

The Influence of Cultural Identity on Language Acquisition in “Third Culture Kids (TCKs)” in America with East Asian Backgrounds

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Abstract: The relationship between cultural identity and language acquisition among a special demographic population, Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in America with East Asian backgrounds, is complex. TCKs spend a significant part of their early years outside their parents' culture and face challenges in language acquisition due to their exposure to multiple cultures. Third Culture Kids with ancient backgrounds face challenges in their lifetime due to differences in cultural backgrounds between their host and home culture. This often leads to a unique “third culture” that blends elements of both cultures. Factors such as the age of language exposure, social interactions, and community attitudes significantly influence this formation of the “third culture”. This essay focuses on the various factors influencing language acquisition, including bilingualism, acculturation, and identity negotiation. Based on theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on sociocultural and identity theories, the aspects influencing language acquisition in TCK with East Asian-American backgrounds and their unique process of language acquisition will be explained.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Language Acquisition, Third Culture Kids (TCKs).

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an increase in people with multiculturalism and migration worldwide, resulting in the emergence of a unique demographic group, Third Culture Kids (TCKs). TCKs are children who spend a significant amount of time at an early age outside the country their parents came from, often due to the occupation mobility of their parents [1]. Thus, TCKs develop a “third culture” that embraces both their home and host culture, creating a new third cultural identity that develops no sense of belonging to any single culture but reflects all of their experiences [2]. With the increasing number of immigrants from East Asian countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, the U.S. has become a melting pot of diverse cultural identities, including many TCKs with East Asian backgrounds who struggle with identity formation and language acquisition in the multicultural environment. The research question is: How does cultural identity impact the language acquisition process of TCKs with East Asian backgrounds in America, considering the challenges they face in balancing their heritage and host cultures?

To investigate the research question, this study is based on a combination of theoretical frameworks and empirical studies related to the sociocultural perspective and the identity theory. This

topic provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and language acquisition among TCKs. The findings can help educators, policymakers, and families to better support TCKs' bilingual development and cultural integration, proposing strategies for positive identity formation and language proficiency for the TCKs, as they will face unique challenges during their lifetime.

2. Language Acquisition and Cultural Identity

Several theoretical frameworks investigate the complex relationship between cultural identity and language acquisition in TCKs with East Asian backgrounds. The sociocultural perspective emphasizes the role of social interactions and cultural contexts in shaping language development [3]. Moreover, TCKs' language acquisition is based on their interactions with family members, peers, and community members who provide opportunities for language learning within meaningful cultural contexts. Also, the identity theory proposed by Erikson suggests that individuals undergo a process of identity formation, exploring and reconciling different aspects of their self-concept [4]. For TCKs with Asian backgrounds, this process involves negotiating their cultural identity about their linguistic and social experiences [5]. Language, therefore, is a symbolic maker of identity, reflecting TCK's sense of belonging to their heritage culture and their adaptation to American society [6].

2.1. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is an omnifarious concept that includes a cultural group's values, beliefs, traditions, and languages. For TCKs, cultural identity is not a static concept but a dynamic one. This is shaped by their unique experiences of living in multiple cultural contexts. TCK's cultural identity is often characterized by hybridity in order to combine elements from their home and host cultures to form a distinct third culture [7].

East Asian TCKs often experience a dual identity, balancing the expectations and norms of their heritage culture with those they experience in American society where they grow up. This dual identity can lead to cultural conflict, making TCKs feel connected and estranged from their host culture. Thus, cultural identity formation is complex and involves several factors, including family factors, social interactions, and individual personalities.

This negotiation of cultural identity among TCKs is a continuous and context-dependent process. In the scenario of East Asian TCKs, they would emphasize their American identity in certain social contexts to fit in with peers while highlighting their East Asian heritage in their family. The fluidity of cultural identity can impact their language use and acquisition, a key component of cultural expression and identity [8].

2.2. Relationship Between Language Acquisition and Cultural Identity

The relationship between language acquisition and cultural identity is bidirectional too [9]. Language serves a crucial role in the expression and construction of cultural identity, while cultural identity influences language learning and use. For TCKs, acquiring multiple languages is not only a cognitive process but also a process related to identity.

Bilingualism and multilingualism are common among TCKs. Their proficiency in different languages can vary depending on the context. The bilingual experience of East Asian TCKs living in America who often speak their heritage language at home and English in public contributes to a complex linguistic identity, where each language is connected with different cultural and social meanings.

The ability to speak and use different languages allows TCKs to engage in diverse cultural communities, enhancing their cultural skills and adaptability [10]. However, this linguistic flexibility

can also pose challenges. TCKs might experience language attrition in their heritage language if not spoken frequently, weakening their connection with their cultural roots. They might also need help achieving a native-speaker level in English which would affect their social integration in American society.

This is evident in the concept of linguistic relativity as well, that language shapes our thoughts and perceptions [11]. For East Asian TCKs, their linguistic ability is cognitively influenced and shapes how they perceive and interpret cultural norms, values, and social interactions.

2.3. Language Acquisition of TCKs in the US with East Asian Background

Several factors, including their age of exposure to different languages, the frequency and context in which they use the language, and the attitudes of their surroundings toward bilingualism influence language acquisition. All these factors shape the linguistic abilities and preferences of TCKs in complex ways.

One significant factor is the age at which TCKs are exposed to their heritage language and English. Early exposure to both languages typically results in higher proficiency and balanced bilingualism. However, if TCKs are introduced to English later, they might not be as fluent, which would impact their academic performance and social interactions.

The context of the languages used is also a crucial factor. TCKs who use their heritage language primarily at home and English at school and society develop distinct linguistic domains. This separation of the usage of language can lead to “code-switching,” where TCKs alternate between languages depending on the context and interlocutors, reflecting the adaptive linguistic strategies TCKs employ to navigate their multicultural environments [12].

Another influencing factor is the attitude of their community towards bilingualism and multiculturalism. Supportive communities that value and encourage bilingualism provide a positive environment for TCKs to develop their linguistic skills. In contrast, communities that view bilingualism as an obstacle to assimilation might pressure TCKs to prioritize English over their heritage language, leading to language and identity conflicts.

Empirical studies on this topic mainly highlight the importance of learning their heritage language while acquiring English simultaneously. Research indicates that heritage language proficiency influences their sense of cultural identity and emotional well-being among TCKs and exhibits cognitive advantages like better problem-solving skills and flexibility [13].

3. Influence of Cultural Identity on Language Acquisition in TCKs in the US with East Asian Background

3.1. Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the process by which individuals adapt to and adopt aspects of a different culture while maintaining elements of their original culture. For TCKs with this background, acculturation involves navigating the cultural values, practices, and languages of both their heritage and host cultures. This process significantly impact on their language acquisition and usage [14].

East Asian cultures are influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes respect for authority, filial piety, and the importance of education [15]. Language use and social interactions in East Asia are influenced by these cultural characteristics in various aspects. For instance, the Korean language has different speech levels based on the speaker’s relationship with the listener, reflecting the respect and hierarchy aspect of Confucian values. Similarly, the concept of “face” in Chinese culture, a person’s image and dignity in society, plays a crucial role in communication and is influenced by the social norms in Confucianism [16].

The degree of acculturation varies among TCKs and is influenced by family practices, community support, and individual attitudes. TCKs who experience a high level of acculturation to American culture might prioritize English and adopt American cultural norms, gradually losing their heritage language, while those who maintain strong ties to their heritage culture will be better at it.

Acculturation strategies adopted by TCKs can be classified into four types: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization [17]. Each strategy has a different function for language acquisition. Assimilation involves adopting the host culture and language and neglecting those of their heritage; separation involves maintaining the heritage culture and language while minimizing interactions with the host culture; and integration means achieving a balanced approach, embracing cultures and languages from both. Marginalization, as the least favorable strategy, results in detachment from both cultures and languages.

Empirical studies indicate that TCKs who adopt an integration strategy are better at linguistic ability and cultural identity [18]. They can learn both cultural contexts effectively and develop a balanced bilingualism and a positive sense of identity. However, TCKs who adopt other strategies including assimilation or separation might face challenges in language acquisition and cultural identity, since they miss out on the benefits of embracing both cultures.

3.2. Identity Negotiation

Identity negotiation is essential for TCKs to reconcile and integrate different aspects of both their cultural and linguistic identities [19]. This process is particularly complex for TCKs with East Asian backgrounds in America, as they must balance the expectations and norms of their heritage culture with those of American society.

As mentioned, East Asian cultures are deeply influenced by Confucian values, reflected by the emphasis on education, respect for elders, and maintaining social harmony in Confucian-influenced societies like China, Japan, and Korea. These cultural roots and social backgrounds significantly influence language use, embedding politeness levels and honorifics in language structure. On the other hand, American culture, characterized by individualism, direct communication, and a more egalitarian social structure, influences everyday interactions [20].

Language plays both as a marker of cultural identity and as a medium for social interaction. TCKs often use language to signal their cultural affiliation and navigate social relationships. Identity negotiation is influenced by several factors including family dynamics, peer interactions, and societal attitudes [21]. Families that emphasize the importance of maintaining the heritage language and culture provide a supportive environment for the TCKs to develop a strong cultural identity, positive peer interactions, and friendships with individuals from similar backgrounds, contributing to a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation.

Social attitude toward multiculturalism and bilingualism is another factor. TCKs are more likely to feel valued and accepted in an inclusive and supportive environment, leading to positive identity development and linguistic ability. On the contrary, in environments where they are pressured to conform to a monolingual and monocultural norm, TCKs would experience identity and linguistic challenges.

TCKs must constantly adapt to their cultural and linguistic identities since identity negotiation is an ongoing process. The adaptability enables TCKs to thrive in diverse cultural environments. However, it can also be a source of stress and confusion, as TCKs have to deal with the complexities of belonging to multiple cultures.

3.3. Future Directions

Past studies mainly focused on case studies and theoretical research; thus, future research related to the influence of cultural identity on language acquisition in TCKs with East Asian backgrounds should focus more on longitudinal studies to track language development and identity formation over time.

Moreover, research should explore the impact of digital media and technology on language acquisition and cultural identity among TCKs to understand how these technologies influence linguistic practices with the increasing use of digital platforms for communication and learning. Educational institutions and policymakers should consider starting programs to support bilingualism and multiculturalism according to the unique needs of TCKs, including language classes of their heritage language, programs for them to exchange cultures, and support networks for TCKs and their families.

Finally, more attention should be focused on the psychological well-being of TCKs. Their challenge in exploring the multiple cultural identities and languages may lead to stress and identity conflicts. These mental health supports and resources specified to the TCKs can help mitigate these challenges, promoting positive identity development and language acquisition.

4. Conclusion

The complex relationship between cultural identity and language acquisition of TCKs with East Asian backgrounds in America emphasizes the importance of understanding their unique experiences and challenges. Cultural identity influences language acquisition and shapes the linguistic practices, cognitive processes, and social interactions of TCKs. Theoretical frameworks including the sociocultural perspective and the identity theory provide insights into this complex relationship, while empirical studies show the significance of maintaining a balance between heritage and host cultures to achieve linguistic ability and identity development.

Moreover, acculturation and identity negotiation are the key processes that influence the language acquisition of TCKs, promoting the fusing and supporting bilingualism, leading to better linguistic ability and a strong sense of cultural identity. Therefore, future research and policy initiatives should focus on supporting the unique needs of TCKs and recognizing their potential.

By focusing on the complexities of cultural identity and language acquisition among TCKs in America with East Asian backgrounds, we can create more inclusive and supportive environments that embrace linguistic diversity and cultural richness. This will benefit the TCKs as well as contribute to the broader goals of multiculturalism and, hopefully, global unity.

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