



The Qualitative Phase in Individual Differences Scale Development in SLA

A Methodological Synthesis



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KEY TERMS



Second language acquisition (SLA):

The study of how people learn a language beyond their first (their second language, or L2), and the factors that shape that process.



Individual Differences (IDs)

Relatively stable learner characteristics that vary across people and shape second language (L2) learning, such as motivation, language anxiety, enjoyment, willingness to communicate, or grit.



Self-report Scale (Questionnaire)

A set of statements (items) that learners rate, using a researcher-determined response format (e.g., from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), to measure an ID construct.



Qualitative Phase

The early formative work (including interviews, open-ended surveys, focus groups, expert review) used to generate and refine items before any statistical analysis, and to support content validity.



Content Validity

The degree to which a scale’s items adequately and fully represent the construct they are meant to measure.

WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM THIS RESEARCH?



Learn how the qualitative groundwork behind SLA self-report scales is typically reported, what details are often missing, and what transparent, theory-informed item development should look like. The paper translates this into a practical, seven-section reporting checklist for developing and evaluating ID scales.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS SUMMARISED?



85 STUDIES



PRISMA-STYLE SCREENING



FOUR CODING DIMENSIONS

A systematic methodological synthesis of 85 peer-reviewed SLA studies (published 1983–2025) that developed or substantially revised an ID scale. Each study was coded along four dimensions: **transparency, theoretical grounding, methodological rigour, and content-validity evidence**, using a **PRISMA-style screening** process with inter-rater reliability checks.

WHAT DOES IT FIND

25%



of studies reported **no** qualitative data collection

16%



of studies referenced an explicit theoretical framework

2%



linked draft items to participants’ own words

1



just one study reported a numerical content validity index

Information on coder agreement, researcher reflexivity, and learners’ interpretations of items was nearly absent.

These gaps can leave constructs under-represented, invite cultural and linguistic bias, and weaken the validity claims that later statistics and meta-analyses depend on.

HOW CAN I USE THE FINDINGS?

1. Check the Origins

Before using a questionnaire, check whether its items emerged from a documented qualitative phase rather than statistics alone.

2. Check Contextual Fit

Ensure the questionnaire reflects your learners, classroom, language, and cultural context.

3. Ground Items in Learners’ Experiences

If you adapt or create a questionnaire, base items on learners’ own perspectives using interviews, focus groups, or open-ended responses.

4. Document the Development Process

Record how items were generated, refined, and reviewed to strengthen transparency and validity.

5. Use the Reporting Checklist

Use the paper’s seven-section reporting checklist to develop or evaluate questionnaires that measure what you intend.