

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of Chris Lonsdale's TEDx Talk "How to Learn Any Language in Six Months"

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### تحليل نقدي للخطاب في محاضرة كريس لونسديل في TEDx كيف تتعلم أي لغة في ستة أشهر

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#### Abstract

This paper examines Chris Lonsdale's TEDx talk 'How to Learn any Language in Six Months' Through critical discourse analysis lenses, studying how language learning is discursively portrayed as an attainable, accelerated and individually controlled process. The paper analyses textual features including pronoun use, modality, imperatives, metaphor, repetition, and evaluative language using Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of CDA, as well as the discursive conditions of TEDx as a genre and the ideological implications of the motivational framework of the talk. The analysis illustrates that Lonsdale's discourse utilizes a coherent set of linguistic strategies to frame the individual learner as solely responsible and inherently capable of achieving language acquisition success. The strategies are contrasted against findings in second language acquisition (SLA) research such as Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, and Dörnyei's (2001) motivational frameworks, unravelling considerable discrepancies between the Longs' claims and empirical data. The talk's motivational discourse is valuable, reducing anxiety, affirming agency, and the accessible strategies, all simultaneously create a neoliberal ideology of self-improvement, which eliminates foundational pillars of language learning outcomes. By focusing on personal agency, it overlooks structural factors that shape learning outcomes and potentially frames failure as a personal deficiency. Pedagogical recommendations for the critical use of motivational TEDx discourse in EFL contexts are offered in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; TEDx; EFL; second language acquisition; learner identity; motivational discourse; neoliberalism; learner autonomy.

#### المخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة محاضرة كريس لونسديل في TEDx بعنوان «كيف تتعلم أي لغة في ستة أشهر» من منظور التحليل النقدي للخطاب، حيث تدرس الكيفية التي يُصوّر بها تعلم اللغة خطابياً على أنه عملية قابلة للتحقيق وسريعة ويمكن التحكم فيها بشكل فردي. تحلل الورقة السمات النصية، بما في ذلك استخدام الضمائر، وأساليب التعبير، والأوامر، والاستعارات، والتكرار، واللغة التقييمية، باستخدام النموذج ثلاثي الأبعاد لتحليل الخطاب النقدي (CDA) الذي وضعه فيركلوف (1992)، بالإضافة إلى الظروف الخطابية لـ TEDx كنوع أدبي، والآثار الأيديولوجية للإطار التحفيزي للمحاضرة. يوضح التحليل أن خطاب لونسديل يستخدم مجموعة متماسكة من الاستراتيجيات اللغوية لتأطير المتعلم الفرد باعتباره المسؤول الوحيد والقادر بطبيعته على تحقيق النجاح في اكتساب اللغة. يتم مقارنة هذه الاستراتيجيات مع النتائج المستخلصة من أبحاث اكتساب اللغة الثانية (SLA)، مثل «فرضية المدخلات» لكراشن (1985)، و«فرضية التفاعل» للونغ (1996)، والأطر التحفيزية لدورنيي (2001)، مما يكشف عن تباينات كبيرة بين ادعاءات لونغ والبيانات التجريبية. يُعد الخطاب التحفيزي في المحاضرة قَبِيماً، حيث يقلل من القلق ويؤكد على الإرادة الذاتية، كما أن الاستراتيجيات السهلة المنال، كلها معاً تخلق أيديولوجية نيوليبرالية لتحسين الذاتي، مما يقضي على الركائز الأساسية لنتائج تعلم اللغة. ومن خلال التركيز على الإرادة الذاتية، فإنه يتجاهل العوامل الهيكلية التي تشكل نتائج التعلم، وقد يُصوّر الفشل على أنه قصور شخصي. وتُقدّم في الخاتمة توصيات تربوية للاستخدام النقدي للخطاب التحفيزي في TEDx في سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL).

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التحليل النقدي للخطاب؛ TEDx؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ اكتساب اللغة الثانية؛ هوية المتعلم؛ الخطاب التحفيزي؛ النيوليبرالية؛ استقلالية المتعلم.

## Introduction

Lonsdale's TEDx talk *'How to Learn Any Language in Six Months'* (TEDx Lingnan University, 2013) has accumulated over 37 million views on the platform YouTube, making it one of the most circulated pieces of public discourse on language learning. It is frequently used in EFL classrooms as a listening resource, and a motivational tool for learners, and has a considerable influence on how learners understand themselves as well as their language learning journey. The talk constructs language learning as a universally achievable, individually controlled, and time-bound project. This paper argues that these constructions are motivational, and they also promote a neoliberal individualism that ignores all of the structural, social, and institutional factors that are vital for learning outcomes. The analysis is not to condemn the talk but to understand how its empowering and constraining aspects are a by-product of the same linguistic mechanisms.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem that this paper addresses is the ideological framework within which Lonsdale's instructions are wrapped when personal strategy, self-regulation and will power are discursively and exclusively portrayed as the foundation for language learning success. The implication is that failure, too, is personal, and lies with the learners who do not achieve the desirable outcomes despite the fact that they followed every step. This approach fails to acknowledge the role of socioeconomic disadvantage, unequal access to authentic input, discrimination, and institutional inadequacy (Norton, 2000). This ideological dimension is no coincidence, it is produced by certain linguistic features. A systematic analytical framework is detrimental to understanding how this construction operates.

## Research Aims

This study has the following two aims:

1. To examine how Chris Lonsdale discursively constructs language learning and the language learner in his TEDx talk *How to Learn Any Language in Six Months*.
2. To evaluate the talk's construction of language learning against established findings in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and assess the ideological implications of its motivational discourse.

## Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following two questions:

1. How does Lonsdale discursively construct language learning and the language learner in this TEDx talk?
2. How does the talk's discourse relate to established findings in SLA research, and what ideological implications emerge from its representation of language learning and learner success?

## Literature Review

### - Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundations

CDA considers language use as social practice: textual choices are ideologically driven constructions of reality, rather than neutral descriptions (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). Fairclough's three-dimensional model encompasses (1) textual analysis of vocabulary, grammar, modality, and evaluative language (2) analysis of the institutional conditions of discourse production and reception (discourse practice) and (3) the broader ideological dimension of discourse (social practice). A vital feature of this model is that it insists that these dimensions are simultaneously present: textual choices are always institutional and ideological.

### **TEDx Discourse as Genre**

TEDx talks are globally recognized as a motivational genre, from personal narrative authority, selective evidence citation, accessible register, and numbered conclusions (Atkinson, 2014). A consistent pattern has been identified by scholars in which learning outcomes are considered to be primarily the responsibility of learners (Nguyen, 2015). TEDx discourse is situated among the neoliberal educational platforms in which personal transformation is promoted as a remedy for structural barriers. Longsdale's talk is thematically of this genre and carries its ideological presuppositions.

### **SLA Research: What the Evidence Shows**

Longsdale's main claim is that any adult can reach fluency in any language within six months, which is not compatible with the heart of SLA literature. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis established that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient, and that individual variation in development is substantial. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis demonstrated that negotiated interaction, not mere exposure is critical to acquisition. Aptitude which is entirely dismissed in Longsdale's talk, remains a vital predictor of adult learning outcomes (Skehan, 1998; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Norton's (2000) work on identity in second language acquisition demonstrates that race, gender, class, and institutional contexts shape accessibility to authentic material, which are factors that are not acknowledged in the talk. Motivation cannot be entirely reduced to the internal state of the learner, and even with that, it is one of many variables that affect learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2001, 2009).

### **Learner Autonomy and the Neoliberal Turn**

A neoliberal turn in language education where success is entirely attributed to individual effort and strategy is identified by Block (2012). Autonomous learning ideologies can carry western-liberal presumptions that are not advantageous to learners who reside outside privileged environments. Block also recognizes the empowering elements of neoliberal discourse, such as the emphasis on agency, and the rejection of inherent deficit thinking about learning potential. Consequently, the analysis conducted focuses on how both empowerment and constraints are not opposite ends of a spectrum but are tied together.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative CDA design. The data consists of the full transcript of Longsdale's TEDx talk which is publicly available on TEDx's official website. The transcript was read inductively a multitude of times. Then a coding scheme was created through a combination of inductive observation of recurring textual patterns and deductive insights from Fairclough's framework. Six analytical categories were coded across the transcript: (1) pronoun use, (2) modality, (3) imperatives, (4) metaphor, (5) repetition, and (6) evaluative language. Instances of each category were systematically recorded, and representative examples were selected on the basis of frequency, typicality, and analytical relevance. The textual findings were interpreted at the levels of discourse practice and social practice within Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Consistent with CDA's interpretive orientation, the analysis does not claim objective neutrality; instead, analytical credibility is pursued through theoretical coherence and systematic evidence.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

#### **Pronoun Use and Audience Positioning.**

**Textual Example:** "you can do this" / "we need to speak each other's languages" / "remember these are things under your control" / "Do them all and you're going to be fluent in a second language in six months."

**Discourse Function:** Direct second-person "you" constructs each listener as individually capable and responsible. Inclusive "we" is used subtly as a goal name, a universally shared one before the discourse returns to individualised "you" directives. The imperative-plus-prediction

structure ("Do them all and you're going to be fluent...") serves as a conditional promise, compliance guarantees outcome. This interpellation (Althusser, 1971; Fairclough, 1989) addresses the mass audience as if each member were in a one-to-one coaching session with the speaker, which is a defining characteristic of the motivational speaker genre.

**Discourse Practice:** The consistent return to individualised address after short -moments of collective "we" reflects the TEDx genre's portrayal of learning as a self-directed project. The promise of transformation through a set strategy use is a recognisable feature of self-help discourse.

**Ideological Implication:** While agency and confidence are affirmed, the individualisation of address produces an individualisation of responsibility. Success and failure become personal possessions rather than outcomes influenced by social and structural conditions. Structural barriers, access to input, time, and financial resources are not recognized meaning non-compliance becomes the only plausible explanation for failure.

### Modality

**Textual Example:** "any adult can learn a second language to fluency inside six months" / "If you're happy, relaxed... you're going to learn really quickly" / "you should be paying attention" / "you have to be able to hear these sounds."

**Discourse Function:** The deontic possibility modal "can" presents fluency as universally achievable, with "any adult" broadening the claim to the entire population of learners with no hedging. High-certainty epistemic modality in the second example positions an emotional state as a reliable determinant of learning speed. Deontic obligation modals ("should," "have to") then construct prescriptive steps, positioning failure to follow as the learner's choice. Notably absent throughout are hedging markers such as "for many learners" or "under optimal conditions."

**Discourse Practice:** High-certainty modality dismisses discussion of individual differences. The speaker's authority to give deontic obligations is constructed through personal narrative rather than academic credentials, a strategy common to TEDx discourse.

**Ideological Implication:** These modal choices conflict with SLA evidence on individual differences (Skehan, 1998; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003) and structural determinants of access to learning conditions (Norton, 2000). Anxiety arising from poverty, discrimination, trauma, or precarious immigration status is not remediable through self-regulation, yet the framing places emotional self-control at the centre. Phonological challenges specific to particular L1 backgrounds are similarly left unacknowledged.

### Imperatives

**Textual Example:** "Listen a lot." / "Start mixing." / "Get yourself a language parent." / "Focus on language content that is relevant to you." / "Use your language as a tool to communicate right from day one."

**Discourse Function:** Bare imperatives deliver direct, unhedged instructions presented as universally applicable. The second-person possessive ("your language," "relevant to you") enhances individual ownership of the learning process. This imperative register, combined with personalisation, is characteristic of the self-help genre and positions the speaker as mentor and the audience as both capable and obligated to follow.

**Discourse Practice:** Personalisation here is compatible with the TEDx genre's framing of learning as an autonomous, self-directed project. The instructions borrow from communicative language teaching principles (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996), though only partially, both approaches also emphasize the role of instruction and scaffolded interaction.

**Ideological Implication:** "Get yourself a language parent" assumes access to willing, proficient speakers of the target language, an assumption that fails for learners in monolingual or low-resource environments. The imperative form naturalises this assumption by presenting it as

straightforwardly actionable, minimizing the social and material conditions that would make it impossible for many learners.

### Metaphor

**Textual Example:** "Brain Soaking" / "A drowning man cannot learn to swim" / "Language parent."

**Discourse Function:** "Brain Soaking" draws on the metaphor of the brain as vessel and language as liquid, reducing complex cognitive processing to a physical sensation and naturalising passive intake as a critical learning strategy. "A drowning man cannot learn to swim" reframes immersion failure as a consequence of the wrong method. "Language parent" naturalises an asymmetrical but supportive relationship as the ideal learning context, creating a sense of warmth, patience, and unconditional support.

**Discourse Practice:** Each metaphor performs a distinct rhetorical function: the first makes acquisition feel automatic and effortless, the second acknowledges that immersion is not automatically effective, a position with some SLA support (Krashen, 1985) while diagnosing the problem in individual method rather than structural conditions, the third constructs an idealised social learning structure featuring a willing, available, proficient interlocutor.

**Ideological Implication:** "Brain Soaking" is not aligned with research on the limits of incidental acquisition (Nation, 2001) and the necessity of noticing (Schmidt, 1990), de-emphasising the active cognitive work acquisition requires. The drowning metaphor positions learners who fail in immersion contexts as having chosen the wrong technique, not as having lacked access to comprehensible, strategically scaffolded input. "Language parent" presents a socioeconomically privileged model of language socialisation as easily accessible.

### - Repetition and Rhetorical Emphasis

**Textual Example:** "really, really important" / "very, very young" / "struggling terribly" / "five principles... seven actions" (repeated across sections) / "Period."

**Discourse Function:** Intensifier repetition and adverb stacking strengthens emotional impact, create urgency, and perform authentic engagement. Structural repetition of the numbered framework creates a memorable, authoritative schema. The rhetorical full stop "Period." performs absolute epistemic certainty in a colloquial register that avoids the appearance of dogmatism.

**Discourse Practice:** Emotional amplification contributes to the speaker's ethos of passionate, personally invested expertise, a characteristic TEDx delivery. The numbered list format borrows from self-help and management discourse, suggesting that acquisition is fully systematisable. "Period." Dismisses counter-argument while maintaining conversational informality.

**Ideological Implication:** The emotional amplification may reduce critical distance in listeners. The numbered framework implies that nothing of relevance is left out, which is not consistent with SLA research, which does not support a fully systematised, step-by-step acquisition model. "Period." closes the dialogic space (Martin & White, 2005) that would allow listeners to entertain competing frameworks.

### Evaluative Language

**Textual Example:** "really easy" / "really cool" / "incredible discoveries" / "talent doesn't matter" / "immersion per se does not work" / "you're completely useless" / "you're not talented" (voiced as discouraging received beliefs).

**Discourse Function:** Strongly positive Attitude (Martin & White, 2005) frames language learning as exciting and accessible. Negative Attitude directed at common beliefs ("talent doesn't matter," "immersion per se does not work") positions the speaker as a myth-buster with counter-intuitive knowledge. Quoted negative Attitude attributed to external factors constructs

a contrast between damaging received beliefs and the speaker's empowering alternative, positioning him as rescuer.

**Discourse Practice:** The positive evaluative language creates an affective community around shared values of accessible, enjoyable learning and normalises success as the default expectation. The myth-busting move is consistent with TEDx genre convention of the "surprising idea," legitimising the speaker's framework by delegitimising alternatives.

**Ideological Implication:** Framing the experience as "really easy" may set unrealistic expectations; when learning does not feel easy, as it does not for most adult learners, the evaluative framework offers no explanatory resource other than personal failure. Both delegitimising claims are also partial: aptitude does matter for adult acquisition outcomes (Skehan, 1998), and immersion quality matters massively. The emotional rescue narrative amplifies the audience's identificatory investment in the speaker's authority while simultaneously closing off critical engagement with his claims.

## Discussion

### Pronoun Use and Interpellation'

The deployment of second-person pronouns serves a powerful interpellative mechanism. Fairclough (1989) identifies interpellation as the process through which discourse constitutes subject positions; by individually addressing each member of a large audience as "you," Lonsdale constructs each listener as personally involved in the outcomes described. This is motivating, "you" are told you can succeed, and individualising success and failure turns matters personal, rather than structural.

The shifting between "you" and "we" is instructive. In the talk's most strongly framing passages. The inclusive "we" makes prominent appearances ("we need to speak each other's languages"), creating a sense of solidarity and unity. However, the discourse consistently reverts to individualised imperative mode, in which "you" receive instructions, make decisions and control learning outcomes. The "we" is discursively and strategically utilised for solidarity, not a consistent alternative to the individualising logic of the talk.

### Modality and the Naturalisation of Certainty

The modal structure of the talk is highly consistent. "This is how it works," "you're going to learn," "it's not going to be there." are examples of high-certainty epistemic modality that dominates the talk. Hedging markers are absent; the talk almost contains no instances of "may," "might," "for some learners," or "under the right conditions." The effect, as Fairclough (1992) would predict, is the naturalisation of a specific model of acquisition as universal common sense.

Individual variation is one of the most astounding findings in SLA research, according to Ellis (2008). Learners with identical exposure, motivation, and access still develop at varied rate. The modal architecture of Lonsdale's talk leaves little room for acknowledging this variety of experiences.

A considerable counterargument is that a relatively high degree of certainty is somewhat essential for effective motivational discourse. If every claim were hedged, the motivational power would be significantly dimmed. The argument is that hedging should replace certainty throughout the talk, but its absence undermines the complexity of language learning and leaves learners void of alternative explanations when their experience diverts from the described path.

### Metaphor and the Simplification of Acquisition

The metaphors in the talk serve a very critical role, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Metaphors structure the way we conceptualise experiences. The metaphors Lonsdale uses such as brain as vessel, acquisition as physical training, the ideal interlocutor as language parent, each construct acquisition as natural, informal and simple.

This simplification reduces fears in regards to language learning and makes the long daunting process feel attainable. Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis proposes that intake requires conscious attention to form, and acquisition is simply not a matter of the brain soaking up language passively. Based on Nations's (2001) research on vocabulary, highly frequent exposure to new vocabulary does not guarantee retention without deliberate learning procedures. Longsdale's recommendations are incompatible with these findings, but the "brain soaking" metaphor eliminates the deliberate effort that the research deems as necessary.

The "language parent" metaphor as a motivational construction is extremely effective, it flows with warmth and safety, and the naturalness of child language acquisition. However, it assumes access to willing, capable and patient interlocutors, which is dependent on conditions that are unequally distributed. For a learner in a monolingual country, the advice "get yourself a language parent" discursively positions the structural disadvantage as a personal failure.

### **Evaluative Language and the Construction of the Unsuccessful Learner**

Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory enables a more accurate understanding of the talks' evaluative framework. At the level of attitude, positive appreciation of language learning is consistent throughout the talk ("really cool," "incredible") and the negative judgement of alternative methods. At the level of engagement, the talk does not offer much room for dialogue, claims are presented as solid facts, alternatives are debunked. At the level of Graduation, evaluative force is achieved with intensifiers and repetition.

The message is a discursive construction that clearly maps the path to success, all alternatives have been assessed and found incomparable, and there is only one acceptable explanatory framework. According to this framework, every unsuccessful learner has simply not applied the correct method, did not self-regulate properly, or did not follow the steps with unwavering commitment. Their structural disadvantage of learning is not an adequate explanatory framework.

It is important to state that the ideological effects of a discourse are not necessarily the intentions of the speaker. The systematic patterns of linguistic choice documented in the analysis above have ideological implications regardless of what Longsdale personally intended.

### **The Relationship between Empowerment and Ideology**

A key counterargument to this analysis is that while the talk is great at motivating learners, easing language learning related anxiety, this does not remove the need for ideological analysis. The emphasis on individual agency motivates learners, while simultaneously understating the role of social, economic and educational conditions in shaping language learning outcomes. Because the discourse is so powerful that its ideological effects are detrimental. A less persuasive discourse would be less empowering and consequently, less ideologically influential.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated how a coherent set of linguistic strategies in Lonsdale's TEDx talk: second person address, high certainty modality, bare imperatives, reductive metaphors, rhetorical repetition, and amplified positive evaluation, construct language learning as universally accessible and achievable, strategy dependent, and is completely within the learners' control. At the textual level these strategies constitute a highly effective motivational discourse that favors learners' agency and reduces anxiety, At the level of social practice, they promote an ideology of neoliberal individualism that ignores the structural conditions, access, socioeconomic context, institutional quality that is identified as major determinants of learning outcomes by SLA literature.

Against SLA literature, the talks' claims are overstated and the six-month timeline is unsupported by evidence, and is simply subjective. The marginalisation of social context is

contradictory to sociocultural and identity-based approaches, and the construction of passive adsorption of input understates the complexity of the cognitive operations that are essential to language acquisition.

The pedagogical implication is that the talk should be used in ways that utilize its motivational qualities while opening room for critical discourse that the very talk eliminates, rather than be removed from classrooms, Teachers should make it clear that is persuasive rather than purely factual, encourage critical discussion, and recognize that language learning is shaped by multifaceted factors.

### **Pedagogical Recommendations**

Motivational TEDx talks, including this one, can be beneficial classroom resources for listening practice, public speaking modelling, and motivational purposes, but should be presented as purely persuasive rather than objective descriptions of language acquisition. In addition, teachers can encourage critical thinking by asking learners about the claims of the talk, what information is missing and who is the true target audience of the talk. This preserves the motivating qualities of the talk while simultaneously promoting critical awareness.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study analyses a single piece of publicly circulated discourse. Future research might examine a corpus of TEDx language learning talks to identify category level patterns, conduct learner reception studies to investigate how different audiences engage with the ideological aspects of such discourse, or compare language learning advice discourse across multiple platforms. Lastly, teachers should ensure that struggling learners do not view themselves as failures, since a multitude of external social and economic factors could influence learning outcomes.

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