

The Influence of Cultural Context on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract:

This review focuses on how cultural context affects second language acquisition (SLA), aiming to sort out relevant theoretical models and empirical research results. Firstly, this paper reviewed the theoretical perspectives of Kramsch (1993), Norton (2010, 2013) and other scholars on the relationship between language, culture and identity, emphasizing that language acquisition is not only a cognitive process, but also the embodiment of social and cultural practice. Subsequently, empirical studies from the family context and the school education field were analyzed, revealing the specific manifestations of cultural ideology, social power structure and identity in second language learning. By comparing theoretical and empirical literature, this paper finds that there are differences between the two in terms of goals, methods and concerns, but they also complement each other. Finally, the article points out that the current research has deficiencies such as ambiguous cultural definitions and neglect of individual experiences, and suggests that in the future, micro experiences and macro structures should be integrated and the operability of cultural variables should be strengthened. This article has certain reference value for deepening the research on language teaching in the cultural context.

Keywords: Cultural context, Identity, Family language policy, Empirical research, Theoretical Review

1. Introduction

With the accelerated development of global population migration, cross-border education and multicultural exchange, second language acquisition (SLA) has not only become a core issue in linguistics, but also gradually developed into a research focus at the intersection of multiple disciplines such as sociology, education and cultural studies [1]. Under such a

macro background, language learners are often in a multicultural context. Their language development is not only limited by the role of cognitive mechanisms, but also deeply influenced by external factors such as social relations, cultural identity and power structure. Traditional SLA studies usually regard language learning as an internal psychological process of individuals, emphasizing the decisive role of cognitive variables such as grammar rules, input volume, and

attention in the acquisition process [2]. However, over the past two decades, researchers have increasingly emphasized the interaction between language learning and the social and cultural environment, and have begun to view language acquisition as a process embedded in a specific social context. Especially in the context of immigrant children and bilingual families, the development of language is highly dependent on cultural factors. Just as Schieffelin and Ochs pointed out, language is not only a communication tool, but also a way of cultural participation and an identity learning mechanism [3]. On this basis, relevant studies have begun to focus on how Family Language Policy, the education system and social identity jointly act on the language acquisition process. King, Fogle and Logan Terry proposed that family language policies constitute the main source of children's language input and play a key role in aspects such as language selection and language usage frequency [4]. Norton further pointed out that the construction of language identity directly affects learners' learning motivation and actual participation opportunities [5]. The research of Curdt-Christiansen shows that the language ideology within the family can imperceptibly determine the direction and pattern of children's language use [6]. Therefore, this paper aims to systematically review the relationship between cultural context and second language acquisition, focusing on three dimensions: language socialization, family language policies, and identity negotiation, to explore the role of cultural factors in language input and learning motivation [7]. Through literature review, this paper reveals the deep mechanism of cultural context in language acquisition, points out the deficiencies of current research at the same time, and proposes possible expansion directions for future research, with the expectation of promoting the continuous in-depth research on second language acquisition in cross-cultural contexts.

2. Review of Theoretical Basis

2.1 The Impact of Multiculturalism on Language Acquisition

In contemporary language education research, SLA has been widely regarded as a cognitive and socialization process embedded in the social and cultural context [1]. Researchers are increasingly focusing on the deep relationship between language acquisition and cultural cognition as well as identity construction, arguing that the cultural context not only provides an environment for language input but also constitutes the basis for the construction of language meaning.

From the perspective of hermeneutics, the concept of

"horizon fusion" proposed by Gadamer reveals the meaning negotiation mechanism between learners and the target language culture during the language acquisition process [8]. Learners do not simply copy language rules. Instead, they achieve the internalization of language and the expansion of cognition by comparing and integrating the understanding perspectives of the cultures of their native language and the target language.

The "Theory of Symbolic Competence" proposed by Kramsch emphasizes the cultural and symbolic systems in language learning [9]. She pointed out that language is not only a tool for information transmission, but also a means for learners to negotiate their identity and social status. The acquisition of symbolic ability requires learners to be able to understand the cultural significance behind the language and flexibly apply the language in diverse cultural contexts.

Chen found through the study of the cultural adaptation problems of Chinese international students that adaptation difficulties not only weaken the learners' willingness to communicate, but also directly affect language output and interaction ability [10]. This point is in line with Krashen's sentiment filtering hypothesis, that is, negative emotional states can hinder the effective processing and internalization of language input.

The concept of "productive bilingualism" proposed by Gao advocates enhancing learners' communication skills through cross-cultural comparison and pragmatic reflection [11]. This is closely related to the "pragmatic competence" theory proposed by Canale and Swain, emphasizing that teaching should help learners understand the differences in communication rules between Chinese and Western cultures and reduce misunderstandings caused by negative cultural transfer.

From the perspective of sociocultural theory, Norton et al. pointed out that language learning is actually a process of identity construction [5]. Li's research on the children of migrant workers in China further indicates that language acquisition has become a symbolic means for disadvantaged groups to challenge the structure of cultural inequality between urban and rural areas, highlighting the social function of language as cultural capital [12]. Phillipson criticized the phenomenon of "language imperialism", pointing out that the current English textbooks overly emphasize Western festivals, lifestyles and other contents, which may lead to a cultural identity crisis for learners [13]. Piller's research indicates that gender identity negotiation in language acquisition, especially in cross-cultural and academic fields, is an important factor influencing language choice and discourse strategies [14].

In recent years, the phenomenon that Chinese Generation Z learners frequently use a mixture of Chinese and

English on social media has also attracted attention [15]. This code-mixing not only reflects the reorganization of its multicultural identity, but also demonstrates its language creative ability, challenging the assumption in the traditional SLA theory that language boundaries are clear and stable.

From the perspective of embodied cognition, Merleau-Ponty pointed out that language not only exists in the brain but is manifested through the body [16]. Non-verbal elements such as gestures, intonation and spatial distance are deeply embedded in the cultural context, indicating that the acquisition of a second language also includes the integration of embodied experiences such as cultural postures and communication customs.

2.2 The Influence of Family Environment on Language Acquisition

King, Fogle and Logan Terry proposed that “family language policy” is not only a management mechanism for language use, but also an important way for cultural context to have a specific impact on language input [4]. Family language policy mainly includes three dimensions: language ideology, language management and language practice. These factors work together within the family to determine whether children can continuously and stably be exposed to and use the first language (L1) or the second language (L2) in their daily lives, thereby influencing the quality of their language acquisition and the construction of cultural identity.

Guardado, through his research on Hispanic immigrant families living in Canada, found that the emotional attitudes of family members towards language, identity belonging, and expectations for children’s language development profoundly influence language choice [17]. If parents have a high degree of identification with their mother tongue and actively create an environment where it is used, children will have a higher chance of maintaining their mother tongue at home. Conversely, if parents, under the pressure of social assimilation, choose the mainstream language as the main communication language of the family, children may quickly lose L1 input, thereby affecting bilingual development.

This process is often accompanied by conflicts of cultural identity. Multilingual immigrant families often hope that their children can master both the mainstream language and the mother tongue culture simultaneously. However, the influence of the social language hierarchy structure and the education system (such as the use of the mainstream language in schools and the lack of support) can weaken the implementation effect of family language policies [6]. Therefore, family language policies connect

micro family practices with macro cultural contexts, and their stability and consistency are particularly crucial in cross-cultural families.

2.3 The Influence of Social Identity on Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is not only the development process of language skills, but also has a profound relationship with the identity negotiation and construction of learners in social interaction [5]. The “investment” theory proposed by Norton holds that whether learners are willing to “invest” in language learning in a specific cultural context depends on whether they can establish achievable social identity.

Through her research on English learners of female immigrants in Canada, she found that although these learners were active in the classroom, they were often marginalized in the real society due to labels such as gender, race and class [5]. This limits their opportunities for language practice and weakens the frequency and quality of language input.

Furthermore, this theory breaks through the traditional cognitive model that regards “motivation” as an internal psychological variable. Norton and Toohey pointed out that motivation should be understood as part of social practice, reflected in how learners imagine their relationship with the target language community [18]. This kind of “imaginary community” shapes learners’ emotional attitudes, strategic choices and degrees of participation. A learner who holds a positive attitude towards the English community is more likely to actively seek communication opportunities in real contexts and continuously engage in language learning.

3. Language Acquisition in the Cultural Context: Consistency and Difference

3.1 Consistency

3.1.1 Cultural embeddedness

Language is not an isolated symbolic system but is used, understood and acquired in specific cultural activities. It is reflected in the meaning of language, pragmatic rules, communication methods, etc., and is often deeply rooted in the cultural context.

3.1.2 Identity negotiation

Language learning is not merely the acquisition of language knowledge; it is also a dynamic negotiation process of learners’ identities (such as ethnicity, social affiliation, and power relations). This is reflected in the fact that

learners constantly adjust their self-positioning between the mainstream language and their mother tongue, as well as between the mainstream culture and the original culture.

3.1.3 Input sociality

Language input is not merely a matter of quantity (such as how many words, grammar, etc.), but rather a socialized input, which is closely related to the learner's cultural role, social participation, and communication field. This is reflected in the fact that family language policies, educational environments, social interaction opportunities, etc., jointly determine whether learners can be exposed to meaningful and culturally valuable inputs.

3.2 Difference

Guardado and Curdt-Christiansen paid more attention to how culture guides language choice at the family level, while Duff and Dagenais et al. emphasized the shaping of classroom language behavior by cultural norms in the education system [19]. Norton conducted an in-depth analysis of the negotiation and construction of language identity in cross-cultural contexts from the perspective of learners [5]. In summary, although different studies come from different perspectives, they collectively reveal the systematic influence of cultural context on second language acquisition.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, the acquisition of a second language is not only a process of mastering language skills, but also a complex practice in which learners negotiate their identities, construct meanings and reshape their cognition in different cultural contexts. Whether from the perspectives of hermeneutics, symbolic ability theory, critical theory, post-structuralism, etc., the profound connection between language learning and cultural understanding is emphasized. During the process of language transfer, the cultural conflicts, pragmatic biases and identity tensions that learners face not only affect their language performance itself, but also profoundly influence their learning motivation and cultural sense of belonging. Meanwhile, the cultural ideology carried by the content and media of language teaching also exerts a subtle influence on learners' cognition and values.

Despite the diverse research approaches and methods, the overall trend indicates that language acquisition is a social process embedded in cultural practice rather than an isolated grammatical input and output activity. The cultural belonging, social identity, family language atmosphere and educational environment of learners all imperceptibly

reconstruct their language development trajectory.

Although existing studies have made considerable progress in cultural context and second language acquisition, the following deficiencies still exist:

The first theoretical integration is insufficient. Many studies rely on a single theoretical perspective (such as Kramsch's cultural context theory and Norton's identity theory), lacking interdisciplinary integration, resulting in relatively scattered analytical dimensions and making it difficult to comprehensively explain the dynamic relationship between culture and language. Second, the research context is narrow: Existing studies mostly focus on language acquisition in Western or immigrant backgrounds, and rarely involve marginalized groups such as Southeast Asia, rural migrant children, and multilingual families. At the same time, they ignore the phenomenon of language learning in informal educational environments. Finally, there is insufficient attention to the context of new media: Language learning in the digital age has been deeply influenced by social platforms, short videos, online communities, etc. However, most current studies still focus on offline communication and ignore the role of new media in reconstructing language acquisition and cultural identity.

Future research can be expanded in the following directions: 1. Construct an interdisciplinary theoretical analysis framework; 2. Expand the diversity of cultural and geographical contexts to cover marginalized groups; 3. Introduce a new media perspective to explore language identity and cultural flow in virtual environments.

This review is conducive to deepening the understanding of the role of culture in second language acquisition and providing a theoretical basis of cultural sensitivity for future educational practice and policy-making.

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