

The Influence of Cultural and Social Variables on Second Language Acquisition

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This essay examines the influence of a number of cultural and social variables on second language acquisition. After a brief introduction of the topic, relevant theoretical models and recent research studies are analyzed and evaluated.

Cultural Variables and Second Language Acquisition

It is very difficult to pinpoint, with accuracy all the intricacies of culture. It is an all-encompassing concept that may mean different things in different circumstances. Generally speaking, we could define culture as a blueprint, a set of cognitive predispositions and mental constructs that act as guiding principles during our interaction with other people.

Each society has a unique culture which reflects the historical circumstances and the socioeconomic level which gave rise to this society. Thus, quite often different cultures espouse antithetical and conflicting values. A member of a given culture possesses an *objective reality* which is the product of the values of his culture. When such a person is introduced to another culture, he is confronted by an *alternative reality*, an unfamiliar way of viewing the world. Depending on a variety of factors, the individuals may totally reject the new culture, accept the new culture while preserving the original culture, or totally immerse themselves in the new culture while rejecting the original culture.

The study of cultural variations and their differences can shed light on the process of second language acquisition. A language is not a neutral tool for interpersonal communication.

Instead, it is a product of a specific society, and it cannot be fully understood unless one makes an effort to comprehend the cultural values of that society. Consequently, when one studies a second language, one also becomes acquainted with the cultural values of the society where this language is spoken. The attitude of the second language learner toward the target language's cultural values may affect both the predisposition of the learner to study it and the capacity to master it. As H. Douglas Brown states:

A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven such that one cannot separate the two... The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition... is also the acquisition of a second culture. (1980, p. 124)

The Theoretical Background

A few researchers have proposed theoretical models of second language acquisition which take into account the influence of social factors in the learning process. Schumann (1976) examined the relationship between acculturation and linguistic success. Acculturation is a gradual adaptation to the norms of a host culture. According to Schumann two factors influence acculturation, psychological and social distance. Psychological distance is a personal variable because it refers to the psychological predisposition of an individual to master a complex linguistic learning task. It is not as important as social distance, which is the degree of similarity between two cultures. Schumann suggests that cultures which have few values in common are very distant. This may impede the second language acquisition process. In more detail, Schumann identifies the following factors which affect the degree of social distance:

1. The political, cultural, and economic status of the target language group as viewed by the learner's group.
2. The cohesiveness of the learner's social group.
3. The size of the learner's social group.
4. The desire of the learner's group to integrate acculturate or preserve its identity.
5. The cultural similarities between the two groups.
6. The length of stay of the learner's group in the target language group's country.
7. The degree of enclosure of the learner's group.

Depending upon these factors, a learning situation may be good or bad. Schumann hypothesized that Americans stationed in Saudi Arabia would suffer from a high degree of social distance and would be poor learners of the target language for the following reasons: (a) American and Saudi Arabian cultures have few values in common, (b) the Americans wish to preserve their group's cohesiveness, and (c) Americans view their stay in Saudi Arabia as temporary. On the other hand, American-Jewish immigrants to Israel would enjoy a low degree of social distance and would become good learners of Hebrew for exactly the opposite reasons.

Schumann's theoretical model, although it seems intuitively correct, did not receive much support from relevant research because it suffers from a very important methodological problem: it is very difficult to measure social distance. Acton (as cited in Brown, 1980) tried to sidestep this serious problem by suggesting that what ought to be measured is not social distance but perceived social distance. Acton differentiates between dominant cultural values, which are unique to specific societies but may clash with the values of other societies, and the

subjective, personal cultures of individual human beings. According to Acton, a person's cultural background is a set of flexible rules or a set of background, reference information. If a person encounters a different culture in a positive way, these positive experiences will affect his attitudes and lower his social distance. Thus, how someone becomes acculturated into a new culture can be as important, if not more important, than his own cultural background.

In order to measure perceived social distance, Acton created the Professed Difference in Attitude Questionnaire (PDAQ). This questionnaire measures the student's perceived social distance. The second language learner responds to questions that measure the student's perceived social distance between himself and the native group, between himself and the target language group, and finally between his native group and the target language group. The answers are combined using a semantic differential technique.

Initial research using Acton's theoretical model came up with some interesting results. It was found that the ideal learner should be somewhere in the middle of the perceived social distance scale. Learners who identified too much or too little with the target language social group were not optimal learners. Eventually though, this model ran into problems because the research findings were not accurate predictors of second language acquisition success.

Giles and Byrne (1982) proposed an alternative model which tries to account for the influence of social factors on second language acquisition. The *intergroup model* emphasizes

ethnolinguistic vitality. According to this model, there are five factors which influence a group's vitality:

1. The degree of identification within the learner's group.
2. The status of the target language group among the members of the learner's group.
3. The degree of the learner's group enclosure. How unique the group considers its culture to be.
4. The learner's group perception of ethnolinguistic vitality. How prestigious the group members consider their culture to be.
5. The degree of the learner's group identification with other groups.

Giles suggests that when the group's ethnolinguistic vitality is low, the members of the group are good candidates for success in second language acquisition. A group with low ethnolinguistic vitality (a) has low self-identification, (b) considers the status of the target language group to be higher, (c) does not consider itself as highly distinct from the target group, (d) suffers from an in-group perception of low prestige, and (e) easily identifies with other groups. The way two groups interact with each other affects the ethnolinguistic vitality of the learner's group, and this may facilitate or impede the learner's group capacity to acquire the target language.

Second language acquisition is seen as a dynamic process that takes place over a period of time and is influenced by the interaction of two groups--the second language learning group and the target language group. The hypotheses of the *inter-group model* have not been experimentally tested as of yet, so the validity of the model will remain an open question until further research is done.

The last model examined is Gardner's *socio-educational model*. Gardner (1985) sees second language acquisition as the result of the interaction of four variables: (a) the learners' cultural predispositions, (b) the environment where the learning process takes place, (c) the capacity of the learners to master the target language, and (d) the success of the learners' efforts to master the language.

This is a dynamic model of language acquisition because each variable influences and is also influenced by the other variables. The learners' cultural beliefs influence their determination to study the target language. However, other variables such as the setting, the learners' aptitudes and their past language-learning successes are also important and may influence their motivation to study. The socio-educational model is a very sophisticated model, and research conducted by Gardner employing advanced statistical tools (linear structural analysis) has provided some support to its underlying hypotheses. The most important finding has been the establishment of a causal relationship between learners' cultural values and their motivation. The socio-educational model, notwithstanding its strengths, also suffers from a number of weaknesses. It does not provide a detailed explanation of how the different variables interact with each other and fails to account for the development of interlanguage and the growth of a person's linguistic ability within a period of time. In this respect, it is a static model insofar as it measures only the learner's final success or lack of success in second language acquisition.

Research on Social Variables and Second Language Acquisition

This section examines how specific social variables affect second language acquisition. Four variables are examined: (a) ethnic background, (b) sex, (c) socioeconomic status, and (d) age. Subsequently, findings of relevant research are evaluated.

A person's ethnic identity is a subjective identification, a means by which people identify themselves vis-à-vis others. The findings of research on this topic have generally shown that a learner's ethnic identity may play an important role in second language acquisition. According to Giles and Ryan (1982), when learners strongly identify with their ethnic group, their group's attitude towards the target language influences their motivation to acquire the target language. For instance, Hindu Indians may have a low motivation to study Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, because the two countries have a long tradition of animosity towards each other.

A number of differences have been reported in the learning styles and language use between men and women. Labov (1991) has suggested that men use nonstandard linguistic expressions (e.g., "Let's go and grab a beer") more often than women, while women tend to prefer standard, prestigious expressions (e.g., "Where shall we have lunch?"). Women are also more receptive to new linguistic expressions, but they do not necessarily adopt them. For instance, in the early 1980's American women began to use borrowed French fashion terms such as *faux bijoux* and *tres chic* prior to American men. This linguistic behavior may help female language students acquire a target language faster than male students because they may be more receptive to new linguistic expressions from the target language. Relevant research on sex

differences in second language acquisition has come up with conflicting results. Burstall (1975) studied six thousand children studying French as a second language in England. During her longitudinal study, girls consistently outperformed the boys in a variety of test scores measuring all four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). However, other researchers failed to replicate these impressive results. The problem is pinpointing the exact cognitive and behavioral differences between the two sexes that have a direct influence on second language success.

The learner's socioeconomic background (as determined by income level, occupation and education) seems to be a good indicator of second language-learning success. In a study of seventh-grade students learning English in Israel, Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp, and Chatow (1990) found that socioeconomically advantaged students consistently outperformed the socioeconomically disadvantaged students in language learning tests. Furthermore, it was discovered that socioeconomically advantaged students had a higher cognitive academic-level proficiency in Hebrew, which correlated strongly with their second language acquisition performance. This led researchers to suggest that the socioeconomically advantaged students were better prepared to acquire a second language in a formal setting because their privileged background helped them acquire more formal learning skills than the socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Age is a defining factor in the learner's attempt to acquire a native accent. Preston (1989) suggests that learners who are past their adolescence find it impossible to acquire a

native accent in the target language. Preadolescent children are more amenable to internalizing the speaking patterns of a target language. Also, age may have an effect on a learner's choice of standard or nonstandard target language expressions. Students who are either very young (10-19 years old) or very old (over 70 years old) are more open to nonstandard expressions, while middle-aged students as defined by Preston (30-60 years old) are more conservative in their choices. According to Chambers and Trudgill (1980), middle-aged working people do not belong to many informal social groups and thus they tend to conform to accepted social values and to use standard language expressions. Younger and older students on the other hand, belong to many informal social groups, and as a result of peer pressure they tend to be more open to nonstandard expressions. For instance, high school students may tend to use more nonstandard expressions because they are popular among the informal peer groups they belong to. Later on in life, when such people join the workforce, they will adopt a more standard set of expressions because they do not belong to many informal social groups. After retirement, such individuals will probably join many informal social groups, and their speaking patterns may influence their choices of nonstandard expressions.

Conclusion

This essay provided an overview of the main theoretical models dealing with the influences of cultural and social variables on second language acquisition. Four models were analyzed and evaluated. All of the models provide important insights about the relationship between cultural and social variables and success in second language acquisition, but they

fail to predict with statistical accuracy under which circumstances an ideal learning situation will occur. Further research needs to be done in order to clarify the weak and the strong points of these models.

Moreover, a number of individual cultural and social variables were examined and relevant research was discussed. It seems that it is easier to come to conclusions when specific social variables are concerned. The task of future research projects will be to synthesize the knowledge we already possess about the effects of specific social variables into a wider theoretical model of second language acquisition.

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