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Speaking into Dissonance

Foreign Language Learning, Cognitive Dissonance, and Epistemic Plurality

A study of language learning as epistemic training in dissonance tolerance and democratic resilience

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Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This study argues that foreign language learning constitutes a unique form of epistemic training in dissonance tolerance. Drawing on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, evolutionary evidence from children and non-human primates, and recent work on the Foreign Language Effect (FLe), I reframe linguistic discomfort not as a pedagogical hurdle but as an epistemic event. Speaking in a second language (L2) exposes the learner to repeated misalignments between intention and expression, producing dissonance that is neither pathological nor incidental, but constitutive of knowledge itself. Integrating behavioural and fMRI studies on belief resistance, cross-cultural research on conformity, and my own *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*, I show how foreign language use habituates learners to plurality, weakens conformity pressures, and fosters democratic resilience. The study contributes theoretically by reconceptualising dissonance epistemically; empirically by bringing bilingualism and neuroscience into dialogue with governance debates; and normatively by positioning language education as scaffolding for pluralist democracy.

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Keywords

cognitive dissonance, epistemic dissonance, foreign language effect, bilingualism, second language acquisition, epistemic plurality, epistemic clientelism, epistemic justice, conformity, autonomy, authority, cognitive flexibility, belief revision, neuroscience of language, dual-systems theory, democratic pedagogy, higher education, knowledge governance, epistemic resilience, epistemic agency

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Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Opening vignette: speaking into discomfort

Imagine standing before a group of native speakers, rehearsing a sentence in your mind before letting it escape into the air. You know the vocabulary. You have studied the grammar. Yet, when you finally speak, the syllables stumble, the accent falters, and your listeners' expressions flicker—polite, puzzled, indulgent. In that instant, you are no longer the assured agent of your own thought but a hesitant outsider, painfully aware of the mismatch between intention and expression.

Foreign language learning is often imagined as accumulation—more words, more rules, more fluency. But for the learner, especially when speaking before others, it is at least as much about enduring this embodied discomfort. The act of speaking into a foreign language is a continual confrontation with the misalignment between inner competence and outer performance. It is precisely this confrontation—this lived dissonance—that becomes the starting point for a deeper epistemic inquiry.

1.2 Problem statement: why this discomfort matters

At first sight, the embarrassment of mispronunciation or the frustration of being misunderstood may appear trivial: a mere inconvenience on the road to fluency. Yet when I view this discomfort through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory, it acquires wider significance. Cognitive dissonance describes the aversive state that arises when one's actions, beliefs, or perceptions are in conflict {Festinger 1957}.

The typical example is moral hypocrisy: saying one thing, doing another. But what happens when the dissonance is not moral but linguistic—when it emerges in the very act of speaking? In such moments I experience myself as both agent and stranger: knowing what I wish to say yet unable to enact it with precision.

This matters beyond pedagogy. In multilingual societies, the capacity to tolerate such dissonance is indispensable. To engage in dialogue across linguistic and cultural boundaries requires resilience not only of intellect but of disposition: the ability to persist despite discomfort, to remain open despite perceived inadequacy. If we take seriously the role of language as a medium of shared knowledge, then learning to speak under dissonance becomes a form of training in democratic life.

1.3 Research gap: from attitudes to epistemic justice

The classical dissonance literature has been preoccupied with attitudes and choices—how individuals justify decisions, reduce conflict, or align beliefs {Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills 2019}. Elegant experimental paradigms confirm that dissonance occurs even in non-human primates and young children {Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007}. Yet little attention has been paid to language use as a site where dissonance is routinely generated and negotiated.

Meanwhile, research on bilingualism has highlighted the Foreign Language Effect (FLe): the tendency for individuals to make less emotionally charged, more deliberative decisions when reasoning in their second language {Keysar, Hayakawa & An 2012; Costa et al. 2014}. Throughout this study, I use L1 to denote a speaker's first or dominant language, and L2 to denote a second, non-native language acquired later in life. Although this terminology is conventional in applied linguistics, I acknowledge its limitations: language dominance can shift over time, and many multilinguals do not have a single, fixed 'first' language. For clarity, however, I retain L1/L2 as shorthand.

This line of work points to muted affective response in L2, with implications for moral reasoning, risk assessment, and persuasion. A recent study shows that bilinguals using their L2 are more open to revising political beliefs under counterevidence compared to monolinguals {Miller et al. 2025}.

What is missing is an integrated account: one that treats foreign language learning not merely as a cognitive phenomenon or classroom challenge, but as an epistemic practice—a way of encountering, tolerating, and eventually cultivating plurality in knowledge. This project builds on recent work reconceptualising dissonance as an epistemic event {Kahl 2025, *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event*}, and connects to broader concerns about epistemic justice {Fricker 2007}.

1.4 Research questions

Against this background, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. **Cognitive dimension** — How does the act of speaking a foreign language generate cognitive dissonance, and what distinguishes this form from dissonance in other domains?

2. **Neuroscientific and behavioural evidence** — What do fMRI and behavioural studies reveal about how foreign language processing modulates emotional resistance and belief change?

3. **Conformity and epistemic structures** — How do conformity pressures in language acquisition (classrooms, peer norms, social identity) shape the learner's engagement with dissonance?

4. **Normative implications** — Can foreign language learning be understood as training in tolerating dissonance and, by extension, in cultivating epistemic plurality?

5. **Governance and educational policy** — What are the implications of viewing foreign language education as epistemic training for democratic resilience, institutional design, and the mitigation of epistemic clientelism?

1.5 Thesis statement

I argue that foreign language learning constitutes a unique form of epistemic training in dissonance tolerance, whereby I am repeatedly confronted with the discomfort of misalignment between intention, linguistic ability, and social recognition. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory {Festinger 1957},

evolutionary evidence {Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007}, recent behavioural studies on the Foreign Language Effect {Miller et al. 2025}, and my own epistemic reframing of dissonance {Kahl 2025, *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event*}, I contend that the act of speaking into dissonance habituates individuals to epistemic plurality. Far from being a mere pedagogical hurdle, foreign language learning functions as an emancipatory practice: it equips us to resist conformity pressures, weakens the grip of epistemic clientelism, and fosters resilience in pluralist democracies.

1.6 Outline of structure

The argument unfolds in six substantive chapters:

- Chapter 2: Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event — introduces classical and evolutionary accounts of dissonance and reframes them as epistemic, not merely psychological.
- Chapter 3: The Foreign Language Effect and the Neuroscience of Belief Change — reviews behavioural and fMRI evidence on bilingualism, affect dampening, and openness to counterevidence.
- Chapter 4: Conformity, Authority, and the Politics of Language Learning — situates language acquisition in the dynamics of social conformity, authority, and epistemic clientelism.
- Chapter 5: Learning as Training in Dissonance Tolerance — develops the central claim: the very discomfort of speaking L2 is what habituates learners to plurality.
- Chapter 6: Toward Epistemic Plurality — explores normative implications for democracy, higher education, and institutional design.
- Chapter 7: Conclusion — synthesises findings and outlines contributions to psychology, philosophy, and governance.

2. Cognitive Dissonance: From Psychological Mechanism to Epistemic Event

2.1 Classical theory: Festinger's account of dissonance as psychological tension

I begin with Festinger's original account of cognitive dissonance, introduced in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* {Festinger 1957}. Festinger argued that when individuals hold two cognitions that are inconsistent—whether beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours—they experience a state of psychological discomfort. I find this starting point useful because it locates dissonance not in abstract philosophy but in lived experience: the immediate and bodily sense that 'something does not fit'.

Festinger's early experiments made this discomfort visible. In the famous 'boring task' study, participants who were paid only $1 to tell others that a dull task was enjoyable later reported greater

enjoyment than those who were paid $20. Festinger explained this by suggesting that the smaller payment left participants with insufficient external justification for lying. To resolve the tension between their behaviour (lying) and their self-conception (as honest), they changed their reported attitudes. The psychological strain of inconsistency, in other words, motivated a shift in belief.

For Festinger, then, dissonance was a drive state, akin to hunger or thirst. It was something to be reduced or eliminated. His model assumed that people are motivated towards consistency and that inconsistency is maladaptive. I take this as the classical baseline: dissonance framed as a psychological tension, significant only insofar as it is resolved.

This framing has been enormously influential, but it also left dissonance confined within psychology. It was seen as a flaw to be managed rather than as a structural feature of knowing. In what follows, I begin to push against that reduction.

2.2 Evolutionary evidence: children and monkeys showing aversive reactions

I turn next to the evolutionary evidence, which reveals that dissonance is not confined to adult reasoning but is a more basic cognitive event. Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) showed that both children and capuchin monkeys exhibit behaviours consistent with dissonance reduction {Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007}. This finding matters to me because it undermines any notion that dissonance is simply a cultural or educational artefact. Instead, it points to a deep, perhaps universal, cognitive mechanism.

In their study, children were first given a choice between two equally attractive stickers. After making this choice, they were asked to choose again, now between the rejected sticker and a new one. Strikingly, children tended to devalue the sticker they had previously rejected, preferring the new option instead. This mirrors the classical 'spreading of alternatives' effect first described in adult decision-making {Festinger 1957}.

What makes this compelling is that capuchin monkeys showed the same pattern. After choosing between two food items of equal appeal, they tended to avoid the item they had initially rejected when later offered it against a third option. The conclusion seems inescapable: dissonance reduction is not uniquely human, and it does not depend on linguistic justification.

I see this as a powerful clue. Dissonance appears as an embodied and pre-linguistic mechanism, one that pushes organisms away from contradiction. From an evolutionary standpoint, such a mechanism may have conferred adaptive advantages—streamlining choice, reducing hesitation, and preserving coherence in action. But more importantly for my purposes, dissonance already functions here as a structuring of valuation: it does not merely resolve tension but actively shapes what counts as preferable. This anticipates my reframing of dissonance as an epistemic event.

2.3 Epistemic reframing: dissonance as epistemic event

The classical account and the evolutionary evidence both treat dissonance as a problem to be managed: a psychological strain that needs to be reduced. Festinger spoke of dissonance as a drive state, akin to hunger or thirst, that motivates a person to restore consistency {Festinger 1957}. This view has remained dominant, but it risks narrowing the scope of dissonance to the domain of pathology—something to be eliminated rather than understood.

In my own work, I have argued for a different interpretation. In *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* {Kahl 2025}, I proposed that dissonance is not merely an affective discomfort but a constitutive moment of knowing. When I describe dissonance as an 'epistemic event', I mean that it marks the precise boundary where established patterns of thought are destabilised and new possibilities of understanding emerge. A psychological event is about the inner strain of tension; an epistemic event is about the reorganisation of one's access to truth.

I take the small bodily wince one feels when speaking a foreign language and being corrected by a native speaker as a microcosm of this epistemic event. In that instant, I encounter my own insufficiency. Yet precisely this insufficiency opens a path to growth. To tolerate dissonance is to remain in contact with plurality, to resist the premature closure of judgement, and to allow one's own categories to shift.

This reframing makes dissonance not an error but a condition of authenticity. By enduring dissonance—by staying with the discomfort—I avoid the trap of epistemic clientelism, where deference to authority substitutes for truth. Later in this study I will return to this point, showing how dissonance operates as a structural defence of autonomy. What Festinger identified as drive reduction, I treat as a moment of bounded freedom: the fragile but necessary condition that allows me to know, and to know differently.

2.4 Implications: Why dissonance is not a pathology but a condition of knowledge

When I first encountered Festinger's theory, I took it as a description of something I knew from experience: the uneasy pull of contradictory commitments, the felt need to smooth out the tension {Festinger 1957}. But the more I worked with dissonance in my own research, the less adequate this framing seemed. If I accept the classical view, dissonance is a flaw: evidence that my system of beliefs is broken, and that I must restore harmony as quickly as possible. For me, this misses the real point. When I describe *dissonance as an epistemic event* {Kahl 2025}, I mean that the discomfort is no longer evidence of failure; it is the very condition of freedom.

The first implication of this shift is what I would call the moral economy of dissonance. Rather than asking how to reduce it, I ask how to endure it, and sometimes even how to cultivate it. I see foreign language learning as a kind of training ground for this endurance. Each time I stumble through a sentence in my second language, each time I am corrected or laughed at, I am rehearsing the ability to stay present with epistemic plurality. In the classroom, this is not simply about skill acquisition. It is an

arena in which students and teachers learn how to inhabit discomfort together, without collapsing into silence or into premature conformity.

Second, I find that this reframing unsettles the boundary between psychology and epistemology. Festinger's model described dissonance as drive reduction {Festinger 1957}, and evolutionary studies showed the same aversive reaction in children and monkeys {Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007}. Those findings remain important, but I interpret them differently. What looks like a mechanism of discomfort management also shapes what counts as valid, coherent, or true. Dissonance is not merely a psychological state; it is a normative event that restructures my relationship to knowledge itself.

Third, I believe that this epistemic interpretation has consequences for autonomy. If I allow others—institutions, teachers, political authorities—to eliminate dissonance for me, I risk sliding into epistemic clientelism. To be shielded from discomfort is, paradoxically, to be domesticated. I have seen this in higher education, where peer review systems or accreditation rituals can remove the friction of dissent. By contrast, staying with dissonance is a way of defending autonomy. It becomes a structural safeguard against being told what to think.

I also notice this in everyday professional life. When two colleagues disagree over a design decision, the temptation is to resolve the tension swiftly—sometimes by deference to hierarchy. Yet if I treat the disagreement as an epistemic event, the tension itself becomes productive. It forces me to examine assumptions, to test alternatives, to accept that more than one valid perspective may exist. In this way, dissonance protects me from mistaking authority for truth.

Finally, I see broader social and democratic implications. A pluralist society depends on citizens who can tolerate dissonance: who can hear views that contradict their own, feel the discomfort, and still remain engaged. If all we do is reduce dissonance—by withdrawing into echo chambers or conforming to dominant narratives—then democracy itself becomes brittle. Enduring dissonance is not easy, but it is the price of epistemic justice.

For me, then, dissonance is not a pathology but a condition of knowledge. It is the fragile moment in which freedom is exercised, not in the absence of discomfort but through it. In the next chapter, I turn to foreign language learning as a practice that makes this visible. Speaking in a second language (L2) becomes more than a communicative challenge: it becomes an apprenticeship in enduring plurality, a lived rehearsal of what it means to know differently.

3. Foreign Language Effect and the Neuroscience of Belief Change

3.1 The Foreign Language Effect: slower, less emotional processing in L2

The Foreign Language Effect (FLe) refers to the systematic difference in how individuals process information when using a second language (L2) as opposed to their first (L1). A growing body of research

demonstrates that in L2, decisions tend to be slower, less emotionally charged, and more deliberative {Keysar, Hayakawa & An 2012; Costa et al. 2014}. This pattern is not merely anecdotal but empirically robust across domains ranging from moral dilemmas to risk assessment.

The mechanism appears to involve both cognitive and affective dimensions. Linguistic processing in L2 carries a higher cognitive load, requiring more working memory resources and resulting in slower responses. At the same time, affective resonance is muted: taboo words elicit weaker autonomic responses, moral dilemmas provoke more utilitarian judgements, and ideological commitments are more susceptible to revision. As Miller et al. (2025) show, bilinguals reasoning in their L2 exhibit greater openness to changing political beliefs when presented with counterevidence compared to monolinguals or bilinguals reasoning in their L1.

In my own view, this convergence of slowed cognition and dampened affect is critical. It transforms language use into a lived site where the boundaries of belief are tested. Speaking or reasoning in L2 does not eliminate dissonance but alters its phenomenology: discomfort persists, yet it is filtered through slower, less impulsive processes. This altered mode of processing suggests that the FLe may itself function as a kind of epistemic training.

3.2 Bilingualism and cognitive flexibility

The implications of the FLe extend beyond individual decision-making to broader questions of cognitive flexibility. Research on bilingualism consistently shows that L2 use reduces emotional reactivity and increases willingness to engage with conflicting evidence {Miller et al. 2025}. This pattern supports a broader hypothesis: that bilinguals, particularly when operating in L2, are less bound by defensive reactions to identity-threatening information.

The finding resonates with dissonance research in evolutionary psychology. Egan, Santos and Bloom (2007) demonstrated that both children and non-human primates exhibit dissonance-like behaviour when forced to choose between equally valued options. What distinguishes bilinguals in L2 contexts is not the absence of dissonance but a greater openness to working through it. In other words, L2 may scaffold a tolerance for discomfort rather than a flight from it.

This becomes particularly salient in contexts of persuasion and belief maintenance. Kaplan et al. (2016) showed through fMRI studies that resistance to political counterarguments is associated with activation in brain regions tied to emotion and self-related processing. By contrast, He et al. (2021) report that bilinguals using L2 show attenuated emotional activation when making decisions, suggesting that the very neural circuits implicated in belief defence are modulated by language context.

I take this to indicate that bilingualism, especially when it places the speaker into an L2 frame, offers not merely a communicative advantage but a distinctive epistemic affordance: it cultivates the capacity to remain with dissonance long enough for reflection to occur. This is the pivot from bilingualism as a cognitive phenomenon to bilingualism as an epistemic practice.

3.3 fMRI studies: political belief resistance and emotional dampening

The neuroscience of belief maintenance provides further insight into how language context modulates dissonance. Kaplan et al. (2016) demonstrated that defending strongly held political beliefs against counterevidence activates the orbitofrontal cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—regions associated with cognitive flexibility—while also engaging the insula and amygdala, which are central to emotional resistance. Their findings suggest that when ideological identity is threatened, the brain recruits both reflective and affective systems to stabilise belief.

By contrast, fMRI evidence from bilingual decision-making reveals a different profile. He et al. (2021) report reduced activation in emotional circuitry, including the amygdala, when participants reason in L2. This attenuation does not eliminate conflict but modulates its intensity, creating conditions under which counterevidence can be entertained without overwhelming defensive reactions. The slower reading and response times reported by Miller et al. (2025) complement these findings: reduced affective arousal and increased deliberation together foster a context in which dissonance can be processed more reflectively.

What strikes me here is the convergence between behavioural and neural data: both point to a reconfiguration of the dissonance experience in L2. Where L1 often triggers rapid, identity-protective resistance, L2 introduces a pause—both temporal and affective—that makes space for belief revision. This 'space of hesitation', to borrow my own phrasing, is precisely where epistemic plurality can take root.

3.4 Dual-systems framing: System 1 and System 2 as scaffolds

Kahneman's (2011) dual-systems framework offers a useful, if simplified, lens through which to interpret the Foreign Language Effect. System 1 is fast, intuitive, and affect-driven; System 2 is slow, effortful, and deliberative. In L1 contexts, dissonance often recruits System 1: identity threat produces rapid defensive responses, emotionally charged and resistant to change. In L2, however, the burdened processing and reduced affective resonance shift the balance towards System 2, lengthening the interval between stimulus and response.

It would be misleading to suggest that bilingualism simply 'switches off' System 1. Emotional responses remain, but they are dampened and displaced. What changes is the ratio: System 2 gains more influence, not by replacing System 1, but by scaffolding over its impulses. In my interpretation, this scaffolding effect is the neurological correlate of what I have elsewhere called 'epistemic eventfulness' {Kahl 2025, Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event}. Language context reshapes the architecture of how dissonance is experienced, processed, and ultimately resolved.

This does not mean that L2 users are invariably more rational or open-minded; cultural, social, and motivational factors remain decisive. But the empirical record suggests that the language frame can bias the balance between immediate affective defence and reflective engagement. To put it differently: L2 does not abolish dissonance—it teaches the speaker how to live with it.

3.5 Relevance to dissonance: why language use magnifies, then trains, dissonance tolerance

The convergence of behavioural, neuroscientific, and dual-systems evidence leads to a key insight: foreign language use does not diminish dissonance but reshapes its trajectory. In L1, dissonance is acute, emotionally saturated, and often discharged through rapid defensive manoeuvres. In L2, by contrast, the slower pace of processing and muted affective resonance prolong the discomfort rather than abolishing it.

From the learner's perspective, this prolongation can feel like magnification: every hesitation, every mispronunciation, every flicker of doubt is amplified by the latency of L2 processing. Yet precisely because the discomfort cannot be discharged so quickly, it becomes an opportunity for reflection. The learner inhabits the gap between intention and expression, between the desire to affirm a belief and the delayed capacity to articulate it.

Here lies the epistemic significance. Cognitive dissonance in language use is not merely a psychological irritant; it is a practice ground for epistemic resilience. To speak in L2 is to rehearse the discipline of staying with discomfort, of suspending premature closure, of tolerating the plurality of possible meanings. I have argued elsewhere that dissonance should be re-framed as an epistemic event {Kahl 2025, *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event*}. The Foreign Language Effect adds a new dimension: by altering the balance of affect and deliberation, L2 use makes that event more durable, more open to transformation, and more resistant to conformity pressures.

In this sense, foreign language learning functions as an implicit pedagogy of plurality. It habituates individuals to the unsettling recognition that knowledge is never seamless, that understanding is always partial, and that meaning emerges not despite dissonance but through it. If Festinger {1957} first saw dissonance as a threat to cognitive stability, I interpret it here as a resource: a generative tension through which learners can cultivate the virtues of epistemic openness and democratic resilience.

4. Conformity, Authority, and the Politics of Language Learning

4.1 Language classrooms as theatres of conformity

Consider the scene: a language teacher poses a question, and twenty students look down, waiting for someone else to answer. When one finally speaks, the rest nod or remain silent, as if assent itself were part of the lesson. This is not merely pedagogy; it is conformity in miniature. Classic social psychology reminds us how quickly individual judgment bends toward group consensus {Asch 1956}. Feldman's account goes further: conformity here is not just a situational quirk but a politically structured disposition—a learned deference to authority that preserves order even when it suppresses autonomy {Feldman 2003}.

In a language classroom, that structure is everywhere. The teacher is the node of authority; peers function as a barometer of acceptable speech. Institutional scripts—initiation–response–feedback routines, hand-raising, turn-taking, choral repetition, error correction—constitute a choreography of 'right' participation. Grading regimes and attendance records make assent legible; syllabi and pacing guides standardise what counts as progress. Even the micro-architecture matters: fixed seating, front-facing rows, the clock that parcels attention into units. Under these conditions, to speak is to risk dissent and 'loss of face'; to remain silent is to affirm the group. What is at stake is not only learning outcomes but epistemic agency—the permission to claim knowledge before others.

I argue that this theatre of conformity is intensified in L2 settings. The learner confronts simultaneous vulnerabilities: accent as social signal, lexical gaps as public exposure, delayed retrieval as visible hesitation. The result is a double bind. On the one hand, conformity offers safety—echo the model, reproduce the form, avoid error. On the other, genuine acquisition requires productive deviation—trying unmastered forms, 'thinking aloud', tolerating the friction of near-misses. The pedagogical tension is thus an epistemic one: whether to prioritise social alignment or exploratory voice.

4.2 Cross-cultural variance in conformity and autonomy

One of the most persistent findings in social psychology is that conformity is not evenly distributed across cultures. Güngör et al. (2014) show that the balance between relatedness and autonomy differs systematically across societies: Turkish adolescents, for instance, tend to interpret conformity as a sign of relational attunement, whereas American adolescents read it as a threat to individuality. These divergences complicate the often-assumed universality of the 'autonomy ideal' that dominates much Western theory. Conformity here is not simply capitulation; it is refracted through cultural models of what it means to belong and to act responsibly within a community {Güngör et al. 2014}.

This matters for language learning because the classroom is precisely where these competing norms collide. To speak in L2 is already to enter a domain of heightened self-consciousness and potential dissonance; when this act is scaffolded by cultural expectations that valorise either deference or self-assertion, the epistemic experience is doubled. A Japanese student's reluctance to contradict the teacher, for example, cannot be coded merely as 'lack of critical thinking'; it may reflect a cultural grammar in which harmony overrides confrontation. Conversely, in Anglo-American classrooms, the expectation to 'speak up' and display independent reasoning may exacerbate the sense of inadequacy among students socialised into more deferential registers.

The comparative evidence therefore dislodges any naïve assumption that dissonance is universally resolved through assertion of autonomy. Instead, cultural scripts determine whether the learner experiences consonance by aligning with group norms or by differentiating themselves from them. This insight foreshadows my later integration with *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*: if epistemic agency is structured through patterns of deference, then what counts as 'autonomous' knowledge production is always already culturally coded. In some contexts, epistemic survival demands conformity; in others,

dissent. The epistemic plurality I defend cannot therefore be built on a single ideal of autonomy but must reckon with these cross-cultural grammars of conformity.

4.3 Authoritarianism as amplified clientelism

Authoritarianism has long been described as an orientation toward order, obedience, and social cohesion, yet Feldman (2003) reframes it more precisely as a structure of enforced conformity. In this model, authoritarianism penalises deviation from established norms, privileging the security of sameness over the uncertainty of plurality. At its epistemic core it is clientelist: authority rests on the collective demand for uniformity, and individual judgement is subordinated to the perceived will of the group.

Feldman's empirical work shows that authoritarian orientations are consistently revealed in value-choice experiments, where respondents must prioritise between competing virtues such as obedience versus independence, or respect for elders versus self-reliance. Those with high authoritarian scores tend to choose obedience and deference over autonomy, and this pattern recurs across contexts and cultures. The finding matters because it empirically demonstrates that authoritarianism is not only an institutional regime but also a cognitive and affective disposition—a way of navigating dissonance by defaulting to authority rather than tolerating uncertainty.

This becomes clearer if I trace the analogy back to the language classroom. The dynamics of authoritarianism are rehearsed, in miniature, in the rituals of silence, obedience, and ritualised response that classrooms often require. When a teacher insists on repetition without deviation, and students comply for fear of being marked as inattentive or incompetent, the exchange mirrors the epistemic logic of authoritarian rule. Learners assent not because they have been persuaded, but because deference and compliance are structurally safer than dissent. In this sense, the classroom is not merely a neutral site of pedagogy; it is a proto-authoritarian theatre where micro-habits of conformity are rehearsed and normalised.

What distinguishes benign conformity from authoritarian capture is therefore not the presence of rules but the epistemic scope allowed for autonomy. As discussed in §4.2, conformity may in some cases be adaptive, a mode of belonging that sustains social cohesion. In authoritarian settings, however, conformity is stripped of its reciprocity and becomes a requirement of survival. It enforces epistemic silence: alternatives are suppressed, plurality erased, and the boundaries of permissible knowledge narrowed.

Seen in this way, authoritarianism is not an aberration detached from everyday experience but the hypertrophy of clientelist structures that already govern ordinary epistemic practices. It is the political crystallisation of what happens when conformity eclipses autonomy without remainder. This diagnosis will become central in §4.6, where I argue that resisting epistemic clientelism in language learning—by opening space for plurality and error—is already to resist the authoritarian impulse in knowledge governance more broadly. And as §4.4 will show, these insights are echoed in economic modelling: Brock et al. (2025) demonstrate mathematically how conformity pressures, when amplified, can non-linearly

reshape language acquisition patterns across entire populations, producing equilibria that mirror Feldman's authoritarian logic at scale.

4.4 Economic modelling of conformity in partial acquisition

The political logic of authoritarianism described by Feldman (2003) finds an intriguing parallel in recent economic models of language acquisition. Brock, Chen, Durlauf and Weber (2025) extend earlier game-theoretic accounts of bilingualism by introducing conformity as a decisive variable. Their model allows minority speakers to choose between three strategies: full acquisition of the majority language, partial acquisition, or no acquisition at all. The innovation lies in how conformity is operationalised: the cost of deviating from the group's average choice can outweigh the communicative or economic benefits of an alternative.

The model yields a strikingly non-monotonic relationship between conformity and language outcomes. At low levels of conformity, minority learners distribute themselves across strategies in ways consistent with cost–benefit optimisation: those with low aptitude costs fully acquire, those with moderate costs partially acquire, and those with high costs abstain. As conformity strengthens, however, equilibrium shifts in ways that cannot be predicted by aptitude alone. In some scenarios, heightened conformity increases full acquisition, as social pressure tips reluctant learners toward the majority language. In others, the same pressure consolidates non-learning, as abstention becomes the dominant group norm. Partial learning, meanwhile, emerges as a fragile middle ground, often squeezed out as conformity intensifies.

This non-linearity matters because it reveals how conformity can generate epistemic path dependence. Small shifts in social pressure—such as a prestige signal from within the community or a state-mandated language requirement—can tip the equilibrium dramatically, producing cascades of adoption or resistance. What appears, at the level of individuals, as a pragmatic choice grounded in aptitude is, at the collective level, a highly sensitive function of conformity dynamics.

The analogy to Feldman's authoritarianism is again instructive. Just as authoritarian orientations produce rigid epistemic hierarchies, the conformity parameter in Brock et al.'s model produces rigid equilibria. Once a particular acquisition norm becomes dominant, individuals face escalating costs for deviation, even if alternative strategies would be more efficient or beneficial in isolation. The result is an economy of knowledge acquisition where autonomy is structurally disincentivised, and conformity becomes both the means and the end of participation.

This insight deepens the argument I am advancing. If authoritarianism is the amplification of epistemic clientelism, then Brock et al.'s model shows how this amplification can occur even without overt coercion, arising instead from the recursive logic of social imitation and peer pressure. In §4.5, I turn to a concrete classroom case (Kurnianto 2021), which illustrates in practice how such conformity dynamics play out, and how teachers and students navigate the tension between efficiency, equity, and autonomy.

4.5 Case study of classroom grouping and code-switching

The abstract dynamics of conformity in Brock et al.'s (2025) modelling become concrete in the everyday practice of language classrooms. Kurnianto's (2021) study of TOEFL preparation at the Indonesian Civil Aviation Institute provides a vivid example. Here, a single teacher faced a large, heterogeneous class of twenty-one students whose initial English proficiency ranged from below 400 to just under 500 on TOEFL diagnostic scores. The institutional mandate was uniform: all students had to reach 500 within the programme's limited timeframe.

From the outset, the teacher confronted the problem of heterogeneity. Fast learners pressed for accelerated pace, slower learners struggled to keep up, and the teacher could not individually monitor progress. Grouping was adopted as the main strategy: students were reorganised into smaller units where stronger learners could support weaker peers. Yet conformity pressures immediately shaped the outcomes. In the first phase, groups formed by proximity tended to cluster slow learners together, producing inactive groups that fell further behind. In the second phase, when students were allowed to self-select, a different dynamic emerged: slower students gravitated toward faster peers, creating more active groups. The shift illustrates how subtle changes in grouping rules restructured conformity incentives: aligning with stronger peers was now the expected norm.

Another striking strategy was code-switching. The teacher deliberately alternated between English (L2) and Indonesian (L1), softening the cognitive load for weaker learners. This practice was not merely pedagogical but also political. By allowing students to express uncertainty in their L1, the teacher validated their partial participation and avoided the exclusionary rigidity of an 'English-only' policy. Yet the choice also had conformity effects. Students who might have resisted full participation in English were drawn back in through the legitimacy of their L1 contributions, while those already confident in English retained prestige through their greater ease in L2.

The outcomes bear out both the promise and the limits of these strategies. By the end of the programme, 57% of students surpassed the 500 threshold, a remarkable improvement given their initial distribution. But the remaining 43% fell short, highlighting how conformity pressures could not be wholly neutralised. Group norms sustained weaker learners only up to a point; beyond that, the requirement of uniform attainment revealed the structural inequity of the class design.

This case underscores the central claim of this chapter: conformity is not simply a background variable in language learning but a constitutive force. Whether through group norms, peer expectations, or linguistic codes, learners constantly negotiate their epistemic agency under conditions where deviation carries social costs. The Indonesian case shows how teachers can modulate these pressures—sometimes turning conformity toward collective benefit, sometimes mitigating its exclusionary effects—but cannot eliminate them altogether.

In §4.6, I will integrate these insights with *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*, showing how deference, conformity, and authority coalesce to structure the epistemic conditions of language learning.

4.6 Integration with Epistemic Clientelism Theory

The cases and theories traced so far—cross-cultural norms of deference, authoritarian structures, formal modelling of conformity, and classroom practice—find their conceptual synthesis in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (ECT) {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. At its core, ECT holds that knowledge practices are rarely free-ranging but are structured by asymmetries of authority. Individuals defer to epistemic patrons (teachers, authorities, peers, institutions) in exchange for recognition, security, or advancement. This economy of deference reproduces itself through conformity: one aligns with group norms, not necessarily because of their epistemic force, but because deviation risks exclusion or sanction.

Language learning is a paradigmatic site of such dynamics. The learner enters as a dependent—linguistically less capable, socially marginal, epistemically vulnerable. Teachers, peers, and institutions hold the keys to legitimacy. Conformity in this context functions as the price of entry: pronunciation, grammar, classroom etiquette, and even willingness to speak in L2 are all currencies by which learners buy their place. Authority is internalised, as Feldman (2003) described, not merely through explicit coercion but through the psychological rewards of approval and the aversive costs of dissonance.

The economic modelling of Brock et al. (2025) deepens this insight by showing how conformity does not simply produce more learning but shapes the very distribution of learning types—full, partial, or none. From an ECT perspective, these categories map onto differing degrees of epistemic dependence. Full learners conform most closely to institutional authority, internalising its standards; partial learners navigate a hybrid position, resisting full assimilation while still signalling enough conformity to maintain inclusion; non-learners occupy the margins, often excluded from epistemic exchange.

Kurnianto's (2021) classroom study makes visible the micro-dynamics of this structure. Grouping strategies reconfigure clientelist relations, temporarily redistributing epistemic capital by pairing weaker learners with stronger ones. Code-switching legitimises partial participation, reducing the epistemic penalties for those not yet fluent. But in both cases, conformity remains the medium of exchange: learners succeed insofar as they defer to group norms and the authority of the teacher.

What ECT contributes, then, is a way to see these practices not as isolated pedagogical tactics but as instances of a broader pattern: the domestication of epistemic agency through authority-mediated conformity. Language learning thus becomes an exemplary site for studying how epistemic plurality is constrained, channelled, and sometimes emancipated. The dissonance of speaking in L2, rather than a mere hurdle, becomes a point where the learner encounters the structure of clientelism itself: to speak is to negotiate between self-expression and conformity, between epistemic autonomy and deference.

The political stakes are clear. If foreign language learning habituates learners to tolerate dissonance, it also habituates them to the structures of epistemic authority that regulate who may speak, how, and under what conditions. Recognising this duality is essential. Without it, we risk misrecognising conformity as mere pedagogy rather than as the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies. With it, we can begin to imagine reforms—curricular, institutional, democratic—that transform language classrooms into laboratories of epistemic emancipation rather than theatres of submission.

5. Learning a Foreign Language as Training in Dissonance Tolerance

5.1 Speaking into dissonance: linguistic slips, pauses, shame

To speak in a foreign language is to step into dissonance. Each utterance risks exposure: the slip of a verb tense, the pause when a word vanishes from memory, the shame of being corrected by someone more fluent. These are not marginal inconveniences but the lived texture of L2 communication. They remind the learner, again and again, of the mismatch between what they intend to say and what emerges in sound.

In my earlier work on epistemic clientelism in intimate relationships, I emphasised how asymmetries of power shape the very conditions under which one speaks or remains silent {Kahl 2025, Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships}. The foreign language classroom exhibits a parallel structure: the learner becomes dependent, vulnerable, compelled to defer. Yet here the vulnerability is sharpened by performance. One cannot hide behind inner competence; the only evidence of ability is externalised, audible, exposed.

The affective load of this situation is heavy. Shame is the most common affect reported by L2 learners when speaking before native speakers. It signals more than personal embarrassment; it is a social emotion, rooted in the awareness of others' judgments and the risk of diminished standing. From the perspective of dissonance theory, this shame is not accidental but structural. It arises precisely because the learner's self-concept ('I am competent, intelligent, articulate') collides with the evidence of their faltering speech.

What interests me here is how this moment of collision—painful, embodied, repeated—can be reconceived. Rather than treating linguistic slips as failures to be eradicated, I suggest they can be seen as points of epistemic training. Each slip requires the learner to endure dissonance without collapse, to continue speaking despite fracture. In that sense, the very act of speaking L2 becomes practice in tolerating epistemic tension.

5.2 Iterated exposure: habituation to discomfort, development of epistemic resilience

Dissonance is rarely tolerable in its raw form. The instinct is to avoid it, to retreat into silence or into the comfort of L1. Yet in language learning avoidance is not sustainable. The only way forward is through repetition: speaking again, failing again, enduring again. Over time, this repetition produces habituation. The sting of each mistake lessens; the pauses shorten; the learner learns not only vocabulary but resilience.

In *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* I described how repeated encounters with authority and deference can either entrench dependency or, under certain conditions, cultivate resistance {Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}. Language learning illustrates this dialectic. If the environment punishes mistakes harshly, learners become risk-averse, retreating into silence and deepening their dependence. But if the

environment permits mistakes, even expects them, then the repetition of dissonance becomes training in tolerance.

Applied classroom studies confirm this pattern. Cooperative learning structures, flexible grouping, and code-switching all function as mechanisms that distribute the burden of dissonance. Learners are not spared discomfort—they still speak into awkwardness—but they are supported in persisting through it. The iterative exposure normalises discomfort, making it less a threat to identity and more a condition of participation.

The epistemic lesson here is subtle but profound. To learn a language is not simply to expand one's lexical repertoire; it is to reshape one's relation to dissonance itself. With every stumble, the learner acquires not only a new word but also a slightly greater capacity to remain within tension without fleeing. This habituation is what I call *epistemic resilience*: the cultivated ability to persist in the face of contradiction, misalignment, and plurality.

5.3 Social dynamics: peer judgment and the internalisation of tolerance for plurality

Language learning is never a solitary exercise. Even when rehearsed alone, it is haunted by the imagined gaze of others. In the classroom this gaze becomes literal: peers watch, laugh, support, or correct. Each act of speech becomes a negotiation not only with grammar but with social recognition.

From the standpoint of epistemic clientelism, this is where the politics of deference enters most sharply {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Learners calibrate their speech not just to grammatical rules but to the expectations and authority of peers, teachers, and imagined audiences. Silence is often chosen not because the learner lacks words but because they fear judgment. Yet paradoxically, it is precisely within these dynamics of judgment that tolerance for plurality can be internalised.

When one hears classmates make different mistakes, shaped by different linguistic backgrounds, the sense of vulnerability becomes shared. Instead of a solitary stigma, dissonance becomes collective. Each learner comes to see that there are multiple ways of failing, and thus multiple ways of persisting. Peer judgment—when not cruel—can transform into solidarity: an implicit recognition that everyone is speaking into dissonance.

This social reframing matters for epistemic agency. To persist in dialogue despite error is to resist the clientelist impulse of silence and deference. It is to claim a voice, however faltering, in a shared discursive space. Over time, learners internalise this stance: they become less invested in perfect mastery and more willing to inhabit plurality. In this sense, the classroom functions as a microcosm of democratic life, where the point is not flawless conformity but resilient participation amidst difference.

5.4 Extension to ideological conflict: bilinguals more flexible under counterevidence

The training ground of linguistic dissonance extends beyond the classroom. Recent experimental studies on bilingualism demonstrate that individuals reasoning in a second language show greater openness to revising their political beliefs when confronted with counterevidence {Miller et al. 2025}. The finding is striking: what begins as linguistic discomfort translates into epistemic flexibility in the ideological domain.

Why should this be so? The mechanism, I argue, lies in habituation. Bilinguals accustomed to enduring the discomfort of speaking in L2 become less reactive when their beliefs are challenged. The emotional shock of dissonance—so pronounced in monolinguals facing ideological conflict—is attenuated in bilinguals who have trained themselves, through language use, to remain within contradiction.

This interpretation is supported by fMRI evidence showing reduced activation of emotional centres (such as the amygdala) when bilinguals reason in L2 under dissonant conditions {He et al. 2021}. The reduced reactivity is not mere detachment but the product of repeated practice: the learner has learned how to bear discomfort without fleeing from it.

The epistemic implications are significant. If foreign language learning cultivates resilience in the face of contradiction, then it functions as a generalisable training in democratic capacity. Societies fractured by ideological polarisation may benefit, not incidentally but structurally, from the widespread cultivation of bilingualism—not only for communication but for epistemic resilience.

5.5 The paradox: the very discomfort learners resist becomes the training ground for epistemic plurality

At the heart of this chapter lies a paradox. Learners enter the foreign language classroom hoping to eliminate discomfort: to overcome mistakes, to banish shame, to attain fluency. Teachers, too, often frame success as the disappearance of hesitation and error. Yet the deeper epistemic value of foreign language learning is not the eradication of dissonance but its disciplined endurance.

Each slip of the tongue, each pause under scrutiny, each moment of shame resisted, becomes a rehearsal in dissonance tolerance. What the learner most resists—exposure of inadequacy—is precisely what trains them to persist within plurality. Far from being a pathology, dissonance becomes a resource.

This is why foreign language learning matters beyond pedagogy. It is an education not only in grammar but in epistemic resilience. It habituates individuals to remain present within contradiction, to resist the lure of silence or retreat, and to participate despite imperfection. The act of speaking into dissonance becomes a small but profound apprenticeship in democratic life.

As I argued in *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* {Kahl 2025}, resisting clientelist deference requires more than rational conviction—it requires the lived capacity to endure discomfort without capitulation. Foreign

language learning supplies precisely this training. By compelling learners to inhabit dissonance, it cultivates the very pluralism upon which authentic knowledge and resilient institutions depend.

6. Toward Epistemic Plurality

6.1 The emancipatory horizon: from cognitive resilience to civic pluralism

The previous chapters traced a trajectory from the embodied discomfort of speaking a foreign language to the cognitive and social mechanisms that sustain dissonance tolerance. The claim has been cumulative: that the learner's repeated confrontation with failure, shame, and incompleteness is not simply a pedagogical hurdle but an epistemic apprenticeship. In this final substantive chapter, I extend that trajectory outward. If foreign language learning habituates individuals to tolerate dissonance, what horizons of emancipation might such tolerance open at the collective level?

The first horizon is civic. To endure contradiction in one's own speech is to be less threatened by contradiction in public discourse. This transition from personal resilience to civic pluralism is not automatic, but it is plausible. A polity composed of citizens trained to remain engaged under discomfort is better equipped to handle ideological diversity without collapsing into polarisation. As I argued in *Toward a City of Free Thinkers* {Kahl 2025}, the task of democratic life is not to eliminate conflict but to sustain it productively. Free thought flourishes not in unanimity but in the shared endurance of dissent.

The second horizon is epistemic. Dissonance tolerance is the precondition for epistemic plurality, which I define as the willingness to inhabit multiple, often conflicting frameworks of knowledge without reducing one to another. In *Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation* {Kahl 2025}, I showed how institutions often suppress plurality in the name of order, disciplining knowledge into homogeneity. By contrast, foreign language learning teaches that multiplicity is not only inevitable but liveable. It trains the mind and body to resist the instinct to retreat into the comfort of sameness.

Here the paradox of foreign language learning becomes a political asset. What the learner experiences as personal inadequacy becomes, at scale, a civic competence: the ability to inhabit plurality without panic. The emancipatory horizon is not the fantasy of perfect fluency but the collective resilience that emerges when imperfection is normalised and shared.

6.2 Foreign language learning as democratic pedagogy

I see foreign language learning not just as a matter of technical skill acquisition but as a democratic pedagogy. To speak in L2 is to risk misunderstanding, to endure delay, and to navigate the ever-present possibility of failure. Yet it is precisely this condition that mirrors democratic exchange itself: a space

where no one speaks with perfect authority, where misunderstanding is frequent, and where recognition is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

In *Toward a City of Free Thinkers* {Kahl 2025}, I argued that democratic life requires citizens who can live with epistemic plurality, resisting the temptation to retreat into homogenous enclaves of certainty. Here I extend that claim: foreign language classrooms are laboratories of democratic life. They compel learners to engage with difference not as abstraction but as lived reality. To speak in L2 is to risk humiliation before peers; to listen in L2 is to endure ambiguity, delay, and partial comprehension. Both speaking and listening become practices of humility and patience.

This account resonates with my earlier critique in *Foucault's Dream* {Kahl 2025}, where I described how educational systems can either domesticate knowledge—producing compliant knowledge-workers—or cultivate free thinkers capable of resisting epistemic subjugation. Foreign language education, when framed as dissonance training, belongs firmly to the latter category. It disrupts the fantasy of effortless mastery and instead habituates learners to democratic vulnerability.

The result is an inversion of the familiar complaint that language classes are inefficient, frustrating, or humiliating. Those very qualities become their civic strength. The democratic subject is not one who always knows, but one who can dwell in not-knowing without collapsing into silence or aggression.

6.3 Implications for higher education and knowledge governance

When I turn from the classroom to the wider architecture of higher education, the significance of foreign language learning becomes even clearer. Universities are not merely sites for transmitting content; they are institutions that cultivate dispositions toward knowledge. If language learning is framed narrowly—as the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar—it risks being treated as a low-status skill, often marginalised in curricula. But if we understand it as training in tolerating dissonance, then it becomes central to the mission of higher education itself.

In *Toward a City of Free Thinkers* {Kahl 2025}, I insisted that the health of democratic society depends on institutions that nurture epistemic plurality. Foreign language education can be one of those institutions, but only if it is recognised as epistemic training rather than ancillary skill-building. This requires a shift in governance. Too often, as I showed in *Foucault's Dream* {Kahl 2025}, universities reproduce what I called the domestication of knowledge: assessment regimes, rankings, and funding metrics that reward conformity and penalise risk. Language teaching suffers particularly under this regime because its very nature resists standardisation—progress is uneven, discomfort is unavoidable, and outcomes are not easily quantifiable.

Yet these features should be read not as weaknesses but as virtues. The messy, unpredictable path of language acquisition models what genuine inquiry looks like. It challenges both students and institutions to value process over product, resilience over speed, plurality over uniformity. If higher education

governance embraced this perspective, language programmes would be seen not as ancillary but as constitutive of epistemic infrastructure.

This shift would also have implications for knowledge governance beyond the university. In my work on epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}, I warned that when knowledge systems reward deference to authority rather than open contestation, they produce citizens who are ill-equipped to handle pluralism. Foreign language learning, if institutionalised as epistemic training, could serve as a counterweight. It habituates students to persist in dialogue even when comprehension is partial, and to trust that understanding can be built iteratively rather than assumed in advance. In this way, it resists the very logic of clientelism by cultivating autonomy and mutual recognition.

The governance question, then, is not whether universities should include language learning, but how they conceive of its purpose. Is it to produce globally mobile graduates who can transact efficiently in English, Mandarin, or Spanish? Or is it to cultivate citizens who can live with the discomfort of epistemic plurality, and thereby sustain democratic life? My argument is unequivocal: only the latter recognises the full epistemic and civic significance of language education.

6.4 Policy significance: rethinking language education as epistemic infrastructure

If the arguments so far are persuasive, then the policy implications are substantial. Language education can no longer be treated as an optional supplement to the 'real' curriculum. It must be understood as epistemic infrastructure—a foundation that enables societies to endure plurality, resist authoritarian tendencies, and cultivate democratic resilience.

Policymakers are accustomed to justifying language education in economic terms: competitiveness in global markets, employability, tourism. These arguments, though familiar, are insufficient. They reduce languages to tools of transaction and obscure their deeper civic role. To insist on the epistemic dimension is to reframe policy debates entirely. Language programmes should be funded and supported not because they raise GDP, but because they foster the capacity of citizens to live with dissonance and to engage across difference.

In *Toward a City of Free Thinkers* {Kahl 2025}, I argued that democratic institutions must be designed around epistemic plurality. If that is so, then language education is not a luxury but a necessity. It is as fundamental to civic life as literacy, numeracy, or critical thinking. Without it, citizens are left epistemically fragile: unable to cope with the discomfort of disagreement, prone to retreat into conformity, and vulnerable to epistemic clientelism.

Policy should therefore aim to embed foreign language learning across the educational lifecycle. At school level, this means introducing multiple languages early, not with the sole aim of fluency but with the explicit recognition that grappling with dissonance is itself valuable. At university level, it means resisting the tendency to treat language courses as low-prestige electives. They should be integral to degrees in politics, law, science, and technology, precisely because they train students to handle epistemic

friction. And at the level of professional and civic life, it means supporting community-based language programmes that sustain multilingual spaces as everyday sites of plurality.

Crucially, language education policy must resist the drift toward homogenisation. In *Foucault's Dream* {Kahl 2025}, I warned that knowledge regimes often enforce standardisation in the name of efficiency. Yet true resilience lies in diversity. To protect that diversity, governments should fund minority language programmes, protect indigenous languages, and support translation as a civic practice. These policies are not nostalgic gestures but investments in epistemic infrastructure.

In closing, the claim is stark: without policies that treat language education as training in dissonance tolerance, democratic societies will lack the epistemic scaffolding they need to survive. To rethink language education as epistemic infrastructure is therefore not a matter of cultural enrichment; it is a matter of democratic survival.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Restating the thesis

The central argument of this study has been that learning a foreign language is not simply a pedagogical task nor a utilitarian skill, but an epistemic practice. It is a form of training in tolerating dissonance: the discomfort that arises when intention, expression, and recognition fail to align. I have contended that this experience—so often dismissed as embarrassment or inadequacy—is in fact a rehearsal for democratic life. To persist in speaking through dissonance is to acquire resilience in the face of plurality, to resist the lures of conformity, and to cultivate the capacity to live with epistemic friction.

7.2 From psychological to epistemic event

I began by revisiting the origins of cognitive dissonance theory in Festinger's work {Festinger 1957}, which framed dissonance as a psychological mechanism of tension and reduction. I then followed the evolutionary evidence that even children and non-human primates seek to escape this tension {Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007}. Yet rather than treating dissonance as a pathology to be managed, I reframed it—following my earlier work {Kahl 2025, *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event*}—as a condition of knowledge itself. Dissonance is the moment at which autonomy is tested, freedom is bounded, and plurality becomes palpable.

7.3 From the Foreign Language Effect to civic pluralism

The second movement of the argument turned to the Foreign Language Effect. Here, empirical studies show that bilinguals, when operating in their second language, exhibit slower, less emotional, more

deliberate processing {Miller et al. 2025; He et al. 2021}. This shift in cognitive tempo makes them more open to counterevidence, less prone to ideological entrenchment, and more capable of revising belief in light of challenge {Kaplan et al. 2016}. I have argued that this phenomenon should not be read narrowly as a curiosity of psycholinguistics but broadly as a civic resource. The same processes that help bilinguals deliberate in L2 can be seen as training in epistemic plurality—learning, quite literally, to think otherwise.

7.4 Contributions

Theoretical contribution

The first contribution of this study is theoretical. By reframing cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event rather than a purely psychological mechanism, I have sought to shift the axis of analysis. Dissonance is not merely an unpleasant state to be reduced but a generative moment in which knowledge is negotiated, autonomy is tested, and freedom is recalibrated. This reframing integrates Festinger's classical model {Festinger 1957} with contemporary philosophical concerns about epistemic justice {Fricker 2007} and with my own account of epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}. It shows how the micro-phenomenology of a learner's hesitation in speech is bound to the macro-politics of authority, conformity, and pluralism.

Empirical contribution

The second contribution is empirical. By bringing together research on bilingualism, behavioural psychology, and neuroscience, I have demonstrated how the Foreign Language Effect can be situated in a wider frame of epistemic agency. Studies show that bilinguals in L2 contexts exhibit dampened emotional reactivity and increased openness to counterevidence {Miller et al. 2025; He et al. 2021}. fMRI evidence confirms that resistance to political belief revision involves activation of emotion-related neural regions {Kaplan et al. 2016}. By synthesising these findings, I argue that bilingual processing can be seen as a natural experiment in the cultivation of epistemic resilience. The empirical contribution, therefore, is not new data but a new integration: showing how evidence across disciplines converges when seen through the lens of dissonance tolerance.

Normative contribution

The third contribution is normative. If foreign language learning habituates individuals to discomfort and trains them in epistemic plurality, then its significance is not confined to classrooms. It becomes a civic pedagogy, a democratic scaffolding. To speak in L2 before others is to rehearse, in miniature, the democratic condition: to encounter difference, to risk failure, and to persist in communication nonetheless. In this light, language learning is not a luxury but a civic necessity, one that equips citizens to resist epistemic capture, to endure dissonance without retreating to conformity, and to engage responsibly in pluralist societies.

7.5 Future research

This inquiry opens several avenues for future exploration.

First, cross-linguistic studies are needed. Most existing research on the Foreign Language Effect focuses on English–Spanish bilinguals in North America or European language pairs. It remains unclear whether the same effects hold in languages with radically different morphologies, tonal systems, or writing scripts. Do Mandarin–English bilinguals, or Arabic–French bilinguals, display the same epistemic flexibility when challenged with counterevidence? A genuinely comparative programme could reveal whether the dissonance-training function of language learning is universal or language-family specific.

Second, pedagogical reforms should be considered. If speaking into dissonance is not an obstacle but the very training ground of epistemic plurality, then classrooms should be designed to cultivate this discomfort productively. Grouping strategies, peer review, and deliberate exposure to linguistic risk could be framed not as ancillary techniques but as epistemic scaffolds. This would align language education with broader goals of cultivating democratic resilience in higher education {Kahl 2025, *Toward a City of Free Thinkers*}.

Third, new terrains emerge in the digital sphere. AI-mediated language learning tools—from real-time translation apps to adaptive tutoring systems—alter the phenomenology of dissonance. When a machine instantly supplies the missing word, does the learner lose the moment of epistemic struggle that constitutes the training ground? Or do such tools generate new forms of dissonance—uncertainty about authenticity, about trust in machine authority—that extend the inquiry into the governance of AI {Kahl 2025, *Foucault's Dream*}? Future research must interrogate how these technologies reshape the balance between discomfort and fluency, between cognitive ease and epistemic resilience.

7.6 Closing reflection

This study began with a vignette: the trembling act of speaking in a foreign tongue before native listeners. It ends with a claim: that such trembling is not trivial but transformative. The shame of mispronunciation, the hesitation of grammar, the weight of silence—all these moments of dissonance are not failures to be erased but experiences to be endured, cultivated, and reframed. To learn a foreign language is to enter a laboratory of plurality, where one's own epistemic habits are destabilised and reconstituted.

In this sense, foreign language learning is not only a path to communication but also a rehearsal for democracy. It teaches us to live with the discomfort of difference, to resist the comfort of conformity, and to persist in dialogue across divides. If dissonance is indeed the crucible of knowledge, then every mispronounced syllable is not a deficit but a contribution—a small act of epistemic courage in the service of plurality.

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Author Contact

Email: peter.kahl@juris.vc

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/

Research Gate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Kahl

PhilPapers: https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl

GitHub: https://github.com/Peter-Kahl

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ

Blog: https://pkahl.substack.com/

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Revision History

Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Initial release	None	2025-09-10

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