

Influence of Second Language Acquisition of International Students in English-Speaking Countries from Sociocultural Theory

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ABSTRACT

Studying abroad has gained immense popularity worldwide. Given that English is the most widely spoken language globally, many individuals opt to apply for universities in English-speaking countries for their further education. As international students immerse themselves in a linguistic and cultural environment markedly different from their home country, they encounter various differences and conflicts that permeate their daily lives, subsequently impacting their second language acquisition outcomes. This study aims to investigate the second language acquisition experiences of international students in English-speaking countries from a sociocultural perspective and propose corresponding improvement strategies for the benefit of educational institutions and international students alike. This study conducted a questionnaire survey to investigate the willingness of overseas students to contact English culture, participation in cultural interaction and participation in community activities. It has been observed that sociocultural factors play a significant role in the English language acquisition of international students. Furthermore, the second language acquisition process for these students can be enhanced by fostering their willingness to engage with local communities and promoting greater social participation. In the study of the questionnaire survey, there may be a situation where the sample does not fully represent the overall situation, or is affected by the personal bias of the surveyor and the respondent, which may affect the research. This study is expected to provide relevant programs for the improvement of second language acquisition of international students from English speaking countries.

KEYWORDS

Second language acquisition; SLA; International students; Language development; Sociocultural theory

1 Introduction

With the acceleration of the process of globalization, the status of English as an international language is increasingly enhanced, and the educational policies of various countries are gradually inclined to promote English education. At the same time, more and more students choose to go abroad to study in English-speaking countries. Studying and living in a new social environment, international students are faced with multiple challenges such as language, culture and social adaptation. In this context, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to study the second language acquisition process of foreign students based on sociocultural theory.

With the increasing exchange activities, scholars around the world have conducted a large number of studies on social culture and second language acquisition, constantly exploring the role of social factors on second language acquisition. At the same time, different educational institutions differ in language course design and teaching methods for international students. Curriculum content, teaching resources and teachers' cultural sensitivity will directly affect students' learning experience and second language acquisition effect. If the teaching guidance related to cultural factors can be given to institutions based on this topic, it can help international students learn second language better.

This article will explore the influence of sociocultural factors on English speaking students. The research will focus on the following questions: How willing are international students to contact the second language culture? How does participation in cultural interaction affect second language acquisition? How supportive is the learning environment (community policy, school curriculum) for second language acquisition? What is the effect of promotion? How does the diversity of language use scenarios (social, classroom, internship) affect foreign students' second language acquisition?

The studies of second language acquisition (SLA) have evolved considerably over time. The theories of SLA are divided into two schools: Cognitive Theory and Sociocultural Theory.

The Cognitive Theory identifies SLA as a psychological process, and focusses on the influence of mother tongue on second language, the role of idioms, the adequacy of understandable input, and the role of meta-language knowledge.

The Sociocultural Theory believes that SLA is a social phenomenon and is closely related to social culture. Learners acquire language through participation in social and cultural activities, and eventually internalise it into active materials in the brain ^[1]. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky(1920) believed that parents, caregivers, peers, and the culture at large are responsible for developing the brain's higher-order functions. Vygotsky believes that spiritual and cultural development is "mediated" by artefacts, which also include tools and symbols. He uses his "genetic approach" to study higher cognitive processes in historical contexts ^[2]. According to Vygotsky, human development relies on social interaction and, therefore,

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can differ among cultures.

A large number of research has been conducted around the world on SLA under cultural differences. Duan Xun(2021) deeply explored the new entry point of second language acquisition research ^[3]. He proposed the need to pay attention to the language socialisation research of SLA from a socio-cultural perspective. The cognitive perspective recognizes second language acquisition as a psychological process, and focuses on the influence of mother tongue on second language, the role of idiomatic expressions, the adequacy of comprehensible input, and the role of metalinguistic knowledge, which have been the mainstream of research for nearly half a century. However, he believes that second language acquisition is a complicated phenomenon, which cannot be separated from the influence of social culture, and the ultimate goal is to be able to communicate freely and appropriately in the target language. Therefore, this study can explore the influence of second language acquisition of foreign students from English-speaking countries from a socio-cultural perspective. Sociocultural factors affect people, which in turn affects SLA ^[4]. Ward(1999) and colleagues have proposed that cross-cultural adaptation can be meaningfully divided into two points: psychological point which is emotional and affective and sociocultural point which is behaviora ^[5]. They also suggest that sociocultural adaptation is best explained by social and cultural factors. This shows that learning efficiency and effectiveness in different cultural environments are closely related to sociocultural factors. International learning mobility is common ^[6]. Students living abroad need to adapt to a new culture, and the result of adaptation will be affected by various social and cultural factors. This reflects the universality of the study abroad phenomenon and the importance of social and cultural factors in the flow of international study. Also it has discussed the problem of how to adapt to the difficulties of cross-cultural life and learning. The research focusses on cultural distance, cultural adaptation, attitude towards the host country and social difficulties. Therefore, many researchers explored the impacts of cultural differences on SLA. They proposed a social education model in which students should use society and culture to supplement language learning. Research has shown that cultural identity plays an important role in promoting language learning.

2 Theoretical analysis and research hypotheses

This research will revolve around Sociocultural Theory. Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that language learning is achieved through social interaction and cultural participation. Among them, cultural identity, the willingness to have cultural exposure to the second language, and the degree of exposure to the second language are the key factors influencing second language acquisition.

At the beginning, cultural identity plays an indispensable role in the process of learning a second language. The degree to which international students identify with the culture of the local second language will affect their learning motivation and language usage strategies. If international students actively embrace the cultures of English-speaking countries, they are more likely to take the initiative to participate in social activities, thereby enhancing the opportunities for language input and output ^[7]. On the contrary, cultural conflicts may lead to avoidance behaviors and hinder language development.

Therefore, the willingness to be exposed to the culture of a second language determines whether international students will actively seek language practice opportunities. According to Vygotsky's Mediation theory, language learning requires social interaction as an intermediary, and the willingness to engage affects whether individuals take advantage of these opportunities. For example, join local communities or social activities or actively look for part-time jobs.

Meanwhile, the degree of exposure to a second language (such as language support provided by schools or communities) is very likely to directly affect the acquisition outcome. The language policies of the school (such as mandatory language partnership programs) and the inclusiveness of the community (such as whether locals are willing to communicate with international students) can affect the quality of language input for international students. If the environment encourages interaction (such as providing cross-cultural activities), international students are more likely to improve their language skills in real contexts ^[8].

3 Methodology and questionnaire design

In this study, questionnaires were issued to investigate questions related to second language acquisition and sociocultural participation. Based on the main views of the socio-cultural school, the factors affecting the second language acquisition of international students are divided into the following two aspects: cultural contact factors and language contact factors. For the survey samples, researchers first need to record their personal information. For example, nationality, age, gender, duration of study abroad and the living environment of the study abroad country (such as on-campus dormitories, homestays, and off-campus rentals). Meanwhile, if the respondents do not study abroad in English-speaking countries, the questionnaire survey will be directly terminated.

Firstly, cultural contact factors are mainly reflected in the willingness to contact the local culture of English-speaking countries and the degree of cultural interaction participation. The degree of cultural contact reflects the amount of cultural contact. The formation of a language is closely related to the local culture. Culture has a great influence on language, and language also contains many cultural factors. Therefore, we can understand the situation of language learning from the degree of cultural exposure. Contact willingness and learning willingness have a great impact on SLA^[9]. If the group of international students has a strong willingness to contact the local culture of the country where they study, they will not have a rejection of the second language, and thus have a stronger drive to learn a second language. This kind of motivation helps international students to form a strong interest in language learning and accelerate the internalization and transformation of second language knowledge, which is ultimately reflected in the effectiveness of second language learning. If you want to understand the degree of cultural contact of foreign students, you can start from their understanding of English corpus. The corpus records the communication styles, social customs and values of the local people. At the same time, some texts in the corpus contain unique local meanings, revealing people's unique communicative habits and social norms. It can be seen that researchers can indirectly understand the degree of cultural contact of overseas students by investigating their knowledge of the local corpus. Regarding the cultural contact module in the questionnaire, the following individual questions are listed: 1. Have you attempted to imitate the expressions of locals (such as slang and accents)? (Yes/No/Occasionally) 2. What is the approximate proportion of you making friends with local students/native speakers? (0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%) 3. Do you think your English expression is closer to that of a local rather than textbook-style English? 4. Have you consciously adjusted your communication style to adapt to the local culture? 5. Questions about the six expressions in the corpus.

Secondly, the researchers also conducted a survey on cultural engagement. In the questionnaire, the number and frequency of international students' participation in community activities and school activities were asked, so as to explore the cultural participation of international students. Activities held by communities and schools often incorporate local cultural elements, so that international students can directly experience the local culture in the process of participation, contact and exchange with local people, and have a deep understanding of local lifestyle and values. At the same time, community and school activities often have a certain educational significance, aimed at spreading and promoting local culture. By participating in these activities, international students can better integrate into local social groups and enhance their understanding of local culture and cross-cultural communication. Here are some examples from the survey questionnaire: 1. Do you know that your school or community holds some cultural exchange activities? 2. How often does your school and community hold cultural exchange activities? 3. Did the teacher encourage you to participate in group discussions or speeches?

Thirdly, language contact factors can be indirectly reflected in the ability to use second languages. The path of language contact is mainly to participate in social activities, and the degree of second language use of international students can reflect whether they successfully participate in relevant social activities (community, school). Language is a social phenomenon, and foreign students usually learn through language contact. The most important way of language contact for international students is around the school and the community. In the questionnaire, the researchers used open-ended questions to ask the international students about their schools and communities to investigate whether their schools set up relevant courses to help international students learn a second language and whether the community has relevant policies and activities to help them improve their language ability. After collecting the questionnaires and sorting them out, the researchers found that most of the overseas students' schools designed courses that would help improve their second language ability and strengthen the second language input of overseas students. However, few international students can provide examples of how their communities have helped them improve their second language skills and enhance their second language exposure. For the study of language exposure, the researchers also investigated the diversity of situations in which foreign students use their second language. The following are individual questions from the researchers regarding the survey on language exposure: 1. How long do you spend on English media (such as news, podcasts, YouTube) every day? (<30 minutes /30-60 minutes /1-2 hours />2 hours) 2. Approximately what was the total duration of face-to-face communication you had with native speakers in the past week? (Almost none /1-3 hours / 4-6 hours/more than 7 hours) 3. How often do you actively speak up or ask questions in class every week? (Never/once a week to five times/more than five times a week) 4. How often do you use English in daily scenarios such as supermarkets and restaurants? 5. Besides school and community life, are you doing any part-time jobs?

In addition to the above two questions, the second half of the questionnaire also contains an English proficiency assessment test, which is used to investigate the second language acquisition level of the questionnaire. First of all, researchers will ask international students to provide the scores of professional tests such as IELTS or TOEFL. Secondly, there are relevant questioning angles around the English proficiency of international students (self-perception, situational assessment) : 1. Can you understand daily conversations, academic lectures or news? Can you participate in social conversations or academic discussions fluently? Can you understand academic papers, news or novels? Can you write academic papers, emails or reports? (1-5 points, 1= completely unable, 5= completely able) 2. Can you understand more

than 80% of the content in class? (Yes/No) 3. Have you ever misunderstood others or been misunderstood due to language barriers? (Yes/No) 4. Can you easily have informal chats with locals (such as dinners and parties)? (1-5 points) 5. Can you communicate smoothly in places like supermarkets, banks, and hospitals? (1-5 points) 6. Can you handle administrative affairs (such as renting a house, visa) in English? Yes/No.

4 Questionnaire data and analysis

According to statistics, a total of 126 questionnaires were collected from 126 English speaking international students. The survey provided some examples from the English corpus: "break a leg" means to wish good luck, especially before a performance, "hit the book" means to start revising, and "yikes" means to be upset or surprised... in addition to the above three examples, the questionnaire also asked international students about their understanding of the exact meaning of "see ya," "bite the bullet," and "the ball is in your court." According to the survey, 32 people (about 25.4 percent) can fully understand these six usages, 57 people (about 45.24 percent) can understand the meaning of 3 to 5 usages, 34 people (about 26.98 percent) know 1 to 2 usages, and finally only 3 people (about 2.38 percent) do not know these six usages at all.

According to the survey, 66 international students (about 52.38 percent) often participate in community and school related activities, such as cultural festivals, club activities, festival parties, volunteer services, etc., once or twice a week. Regarding the degree of language exposure, the questionnaire shows that 23 international students (about 18.25 percent) use the second language in school, community and part-time jobs, and the rest of the foreign students use the second language mainly in school and community.

All in all, according to the test of second language level, the researchers found that of the 54 foreign students who measured good second language proficiency, all met one or two of the three characteristics of having a good corpus, active participation in community school activities, and diverse second language use scenarios.

5 Conclusion

According to the above survey, the researchers found that the second language acquisition of foreign students is closely related to their cultural contact and language contact degree, and the contact degree is positively correlated with their second language acquisition situation. The survey shows that international students who have close cultural contact or language contact, or a high degree of both cultural and language contact, tend to have a higher level of second language. Based on this study, in order to improve the second language acquisition of international students, the researchers put forward three suggestions for reference and application:

5.1 Communities and schools with a large number of international students hold more local culture learning and publicity activities

Set up cultural festivals in schools and communities to display the traditional culture, art forms, craft works, cuisine, etc. of local countries and regions, and invite international students to participate in the preparation and celebration of local festivals, so that they can personally experience the local cultural atmosphere. At the same time, more cultural visits and exchange activities are organized to arrange international students to visit local scenic spots, museums and art galleries, and cross-cultural exchange platforms are established to promote interaction between local students and international students. These practices help the overseas students to integrate into the local community, enhance the local cultural identity, and thus strengthen the willingness to learn a second language and promote the second language learning.

5.2 Communities and schools with a large number of international students set up language learning programs and related activities

Schools should set up different levels of second language improvement courses for international students to choose from, which should include four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing to help international students systematically improve their second language ability. In communities with a large number of international students, second language centers can be set up to provide textbooks and online language learning assistance systems to help international students acquire knowledge related to a second language in the community. At the same time, the community can also take advantage of local holidays to organize more gatherings and dinners to promote the exchange and learning between the international students and the local community, increase the second language contact degree of the international students, and enhance their learning interest and second language ability through rich activities.

5.3 Encourage international students to increase the diversity of second language use situations

In addition to using a second language at school and in the community, international students can also take part time or volunteer in the local community during periods when classes are not busy. In the school classroom, the group of international students learn the second language systematically, and the classroom teaching provides them with a structured learning environment, so that they can learn the relevant knowledge of the language in an orderly way. If the group of international students also enter the society to do part-time work outside the classroom, they will encounter a rich social scene. In these scenarios, international students need to communicate with local people, which provides them with rich opportunities for language practice. By interacting with a variety of local people, international students can more accurately understand the actual use of the language, including slang and idioms that may not be covered in the classroom, thus deepening their contact and understanding of the second language culture. At the same time, these complex social scenes are generally immediate and changeable, which obviously helps international students to improve their language exposure, enhance language responsiveness and fluency, and improve their second language ability.

Future research can integrate linguistics, psychology, sociology, pedagogy and other subjects more deeply to form a more comprehensive and systematic research framework, so as to more accurately reveal the impact of socio-cultural factors on second language acquisition.

At the same time, based on an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural factors, future research can explore how to make more personal second language acquisition programs for international students in English-speaking countries to improve their learning efficiency and effectiveness.

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