

An Exploration of Cultural Adaptation in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper mainly discusses the issues of cultural adaptation in second language acquisition and their influencing factors, and puts forward a series of targeted coping strategies. Firstly, it expounds the challenges posed by cultural differences to second language learners, including conflicts in cultural cognition and values, obstacles in intercultural communication, and so on. Then it analyzes the factors affecting cultural adaptation in SLA from three aspects: individual differences, social environment, as well as educational background and teaching methods. On this basis, strategies such as strengthening the cultivation of intercultural awareness, improving foreign language teaching methods and means, and promoting multicultural exchange activities are proposed to enhance the cultural adaptation ability of second language learners.

Keywords: Cultural Adaption; Second Language Acquisition; Value System; Cross-Culture Awareness; English Teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

In an era of deepening globalization, second language acquisition has become increasingly prevalent, presenting challenges for language learners in cross-cultural communication. During the process of second language acquisition, due to cultural differences, learners often encounter numerous difficulties in adapting to the target language environment, understanding local culture, and expressing themselves accurately. Research on acculturation in second language acquisition is of undeniable importance for promoting the all-round development of language learners and enhancing their cross-cultural communicative competence.

From the perspective of research background, acculturation in second language acquisition is a complex and multi-dimensional issue. As the

carrier of culture, language embodies rich cultural connotations and value orientations; as the context of language, culture exerts a profound influence on language comprehension and expression. In second language acquisition, learners must gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural background of the target language to better comprehend and use it. An in-depth study of acculturation in second language acquisition helps reveal the relationship between language and culture, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for language educators.

The significance of this study lies in uncovering the internal mechanisms of acculturation in second language acquisition, thereby offering theoretical support and practical guidance for language educators. This helps improve the quality and effectiveness of language education and advances cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, this study contributes to the development of cross-cultural exchange, fosters mutual understanding and respect among different cultures, and safeguards global cultural diversity. By investigating acculturation in second language acquisition, stronger theoretical support and practical guidance can be provided for cross-cultural communication.

1.2 Literature Review and Current Situation

In recent years, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has witnessed a surge in high-quality research outputs, with scholarly attention increasingly focused on acculturation as a core component of effective language learning. Existing studies span a wide range of critical dimensions, including targeted acculturation strategies for diverse learner groups, key internal and external influencing factors, phased characteristics of the adaptation process, and the interactive relationship between cultural integration and language proficiency improvement. These in-depth investigations have gradually unpacked the complex internal mechanisms of acculturation, moving beyond surface-level descriptions to explore how

cultural beliefs, social norms, and communicative habits shape language learning behaviors, thus laying a solid theoretical foundation and offering actionable practical guidance for evidence-based second language teaching and cross-cultural education practices. Among foundational SLA theories, Krashen's Input Hypothesis stands out as one of the most comprehensive and influential frameworks, providing groundbreaking insights into the role of comprehensible language input in facilitating acquisition and highlighting the indirect but vital role of cultural context in making such input meaningful. Linguist Selinker further advanced the field by introducing the pivotal concept of fossilization in second language learning, which refers to the long-term, persistent retention of non-target grammatical, phonological, and pragmatic features in learners' interlanguage systems. These fossilized features are highly resistant to correction or modification even with prolonged language exposure, and as a result, the vast majority of second language learners never achieve full native-like linguistic competence in the target language [1].

In the Chinese context, He Mengjie has conducted systematic and in-depth research on acculturation within the scope of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. She argues that further empirical exploration is urgently needed to verify the actual effectiveness of different acculturation strategies and quantify the varying impact weights of different influencing factors on learner adaptation. Through rigorous empirical research, she conducted a comprehensive analysis of the cultural adaptation status of international students studying Chinese in China, confirming that their adaptation journey is affected by a combination of factors such as cross-cultural differences, unexpected cultural conflicts, and unintentional cultural misunderstandings, with the degree of impact varying significantly based on individual learner differences and specific situational contexts [2].

Despite these research advances, numerous challenges remain in addressing acculturation issues in second language acquisition. Cultural conflicts and misunderstandings remain commonplace among learners immersed in second language environments, directly hindering learning efficiency, lowering learning motivation, and exerting persistent negative psychological effects. Language educators also

face persistent practical dilemmas in designing targeted support mechanisms to help learners adapt to target language cultures. To mitigate these issues, educators must continuously strengthen their own cross-cultural communicative competence, deepen their understanding of the cultural characteristics and value connotations of target language communities, and integrate cultural acculturation guidance into daily teaching to better support learners' smooth cultural integration and sustainable language development.

2. Theoretical Foundations

In the field of second language acquisition, language aptitude theory, universal grammar theory, and cognitive theory serve as three core theories, providing distinct perspectives for understanding learners' behaviors in second language acquisition [3,4]. These three theories complement each other, jointly constructing a comprehensive theoretical framework that helps explain the internal mechanisms of second language learning, interpret individual differences among learners, and guide the practice of second language teaching.

Language aptitude theory is a vital and foundational theory in the field of second language acquisition, which focuses on the inherent differences in learners' language learning potential. It states that learners exhibit different levels of language aptitude during the acquisition process, and this aptitude is composed of multiple interrelated components, including phonetic coding ability, lexical learning ability, and grammatical analysis ability—all of which directly affect the efficiency and effect of second language learning. For instance, phonetic competence, which involves mastering correct pronunciation, appropriate intonation, and natural rhythm, is crucial for improving the accuracy and fluency of oral English, as it enables learners to be understood clearly and integrate into target language communication scenarios. Lexical competence, which requires accumulating sufficient vocabulary, grasping the precise meaning of words, mastering their flexible usage and collocation rules, directly enhances learners' oral expression and reading comprehension abilities. Grammatical competence, covering basic rules such as noun number, tense, and voice, helps learners avoid common grammatical errors, standardize their writing, and ensure the

accuracy and coherence of language output.

Universal grammar theory, proposed by Chomsky, emphasizes that human beings are born with an innate language acquisition device, which contains universal grammatical rules common to all languages. Learners unconsciously apply this innate universal grammar to analyze and construct second language structures in the process of second language acquisition. This theory effectively explains how learners, with limited language input, can quickly master complex second language systems through the transfer and overgeneralization of their first language knowledge. For example, when encountering a new English word, learners may actively compare it with known vocabulary in terms of pronunciation, meaning, and usage to identify similarities and differences. During this process, universal grammar plays a key guiding role, helping learners derive new linguistic knowledge from existing language reserves, thereby improving the efficiency of second language acquisition and promoting the formation of interlanguage systems.

Cognitive theory, rooted in cognitive psychology, focuses on the cognitive processes and learning strategies adopted by learners in second language acquisition. It holds that second language learning is essentially a process in which learners actively process, encode, store, and retrieve second language information through a series of cognitive activities. Learners rely on various cognitive strategies such as memorization, attention, thinking, and problem-solving to construct their own second language knowledge system and develop language skills. For example, when learning a new English word, learners may use rote memorization or associative memory to remember its pronunciation and meaning, and focus on details such as spelling and usage to ensure accurate application in communication.

Cognitive theory also helps explain the individual differences in learning abilities and performance among second language learners, as different learners have different cognitive styles, memory capacities, and thinking modes, which lead to differences in their learning efficiency and outcomes [5].

3. Manifestations of Acculturation Issues in Second Language Acquisition

3.1 Linguistic Communication Level

At the linguistic communication level, second language learners often encounter difficulties arising from cultural differences, which hinder expression and may lead to misunderstanding or conflict in the target cultural context [6]. These difficulties are not merely about incorrect grammar or inadequate vocabulary, but rather the mismatch between the learner's linguistic output and the cultural norms of the target language, making effective cross-cultural communication challenging. Since language is deeply intertwined with culture, every word, sentence, and speech act carries cultural implications that learners may not fully grasp, leading to unintended misinterpretations. Key issues in this regard are elaborated in detail below.

3.1.1 Differences in lexical connotations

Lexical connotations vary significantly across cultures, posing considerable challenges for second language learners and often becoming a major source of communication breakdown. Words with the same literal meaning can carry vastly different emotional, cultural, or symbolic connotations in different cultural contexts, and even small discrepancies can lead to serious misunderstandings. Even if learners grasp the basic dictionary meaning of a word, they may fail to fully understand its hidden cultural connotations, emotional overtones, or usage scenarios in the target culture. For example, the term "old" conveys profound respect and reverence for elders in some Eastern cultures, where it is common to address elders as "old uncle" or "old aunt" as a sign of politeness and affection. However, in many Western cultures, such an address may be considered impolite or even offensive, as it is often associated with weakness, infirmity, or obsolescence, and people tend to use more neutral or positive terms to avoid emphasizing age. To avoid such communication misunderstandings, second language learners must go beyond memorizing literal meanings and actively explore the cultural connotations and usage habits of words in the target language.

3.1.2 Deviations in contextual comprehension

A lack of cultural background knowledge is the primary cause of contextual comprehension deviations among second language learners [7]. Contexts in the target culture, whether verbal or situational, carry rich cultural information, including historical background, social customs,

and interpersonal norms, which learners may fail to interpret accurately without relevant knowledge. This often leads to learners understanding the literal meaning of a sentence but missing its implied message or cultural connotation. For instance, the English term “uncle” has a broad and general meaning, referring to any male relative of one’s parents or a close family friend, while in Chinese culture, there are distinct terms for maternal uncles, paternal uncles, and other similar relatives, each carrying specific kinship implications. Without understanding the target culture’s naming conventions and kinship system, second language learners may misuse such terms, calling a maternal uncle by the term for a paternal uncle, which not only causes confusion but also may be regarded as a lack of respect for the target culture’s customs, ultimately leading to communication failures.

3.1.3 Inappropriate speech styles

Speech styles, including the degree of formality, directness, and politeness, differ significantly across cultures, and adapting to these differences is a key part of second language acculturation. Second language learners must adapt to and respect the speech norms of the target culture to prevent unnecessary conflicts and misunderstandings. For example, some Eastern cultures emphasize modesty and euphemism, and people tend to use indirect and polite expressions when expressing opinions, making requests, or refusing others, to avoid offending or embarrassing the other party. In contrast, many Western cultures favor directness and candor, where people express their thoughts and needs clearly and straightforwardly, without excessive circumlocution. If a learner from an Eastern culture uses overly euphemistic language when communicating with a Westerner, the latter may fail to understand the true intention; conversely, a learner who uses overly direct language in an Eastern cultural context may be considered rude or impolite. Therefore, learners should adjust their speech styles according to the target cultural characteristics, flexibly switching between direct and euphemistic expressions to convey their intentions accurately while respecting the other party’s cultural habits.

3.2 Non-Verbal Communication Level

At the non-verbal communication level, second language learners need to adapt to target cultural

non-verbal communication modes, including differences in body language, emotional expression, time perception, and spatial perception.

Body language varies markedly across cultures. Specific gestures or postures may carry distinct meanings in one culture but be deemed impolite or threatening in another. Learners must understand and adapt to target cultural body language to avoid conflicts or embarrassment caused by misinterpretation.

Emotional expression norms also differ culturally. Some cultures emphasize expressive body language and facial expressions, while others value restraint, conveying emotions through eye contact or silence. Learners must master appropriate emotional comprehension and expression to communicate intentions effectively in cross-cultural interactions.

Time and spatial perceptions also diverge across cultures. Some cultures prioritize punctuality and strict time management, while others adopt a more flexible approach. Learners should respect and adapt to target cultural time perceptions to avoid contradictions or misunderstandings caused by time-related conflicts [8].

3.3 Culture and Values

Cognitive differences and value conflicts are critical factors in second language acquisition, exerting profound impacts on learners' progress, cross-cultural communication, and interpersonal relationships.

Cultural cognitive differences present a major challenge. Divergent ideologies, values, and behavioral norms across cultures often lead to misunderstandings or biases in learners' understanding of the target culture. For example, attitudes toward privacy, religion, and age vary: Chinese people may casually ask about age or religion in daily life, which Westerners consider an invasion of privacy. Learners must actively seek understanding and integration by learning about target cultural traits and respecting local customs.

Value conflicts are also prominent, such as tensions between individualism and collectivism, authoritarianism and egalitarianism. These differences may cause frictions between learners and the target culture. Learners must understand and respect target cultural values and develop their own cultural identity through cross-cultural learning.

Cross-cultural communication barriers are another key concern. Language, customs, and value differences may create communication obstacles, misunderstandings, or conflicts. To overcome these, learners must enhance cross-cultural communication skills, understand local thinking patterns, behaviors, and values, and gradually integrate into the target cultural environment [9].

4. Strategies for Improving Acculturation Competence

4.1 Strengthening Cross-Cultural Awareness

Hosting lectures and workshops is an important approach to cultivating cross-cultural awareness among second language learners. Regular cross-cultural exchange lectures and workshops provide students with a diversified and interactive communication platform, usually delivered by professionals with rich international exchange experience, such as overseas returnees, cross-cultural communication scholars, or foreign educators. These speakers share their real-life experiences in cross-cultural interactions, practical insights into cultural differences, and effective coping strategies for potential cultural conflicts. This interactive teaching approach, which often includes group discussions, case analyses, and Q&A sessions, not only broadens students' global horizons but also enhances their understanding of cultural similarities and differences, thereby strengthening their cross-cultural comprehension and sensitivity.

Offering cultural courses is another effective method to enhance students' acculturation competence. Integrating cultural content into foreign language curricula through various forms, such as thematic lectures, classic readings, cultural documentaries, and video clips, helps students systematically grasp the cultural characteristics, values, and social norms of target language countries. This integration allows students to learn language and culture simultaneously, fostering their cultural sensitivity and enabling them to better understand the cultural connotations behind language expressions, thus reducing cross-cultural misunderstandings [10].

Organizing or participating in international cultural events such as cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and traditional performances is also a practical way to promote cross-cultural

understanding. These events intuitively showcase the unique charm of different cultures, including traditional music, dances, cuisines, and handicrafts, and offer students firsthand cross-cultural experiences. By participating in these activities, students can interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, experience different cultural customs in person, and deepen mutual understanding and recognition between different cultures [11].

In addition, campus cultural activities should focus on cultivating a cross-cultural atmosphere, providing students with more opportunities to practice cross-cultural communication. Activities such as foreign language corners, cultural salons, and international student exchange meetings allow students to freely showcase their own cultural traditions, share their cultural experiences, and learn about other cultures from their peers. These activities not only improve students' cross-cultural communicative competence but also cultivate their cross-cultural literacy, laying a solid foundation for their future cross-cultural interactions.

4.2 Improving Teaching Methods and Approaches

Situational language teaching has gained wide recognition in recent years as an effective teaching method for second language acquisition. By simulating real-life scenarios closely related to students' daily lives, it enables students to learn foreign languages in a realistic and immersive context, thereby enhancing their practical language application abilities. In teaching Chinese as a foreign language, scenario creation is particularly critical. Simulating common daily scenarios like shopping in a market, traveling in a city, and socializing with locals immerses students in authentic language and cultural contexts, helping them master not only Chinese vocabulary and grammar but also the cultural norms and communicative habits in different situations, thus facilitating mastery of Chinese language and culture and improving learning efficiency [12].

Interactive teaching is another effective approach to optimize second language teaching. It promotes active student engagement through various forms of teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions, such as group discussions, role-plays, and experience sharing. This teaching method encourages students to actively

participate in class activities, express their opinions freely, and practice language skills in real-time communication. In Chinese as a foreign language teaching, interactive teaching not only boosts students' learning initiative and enthusiasm but also enhances their teamwork and communication competence, laying a solid foundation for their future study and work [13]. Utilizing modern teaching technologies is a major trend in contemporary education and an important means to improve second language teaching quality. With the development of information technology, multimedia and online learning resources, such as vivid courseware, high-quality online courses, and convenient digital dictionaries, have enriched teaching materials and forms. These resources help students better understand and master Chinese language and culture through intuitive audio-visual experiences, and provide them with convenient, efficient, and flexible learning experiences, adapting to the diverse learning needs of different students.

5. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, where cross-cultural interactions have become increasingly frequent and indispensable, acculturation in second language acquisition has grown increasingly significant, evolving into a core factor that determines the quality and effectiveness of second language learning. This study focuses on the prominent acculturation issues faced by second language learners, analyzing the specific challenges they encounter in the acculturation process and proposing corresponding solutions through in-depth investigation and systematic analysis. Specifically, this study explores the key acculturation challenges encountered by learners, including initial culture shock, difficult cognitive adjustment, and the long-term process of cultural integration. These challenges are rooted in inherent cultural differences between the learners' native culture and the target language culture, the difficulty in constructing a new cultural identity, and the obstacles in adapting to the target cultural environment. To effectively address these challenges, learners must actively deepen their understanding of the target language culture, including its values, social norms, and communicative habits, and consciously develop their cross-cultural communicative competence.

On this basis, a series of targeted strategies are proposed to promote learners' acculturation, including enhancing cultural cognition, improving language proficiency, and strengthening acculturation competence. Implementing these strategies in daily learning and teaching helps second language learners better adapt to the target cultural environment, effectively reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, enhance their cross-cultural communication skills, and ultimately improve their overall acculturation competence, laying a solid foundation for their successful second language acquisition and future cross-cultural interactions.

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