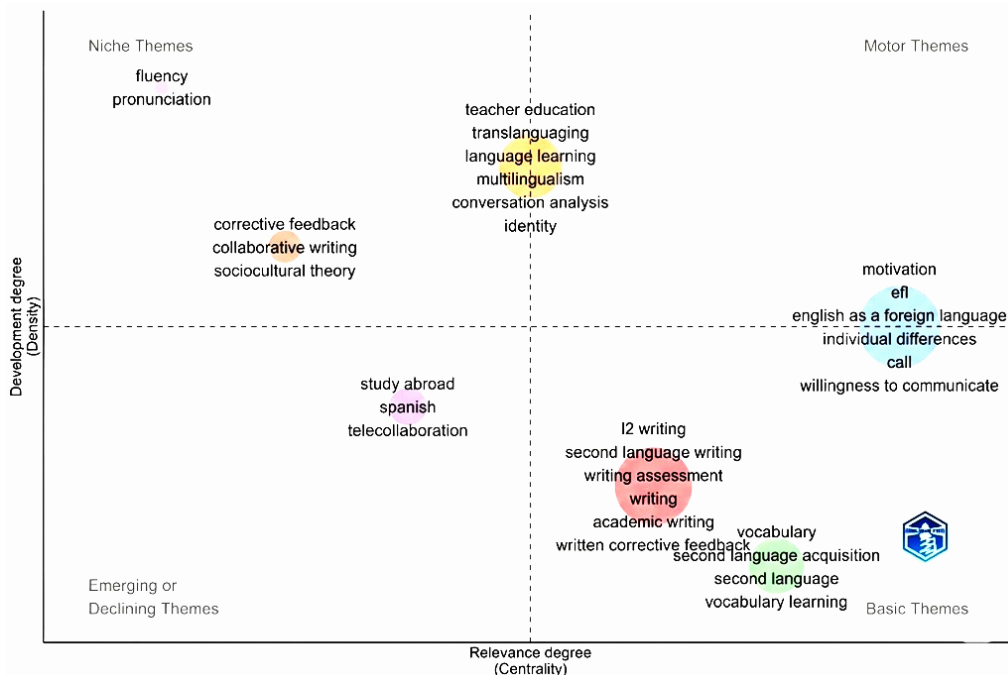


Figure 5
Thematic Map of Studies on ELE Research

The thematic map shows research topics arranged in a systematic pattern based on their importance (centrality) and their stage of advancement (density), which suggests distinct categories: motor, basic, niche, and emerging or declining research areas. First, the motor themes quadrant is characterized by highly central and well-developed topics such as teacher education, translanguaging, language learning, multilingualism, conversation analysis, and identity. The research field depends on these themes because they serve as its main drivers while being backed by a unified collection of academic studies. The positioning of 'Translanguaging' and 'Identity' as central motor themes suggests the growing prominence of multilingual perspectives within the field toward the 'multilingual turn,' confirming that these concepts have gained increasing centrality of disciplinary practice.

Second, the basic themes quadrant includes high-centrality but comparatively lower-density topics, notably English as a foreign language (EFL), motivation, individual differences, CALL, willingness to communicate, second language acquisition, vocabulary, and vocabulary learning. These research themes define core investigation areas which connect to other fields through direct relationships, while their conceptual frameworks develop to support theoretical and practical research.

In contrast, the niche themes quadrant shows well-developed yet isolated subjects, which include fluency, pronunciation, corrective feedback, collaborative writing, and sociocultural theory. Here, the research themes maintain an organized structure which enables scientists to perform studies about defined research inquiries that generate vital results for their scientific domains.

Finally, the emerging or declining themes quadrant contains three themes—study abroad, telecollaboration, and Spanish—as these topics show weak connections between their elements. These themes appear to represent either new fields which scientists have not fully incorporated into their current studies or scientific topics which experts now study less frequently. Overall, the thematic structure suggests that the field upholds its

fundamental base in pedagogy and sociolinguistics while backing both research domains and emerging academic disciplines. The current research framework shows a complete field which connects fundamental scientific investigations to recent findings and additional research domains.

In this section, the analysis covering the period from 2011 to 2025 is presented with a more specific focus on the years 2016–2025, allowing for a comparative examination of biannual trend differences. The radar chart reveals a pronounced and systematic shift in both thematic priorities and research methodologies in journal publications between 2016 and 2025. Initially, the research focus during 2016–2018 centered on educational methods and evaluation procedures, which included studies about error correction, washback effects, test validity assessment, vocabulary education, and classroom teaching practices. The research methods used in this phase consisted mainly of quantitative and quasi-experimental approaches which depended on test results, controlled teaching methods, and survey research techniques. Research about technology existed but it concentrated on basic computer-based communication systems, automated testing systems, and controlled online platforms, demonstrating a practical approach to digital technology implementation.

Subsequently, the field expanded its thematic range between 2018 and 2020 because researchers started studying collaborative writing, task-based language teaching, telecollaboration, motivation, study abroad, identity, and sociocultural theory. The research adopted thematic diversification which brought about a distinct change in research methods using mixed-methods and qualitative approaches that included interviews, reflective journals, discourse analysis, and classroom interaction data. The research designs of this time frame studied learning processes and student-to-student interactions which took place in real classroom settings instead of tracking numbers, indicating that scientists started using data analysis techniques to study student needs. Figure 6 shows thematic shifts in journal research topics from 2016 to 2025.

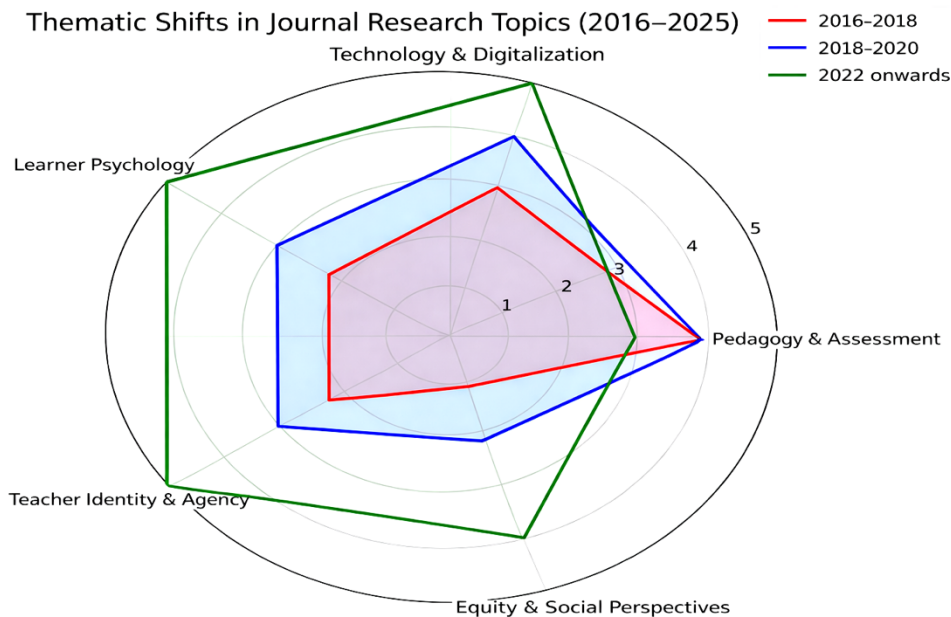


Figure 6
Thematic Shifts in Journal Research Topics from 2016 to 2025

Starting from 2022, the radar chart shows a major shift in educational focus toward psychological, social, and ethical subjects. These include student engagement, foreign language enjoyment, self-efficacy, teacher identity, teacher agency, equity, social justice, resilience, and growth language mindset. Simultaneously, the field of artificial intelligence, generative AI, digital literacy, virtual exchange, and multimodal composing research has expanded rapidly because educational settings are undergoing rapid technological transformations. The current research phase suggests enhanced research approaches through qualitative studies using longitudinal methods together with new approaches such as narrative inquiry, duoethnography, design-based research, and exploratory practice. These methods enable scientists to study participants through their real-life activities while they practice self-reflection and retain their decision-making abilities, exceeding the capabilities of traditional experimental study designs.

In summary, the research progression shows a distinct development from mainly positivist studies which focused on results to comprehensive methods which study complete experiences while

following ethical standards. The integration of digital tools with psychosocial and critical methods enables education to handle multiple educational problems which result from student migration and the requirement for accessible learning spaces. Ultimately, the research field has evolved through this change which brings together different research approaches while studying how people learn and teach languages.

5. Discussion

The present bibliometric analysis of 6,815 articles published between 2011 and 2025 provides empirical evidence for the significant epistemological shifts characterizing the field of English Language Education (ELE). By mapping the longitudinal growth, geographic distribution, and thematic evolution of the discipline, this study substantiates the theoretical claims of a "social turn" (Block, 2003; Johnson, 2006) and supports the emergence of a "transdisciplinary framework" as advocated by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). The findings reveal a field that has increasingly incorporated social, affective, and technological perspectives alongside cognitive traditions.

The thematic evolution observed in this study mirrors the theoretical shift described by Firth and Wagner (1997) and Norton (2010), moving increasingly from the "computational metaphor" toward "identity work." The prominence of topics such as identity, translanguaging, and social justice suggests that social dimensions of language learning have become increasingly influential within the field. While cognitive and instructional approaches remain active areas of inquiry, the growing visibility of these themes indicates a broader diversification of theoretical perspectives. This extends the work of Lei and Liu (2019), who identified early signals of social dimensions; the current analysis demonstrates that these concepts have now achieved "motor theme" status. Furthermore, the emergence of "translanguaging" and "multilingualism" as central nodes aligns with Ortega's (2013) "bi/multilingual turn," signaling a growing challenge to "target deviation" perspectives and deficit models criticized by McKay (2010).

The findings from the post-pandemic era (2021–2025) reveal a unique dual trajectory: the simultaneous ascent of high-technology (Generative AI, ChatGPT) and high-affect (Positive Psychology, Enjoyment) themes. The emergence of Generative AI and ChatGPT reflects the rapid integration of deep learning technologies into language education and supports observations regarding the growing influence of AI in educational settings (Zhai et al., 2021).

At the same time, the increasing prominence of positive psychology and enjoyment indicates the ongoing "emotional turn" in the field (Dewaele & Li, 2020). This trend indicates that researchers continue to emphasize learner well-being, resilience, and affective development despite the accelerating pace of technological change.

The juxtaposition of these domains suggests that the field is not abandoning the social turn for a technological one. Rather, it appears to be entering a post-digital phase in which human identity, emotion, and algorithmic interaction increasingly coexist within language learning environments. This observation aligns with the transdisciplinary perspective that conceptualizes language learning as a complex adaptive system involving both

human and non-human agents (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Cherian, 2024).

This ontological shift toward complexity and learner agency has necessitated a visible transformation in the research methodologies published in academic journals. The analysis of journal publications (Figure 6) reveals a notable trajectory: the dominance of quantitative and quasi-experimental designs between 2016 and 2018—heavily reliant on test scores and surveys—reflected the lingering influence of positivist paradigms where language learning was viewed as a measurable, linear output. However, the subsequent surge in Mixed Methods Research (MMR) and the post-2022 proliferation of qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry, duoethnography, and exploratory practice signals a critical pivot.

This evolution is not merely technical but epistemological; as Hyland (2016) argues, research methods are not "neutral options" but manifestations of underlying theoretical beliefs. The increasing acceptance of these interpretative methodologies in high-impact journals suggests that the discipline has embraced Complexity Theory (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007), acknowledging that the nuanced, fluid constructs of learner identity and investment (Norton, 2010) cannot be fully captured through static metrics alone but require the "thick description" that only qualitative and principled mixed-methods approaches (Afshar & Ranjbar, 2023) can provide.

Finally, the geographic distribution of this research underscores a gradual diversification (Liu et al., 2025). While the US and UK remain influential, the rising collaboration networks involving Asian contexts like China, Iran, and Indonesia challenge the "native speaker" hegemony in knowledge production, pointing toward a more truly globalized research landscape (Mufwene, 2010).

6. Implications

The findings of this study offer theoretical and practical implications for the field of ELE. Specifically, the findings provide quantitative

evidence that is broadly consistent with the Transdisciplinary Framework developed by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). The established shift between cognitive-computational and socio-affective themes requires new SLA theoretical frameworks to study the "emotional-cognitive-social brain" system, as present models keep linguistic competence separate from learner identity. Furthermore, the bibliometric maps show that "World Englishes" and "Translanguaging" hold significant importance, supporting the requirement to analyze the "native speaker fallacy" (McKay, 2010) in theoretical work by studying language as a system which adapts in local contexts (Mufwene, 2010).

Regarding practical applications, the research results establish requirements which determine teacher education methods and the subjects which should be included in their curriculum. The educational sector now emphasizes "praxis" according to Johnson (2006) because teachers engage in research activities through their practice of action research and teacher agency. Consequently, teacher training programs need to focus on developing reflective practices and creating local knowledge instead of following methods that come from above. Moreover, educational institutions need to create a teaching method which keeps subjects in balance, as AI development now combines with positive psychology. The Generative AI revolution demands digital literacy competencies from educators according to Zhai et al. (2021), while simultaneously fostering emotional resilience and "enjoyment" (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Ultimately, the absence of technological facts and emotional aspects in curricula will produce educational programs which fail to meet the needs of contemporary "poststructuralist subjects" (Norton, 2010).

7. Suggestions for Future Research

The research needs to follow multiple paths which stem from both current knowledge deficiencies and upcoming industry developments. First, regarding technological impact, the research shows AI-related publications experienced a significant increase

during the study period, yet researchers have not proven the enduring effectiveness of these technologies (Golonka et al., 2014). Therefore, future researchers need to advance from perception studies by conducting long-term research to understand how Generative AI affects language learning and student identity development through time.

Simultaneously, the research community shows increasing interest in Mixed Methods Research (MMR), yet Hashemi and Babaii (2013) determine that "principled mixing" stands as the main obstacle which prevents their research from progressing. Consequently, research in the future should unite qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques through an integrated method which surpasses separate execution to understand the complex nature of the "social turn".

Finally, concerning research geography expansion, the increasing number of Asian research outputs shows that top nations continue to use Single Country Production (SCP) as their main production method. To address this, research should focus on international partnerships which unite Global North and Global South institutions to study educational settings that lack current representation.

8. Conclusion

The present bibliometric analysis of 6,815 articles published between 2011 and 2025 offers a comprehensive, data-driven mapping of the epistemological evolution within English Language Education (ELE). The findings provide substantial evidence for the growing influence of social, affective, and transdisciplinary perspectives within English Language Education. Rather than indicating a complete replacement of earlier cognitive traditions, the results suggest that multiple paradigms currently coexist, with social and identity-oriented approaches becoming increasingly visible within the contemporary research landscape. Specifically, the research data shows that the field followed a specific development path which started with teaching methods and individual thinking skills before

advancing to identity development, social justice, and translanguaging practices. This development follows the Douglas Fir Group (2016) transdisciplinary framework, which shows how modern research studies language learners as social beings who handle power dynamics instead of treating them primarily as input-processing individuals.

Furthermore, the research investigates how people now experience two opposing trends which combine their desire for technological progress with their need to focus on positive emotions. Consequently, the upcoming development of ELE will focus on building digital education systems which use technology to support student autonomy while building supportive learning spaces for students. Simultaneously, the field now displays rising methodological diversity because researchers perform Mixed Methods Research and qualitative inquiry, while knowledge production shifts to Asian locations, creating a more democratic research environment. Ultimately, the research shows how the field undergoes transformation because it now addresses multiple challenges which emerge from worldwide connections, environmental changes, and digital progress.

9. Limitations

The research delivers important findings about ELE development, yet researchers need to understand the built-in restrictions which occur when using bibliometric methods. First, the data collection was restricted to the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. While the database maintains its reputation for strict journal indexing criteria, its selection process tends to choose English-language journals with high impact, which might block important research from regional journals, non-English publications, and grey literature that present different viewpoints from the Global South. Consequently, the research data indicates that democracy is advancing, but the worldwide diversity of academic fields might not receive proper documentation.

Second, the document type restriction in this system allowed only articles to be included while

blocking access to books, their chapters, and conference papers. This limits the study because the thematic mapping process becomes less comprehensive, as Applied Linguistics and SLA researchers mainly distribute their core theoretical work through monographs and edited volumes. Third, the bibliometric indicator which depends on citation counts faces a time delay because it requires time to establish itself. For instance, the publications from 2024 and 2025 about Generative AI and other new subjects have not received enough citation activity to match the citation numbers of established research papers. Therefore, the citation network analysis fails to show the complete influence which these emerging concepts will have on the field.

Finally, the keyword analysis delivers a complete picture of major trends, but it uses metadata instead of performing a complete text analysis, which might miss detailed changes within terms. To address this, the research needs to overcome its current restrictions using multiple databases—including Scopus and Google Scholar—and by conducting qualitative systematic reviews which will enhance the quantitative bibliometric data.

Statements and Declarations

Competing Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical consent was not necessary as the study does not include human participants.

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Availability of Data and Materials

Data for the study can be sent upon reasonable request.

AI Use

The use of AI was limited to language polishing purposes and to creating Figure 6.

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