

The Influence of Acculturation on Students' Language Proficiency

Min Wang

*Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2284450070@qq.com*

Keywords: Acculturation, Learning Motivation, Language Proficiency

Abstract: Acculturation is usually accompanied by changes in the language environment. Students may need to adapt to the new language environment, which will have a certain impact on students' language acquisition. Generally speaking, acculturation helps students better integrate into local social circles. Such social interactions provide opportunities to practice language skills as they need to communicate and build relationships in the new language. This study focused on Chinese students studying in the UK and explored the relationship between these students' acculturation and English proficiency skills, as well as the factors that may mainly influence their language proficiency. Research has found that acculturation has a positive impact on students' language proficiency, and the psychological factors in Schumann's acculturation theory are more prominent. Among them, the highest factor affecting language learning and proficiency is learning motivation.

1. Introduction

As an English-speaking country, the UK is consistently one of the top destinations for Chinese students to pursue academic progress and English language proficiency. According to information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in 2020-21, there were 143,820 Chinese students at UK colleges, contrasted with 95,595 in 2016-17. Of those Chinese students who study in the UK, most are full-time postgraduate taught students, which implies that their length of study is usually one year. Based on Schumann's (1986) model of acculturation, second language capability is connected with the student's vicinity to the gathering whose individuals communicate in that language. In particular, social and mental elements attached to language could significantly affect L2 acquisition^[9]. L2 Learners' acculturation is impacted by numerous factors, for example, a feeling of estrangement, absence of social help, language hindrances, culture shock, and academic challenges (Misra et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2018)^[7-11]. Different observational studies have been directed into the level of acculturation according to second language capability. Jia et al. (2016) explored a reciprocal relationship between English capability and acculturation among youths in grades 7-12^[3]. Besides, albeit a few studies have explored the connection between language capability and acculturation, only a few studies have targeted these graduate students whose features are special in any systematic way (Dao et al., 2007)^[1]. They move to another country with a culture that is not the same as their own after pubescence and typically leaves following a couple of years. Although they have taken language tests, like IELTS, TOEFL, to demonstrate they can

communicate in English, this does not ensure adequate English capacity to prevail in advanced education (Wang et al., 2018)^[11]. Language battles can add to intellectual and social challenges for global understudies (Martirosyan et al., 2015)^[6]. Consequently, because of the significance of language learning and communication, L2 proficiency is a basic issue for Chinese graduate students in the UK that whether they can foster their language capability in the span of one year while managing language hindrances, culture shock, and social personality. So this study aims to explore the relationship between acculturation and Chinese graduate students' language proficiency in the UK and what factors significantly influence those students' language learning and proficiency.

2. Literature Review

According to Schumann's Acculturation Theory, which was published in *The Pidginization Process: A Model for Second Language Acquisition* in 1978, a learner's level of acculturation will determine how successful they are at picking up a second language (L2). The process of acculturation and the learning of a second language are influenced by social and psychological factors. Schumman defines acculturation as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group," and claims that the naturalistic or untutored SLA is a byproduct of this process^[9]. Previous studies have explored the relationships between acculturation and language proficiency among L2 learners who are short-term residents or international students. Lybeck (2002) and Spenader (2011) focused on sojourners' learning in their acculturation, specifically, social-cultural identification and relationships with host nationals^[5-10]. Those sojourners who stayed in the target country for no more than three years were much influenced by a supportive host environment and meaningful relationships with host nationals. Their acculturation indeed enhanced their target language proficiency, including pronunciation, while rejection to the host culture caused low language proficiency. Interviews were used to assess those L2 learners' language proficiency. Besides, many studies have emphasized the language proficiency in the acculturative process for international students in the United States. Jiang et al. (2009) first verified that the relationship between acculturation and second language acquisition based on two factors, US society and Chinese society^[4]. Then they investigated that the more Chinese L2 students were immersed in American society, the more proficient their oral English language would be, even if they kept their Chinese identities during their studies in the USA, but their pronunciation seldom changed. Peng & Patterson (2021) also targeted international students in the US to find that strong ethnic identification could negatively influence L2 English proficiency, but motivation to learn English could mitigate this effect and help international students attain greater English language proficiency^[8]. Also, it had a similar result that intense American acculturation could help English language proficiency by motivation. When it came to research methods, it was distinct from other studies by adopting a self-reported questionnaire as a standard measure of English language proficiency. Furthermore, after much research about the relationships between acculturation and language proficiency, several studies have used longitudinal data to examine the influence of social distance and psychological distance on the L2 acquisition of short-term international students. For example, Gao (2020) conducted research on the acculturation of Korean students during Chinese language acquisition^[2]. It concluded that both social factors and psychological factors had certain influence on language input, which is consistent with the hypothesis. And for Korean international students, "social distance" was more significant than "psychological distance" when learning Chinese.

Many studies have focused on the relationship between language proficiency and acculturation based on different populations. However, little research targets international postgraduate students in the UK who have a strong motivation to learn while usually staying in the host countries for less

than two years. Those students are unique. Most of them will not stay in the UK because the UK is not an immigrant country. Even if the UK published a PSW (Post Study Work) visa policy in July 2021, which allows international students to find a job within two years after graduation, most Chinese students will choose to come back to China. That means the majority of Chinese postgraduate students will not stay in the UK for more than two years, and research on their acculturation will be necessary for such conditions. The present study examined the relationship between acculturation and English proficiency skills measured by the self-report method among those students and the factors that might largely influence their language fluency.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The study invited 5 participants who all are Chinese-English bilinguals. They went to pursue their one-year postgraduate taught programs in the UK in September 2021. All of them were born in Chinese mainland and speak Mandarin as their first language. They were required to complete a mainstream acculturation questionnaire and a language learning and proficiency self-report.

3.2 Mainstream acculturation questionnaire

Based on the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000), 15 questions about acculturation towards a UK target society are listed. Response options range from 1 = False to 5 = True. Questions are about adaptation in the UK. For example, “I attend social functions with UK people”; “I am familiar with important people in UK history”. This questionnaire only focuses on target acculturation including domains like culture, friends, daily life, communication. When the participants get the higher scores, it reflects their greater acculturation to UK society.

3.3 Language learning and proficiency

The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) is a validated tool for collecting self-reported proficiency and experience data from bilingual and multilingual speakers. So 4 items assess level of English proficiency in read / write / speak / listening on a scale from zero (none) to ten (perfect), and six factors (such as native language community, length of residency, local life style, language shock, learning motivation, culture shock) contribute to language learning on a scale assessed from zero (not a contributor) to ten (most important contributor). Self-report is a popular method for assessing language competency because direct testing and comparative study by longitudinal recording are complex and time-consuming.

4. Data Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to test relationships between acculturation in UK and English proficiency. The results of the correlation analysis model below indicated a good influence.

	Acculturation	Language Proficiency
Acculturation	1.000(0.000***)	0.922(0.026**)
Language Proficiency	0.922(0.026**)	1.000(0.000***)

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

5. Findings

After collecting the data, the study used correlation analysis in SPSS to analyze the data. Moreover, after processing and analyzing the relevant data by SPSS, the final result is that the SD is 0.026, and the number received is positive. Therefore, the results of this study show that acculturation positively impacts students' language proficiency, which is consistent with previous research that acculturation contributes to the improvement of students' language proficiency. Acculturation is often accompanied by exposure to more English language environments, such as interacting with native students and community members, participating in English-taught courses, social activities, etc. This language environment helps international students improve their English listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities. Acculturation also brings a deeper understanding of English cultural and social practices. This is very important for the correct use of English expressions and habits, because language is not just vocabulary and grammar, but also covers cultural background and social context. What's more, it also exposes international students to a wider range of vocabulary and spoken expressions. This helps international students expand their vocabulary and improve their language expression skills. International students can make the most of the opportunities brought by acculturation to improve their English language skills by actively participating in the language environment and actively communicating. Thus, when Chinese students actively participate in culture and daily life in the UK, their L2 (English) oral level gradually improves, and their English language proficiency also improves rapidly.

In addition, through the data analysis of language proficiency self-report, the study found that for Chinese students studying in the UK, the psychological factors in Schumann's acculturation theory were more prominent, and the highest factor contributing to language learning and proficiency was learning motivation. It shows that students go to the target country as a specific group with almost the same purpose of learning. According to (Xu, 1991), there was indeed a relationship between language proficiency and academic performance^[12]. For Chinese international students in the UK, they go to the UK to quickly adapt to the British study and lifestyle, and get their master's degree within one year, and even hope to achieve excellent results in their GPA, or they hope to take advantage of the opportunity of studying abroad to quickly improve their English language proficiency and make themselves more competitive in the job market after graduation. All of these make their learning motivation stronger than other factors. High levels of learning motivation are generally associated with higher activeness and persistence in learning. When students have strong interests and goals in learning English, they are more likely to invest more time and effort in learning, thereby improving their language proficiency. For example, actively participating in class discussions, learning independently, and actively seeking help. These can speed up students' English language learning process.

6. The Theoretical and Practical Implications

Language and culture are inextricably linked with a long history. Language is not only the carrier of culture, but also the crystallization of culture. The form of language expression is also restricted by the content and characteristics of culture. Therefore, the process of language learning is inseparable from the process of cultural cognition and acquisition. The acculturation theory proposed by Schumann (1978) demonstrates that cultural acquisition promotes second language acquisition. He pointed out that learners who have a strong desire to integrate with foreign cultures will learn more of the language^[9]. According to this study, the input of British culture is of great help to Chinese students' English spoken proficiency and comprehension ability during their study in the UK. Therefore, acculturation has a positive impact on students' language proficiency. Such a positive attitude will, of course, lead to better foreign language learning; that is, in some cases, acculturation can affect learners' perceptions of learning, which in turn affects second language acquisition. At the same time, acculturation can alleviate the anxiety caused by culture shock. When

a student knows or comes into contact with the culture behind a language, he or she will not be so nervous because of the familiarity, thus reducing the anxiety of second language learning and making the second language acquisition process easier and smoother.

It is of great practical significance for second language teaching and second language learning to know the promoting effect of acculturation on second language acquisition and to understand the influencing factors of promoting acculturation in the process of second language acquisition. For example, teachers' guidance intervention on cultural input in classroom teaching activities, habitual extensive extracurricular reading and cross-cultural communication practice can help students to effectively learn about culture, thereby helping Chinese students to integrate into English better and faster language learning atmosphere, and accelerating the process of second language acquisition. On the other hand, Chinese international students need to complete their master's studies within one year, and want to achieve excellent academic results, or some international students want to make full use of the opportunity to study abroad to improve their English proficiency, so that they can be more competitive in the job market in the future. All of these reasons make learning motivation a major factor for international students who want to improve their English language skills. Therefore, Chinese international students can often use their own learning motivation to motivate themselves to actively integrate into the British learning environment and to get in touch with British culture as much as possible, so as to subtly improve their language proficiency. Only on the basis of the simultaneous cultivation of language awareness and cultural awareness can learners learn the target language well and use it freely in practice.

It can be seen that acculturation has important theoretical and practical significance for second language acquisition, and it is an indispensable part of successful second language acquisition. Only when language acquisition and cultural acquisition are carried out at the same time, the learner's second language acquisition is likely to achieve real success. In addition, learning motivation is also one of the key factors in learning English language ability. A high degree of learning motivation can motivate students to participate more actively in the learning process and adopt more effective learning strategies, thereby helping them improve their English language skills. Therefore, both educators and students themselves should pay attention and strive to improve learning motivation to achieve better language learning outcomes.

7. The Strengths and Limitations

Influenced by China's examination-oriented education, under the background of traditional Chinese foreign language teaching, college students' foreign language learning focuses on the three major language elements of vocabulary, grammar and semantics, and strives to convey meaning accurately and fluently. Therefore, Chinese college students' English reading and writing abilities are generally more robust than their listening and speaking abilities. However, if students study in the UK, it is obvious that all four aspects of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are indispensable. Therefore, it is necessary to study and understand the factors that influence Chinese students to comprehensively improve their English proficiency in the UK within one year. The research is based on Schumann's theory of acculturation. It takes the one-year British master of Chinese students as the research entry point, so that the theory can be confirmed, and new discoveries have been obtained from new research objects and events. That is to say, for Chinese students studying in the UK for one year, among the social and psychological factors reflected in Schumann's acculturation theory, the learning motivation factor significantly impacts the improvement of Chinese students' English language learning and proficiency in the UK. Therefore, the findings are not only consistent with previous research that acculturation has a positive effect on students' language proficiency. And on this basis, it is found that learning motivation is stronger than other influencing factors. This provides a certain reference value for Chinese students who want to improve their English proficiency in the UK; that is, they can stimulate their motivation to study. As mentioned above, a complete and comprehensive language ability expression should

reflect four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Based on these standard-the four aspects, the four items involved in the research questionnaire used in this study, plus self-report, can comprehensively analyze and reflect a person's English proficiency. The six factors in the questionnaire also cover social and psychological factors in Schumann's acculturation theory. The research tools chosen and used during data collection are well suited to the research theory and the content of the study. In addition, SPSS is also applied to the data processing to make data analysis more precise and accurate, thus making research results more convincing.

Of course, this study also has certain limitations. Since only 5 participants participated in the questionnaire, the findings may be less representative. Therefore, it is still necessary to invite more participants to conduct quantitative research in future research, but this study also has certain reference significance. Suppose students want to conduct a more detailed study on its influencing factors. In that case, students can also make a more detailed division of social variables and psychological variables in Schumann's acculturation theory, and conduct qualitative research to explore in depth.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the study found that acculturation helps improve students' language proficiency. According to Schumann (1978)'s acculturation model theory, it is found that psychological factors have a greater impact than social factors on language learning and proficiency of Chinese students studying in the UK, especially learning motivation. It can be seen that the role and influence of acculturation should be paid attention to in the process of language acquisition. Therefore, the results of this study have certain significance and reference value for English teaching and students' language acquisition and development.

References

- [1] Dao, T. K., Lee, D., & Chang, H. L. (2007). Acculturation level, perceived English fluency, perceived social support level, and depression among Taiwanese international students. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 287–295.
- [2] Gao, L. (2020). Research on Acculturation of Korean Students during Chinese Language Acquisition. In 7th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication (ICELAIC 2020) (pp. 420-427). Atlantis Press.
- [3] Jia, F., Gottardo, A., Chen, X., Koh, P., & Pasquarella, A. (2016). English proficiency and acculturation among Chinese immigrant youth in Canada: A reciprocal relationship. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(8), 774-782.
- [4] Jiang, M., Green, R. J., Henley, T. B., & Masten, W. G. (2009). Acculturation in relation to the acquisition of a second language. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(6), 481-492.
- [5] Lybeck, K. (2002). Cultural identification and second language pronunciation of Americans in Norway. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(2), 174-191.
- [6] Martirosyan, N. M., Hwang, E., & Wanjohi, R. (2015). Impact of English proficiency on academic performance of international students. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 60–71.
- [7] Misra, R., Crist, M., & Burant, C. J. (2003). Relationships among life stress, social support, academic stressors, and reactions to stressors of international students in the United States. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 10(2), 137–157.
- [8] Peng, A., & Patterson, M. M. (2021). Relations among cultural identity, motivation for language learning, and perceived English language proficiency for international students in the United States. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 35(1), 67-82.
- [9] Schumann, J. H. (1978). *The pidginization process: A model for second language acquisition* (pp. 1-113). Rowley, Mass: Newbury House Publishers.
- [10] Spenader, A. J. (2011). Language learning and acculturation: Lessons from high school and gap-year exchange students. *Foreign Language Annals*, 44(2), 381-398.
- [11] Wang, C. H., Harrison, J., Cardullo, V., & Lin, X. (2018). Exploring the relationship among international students' English self-efficacy, using English to learn self-efficacy, and academic self-efficacy. *Journal of International Students*, 8(1), 233–250.
- [12] Xu, M. (1991). The impact of English-language proficiency on international graduate students' perceived academic difficulty. *Research in Higher Education*, 32, 557-570.