

Language Learners' Acculturation Attitudes

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Abstract

Learning a language involves knowledge of both linguistic competence and cultural competence. Optimal development of linguistic competence and cultural competence, however, requires a high level of acculturation attitude toward the target language culture. To this end, the present study explored the acculturation attitudes of 70 Iranian undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language, following a one-semester academic sojourn in the United States. The data of the study were collected through a 29-item 5-point Likert scale acculturation attitude questionnaire. Findings indicated that sojourners tended to have close contact with the people of the target society while maintaining their original culture, adopting Integration and Assimilation strategies as their acculturation attitudes. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested providing opportunities for students of English as a Foreign Language to immerse in the target language culture through organizing academic exchange programs.

Keywords: acculturation, sojourn

1. Introduction

Learning a language requires not only knowledge of linguistic competence but also knowledge of cultural competence (Culhane, 2004) as language and culture are bound together and it is impossible to separate them from each other (Kramsch, 1993). In fact "a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (Brown, 1994, p. 165). However; familiarity with the target language culture, as an essential component of language learning, cannot be fully achieved through classroom instructions. Therefore, optimal development of linguistic and cultural competence requires educational sojourns, "periods spent abroad in a region where a target language is used as a medium of everyday communication" (Culhane, 2004, p. 50).

The reason is that proficiency in the target language and adaptation to the target language culture are directly interrelated. High level of target language proficiency is supposed to be associated with high level of contact with the target language people and low level of maladaptation to the target language culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). This has raised the issue of acculturation which refers to "the phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). To obtain optimal linguistic knowledge through out-of-class contact and to optimize the sojourn experience, sojourners must maintain regular contact with the people of the target language society (Wang, 2010).

The assumption is that study abroad language learners have high level of contact with target language speakers, and exposure to target language culture, and consequently have the opportunity to obtain optimal linguistic knowledge. However, studies on the obtained linguistic knowledge of sojourners have suggested inconsistent findings. The reason for this inconsistency can be attributed to the fact that study abroad context is not the mere predictor of linguistic knowledge rather lots of other variables such as the type and quality of contact with the target language people are involved. In fact, the type and quality of contact which sojourners seek to have with the target language people as well as their specific personality traits are the factors which might determine the degree of immersion in, and exposure to, the target language and culture (Spenader, 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Berry's (1980) Working Model of Acculturation Attitudes

Berry (1980) developed an acculturation attitudes model in which the different ways that people acculturate is outlined. This model involves two major issues: the extent to which people tend to maintain their original culture and the extent to which people tend to have contact with the people of the target society and adopt the culture of the target society. The level of tendency to any of these two issues of maintaining original culture and contact with the people of the target society lead to the adaptation of four acculturation strategies. These four acculturation strategies are termed by Berry (1980) as Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Assimilation is the acculturation strategy in which people do not tend to maintain their original culture and tend to have close contact with the people of the target society, and in some instances adopt the culture of the target society. Integration is the acculturation strategy in which people both tend to maintain their original culture and have close contact with the people of the target society. Separation is the acculturation strategy in which people tend to maintain their original culture and avoid contact with the people of the target society. Marginalization is the acculturation strategy in which people neither tend to maintain their original culture nor tend to have contact with the people of the target society (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Table 1. Acculturation strategies

		Maintenance of Original Culture	
		+	-
Contact with the People of the Target Society	+	Integration	Assimilation
	-	Separation	Marginalization

2.2 Previous Studies on Language Learners' Acculturation Attitudes

In one study, Jiang et al. (2009) examined the effects of acculturation attitudes on language learners' pronunciation and oral speaking proficiency. The participants were 49 Chinese international students enrolled in graduate programs at a university in the United States, with a maximum of 5 years of residence in the host country. The Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale was used to measure participants' acculturation progress. Pronunciation was measured through a sentence reading task and oral speaking proficiency was assessed through a language proficiency interview. Findings showed that participants were unanimously more immersed in their original culture, but varied on their acculturation toward American society. The degree of immersion in American society contributed to participants' speaking proficiency but not pronunciation.

In another study, Cara (2010) explored acculturation strategies of 450 ethnic Russian adolescents in Latvia two years before and three years after the 2004 education reform as well as the relationship between the choice of acculturation strategies and Latvian language knowledge and use. Knowledge of Latvian language was measured using a 3-item four-point scale assessing speaking, writing, and reading skills. Measure of acculturation strategy was adopted from the ICSEY project which assessed four acculturation strategies including Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization on a four-point scale. The results suggested that Integration was the most preferred strategy while Marginalization was the least preferred strategy in both years of the study. Moreover, Latvian language knowledge and use was positively correlated with Assimilation and Integration strategies, but negatively correlated with Separation and Marginalization Strategies.

Waniek-Klimczak (2011) also conducted a study to investigate the acculturation attitudes of three Polish learners of English in an educational sojourn in England, following five years of residence in the target language country. The data of the study were collected qualitatively using an open-format questionnaire consisting of items related to both language learners' language experience and their acculturation strategies. Findings suggested that both Assimilation and Integration were chosen as acculturation strategies by the three Polish language learners. Moreover, language learners expressed that exposure to authentic culturally specific materials was more useful than formal training they had received in English language classes.

3. Methodology

Studies conducted so far have provided sufficient evidence for the necessity of having a high level of acculturation attitude toward the target language culture and having a high level of contact with the target language speakers in order to optimize the study abroad experience and obtain optimal proficiency in the language to be learned. Bearing in mind the significance of type of acculturation attitude adopted by language learners during a sojourn program as the major predictor of developing target language proficiency, the present study sought to explore the acculturation attitude of Iranian undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language, following a one-semester academic sojourn in the United States.

3.1 Participants

Participants of the study consisted of 70 Iranian undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language during a one-semester academic exchange program in one of the universities in the United States. They were students in various universities in Iran and none of them had experienced visiting or living in a native English speaking country. Among all 70 participants in the study, 35 of them were males and 35 of them were females. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 with an average age of 22. The academic exchange program continued for 4 months in winter semester 2013. The participants received 16 hours of class instructions at the university weekly, in classes mixed with native American students. They also lived with American roommates on campus.

3.2 Instruments

The East Asian Acculturation Measure (EAAM), previously developed by Berry (2001), was adopted as the data collection instrument and was modified to suit the purpose of the current study. The adapted version of the EAAM was a 29-item 5-point Likert scale questionnaire which consisted of four subscales testing sojourners' Assimilation attitude (8 items), Integration attitude (5 items), Separation attitude (7 items), and Marginalization attitude (9 items). All items on the adapted version of the EAAM were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, to strongly agree with values 1 to 5 assigned to them respectively.

To assess the validity of the adapted version of the EAAM, the items went through the content-related evidence of validity. Two professors at University of Tehran, who were experts in the field, judged the appropriateness of the items for the study. To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, the adapted version of the questionnaire was piloted on 30 non-participant undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language who were on an academic sojourn in the United States. The reliability coefficient computed through the split-half reliability coefficient for each sub-scale of the questionnaire including Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization attitudes were respectively 0.78, 0.83, 0.75, and 0.80.

3.3 Procedure

At the end of the winter semester in 2013, following 4 months of academic sojourn in the United States, 70 copies of the acculturation attitude questionnaire were distributed among all participants in the study. Participants were instructed to express their feelings toward the idea mentioned in each item by circling the point on the scale which best reflected their level of agreement with the idea mentioned in the item. They were also assured that the content will remain private and confidential. They were then given ample time to reflect on their acculturation attitudes and return the questionnaires by the time of their departure to Iran. All the questionnaires were then collected to be analyzed by the research team.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the data collected from the participants. Descriptive statistics consisted mainly of mean and frequency percentages. The acculturation attitude was represented by a mean score on a 5-point scale, where 1 (strongly disagree) represented the minimum score on the scale and 5 (strongly agree) represented the maximum score on the scale. The overall mean score for each acculturation strategy determined sojourners' level of attitude regarding that specific strategy. The acculturation strategy which received the highest mean score represented sojourners' acculturation attitude.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Table 2 presents the overall mean and frequency percentages of sojourners' specific acculturation attitudes including Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization. The mean score computed for sojourners'

responses to the items referring to their Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization attitudes were respectively 4.02, 4.24, 2.16, and 1.92. As the data shows, the acculturation strategies adopted by sojourners, in hierarchy order, were respectively Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization. Specifically, sojourners expressed a very high Integration (mean: 4.24) and Assimilation (mean: 4.02) attitude but a low Separation (mean: 2.16) and Marginalization (mean: 1.93) attitude.

Table 2. Distribution of mean scores on the acculturation attitude scale

Scale	Percent (%)					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Assimilation	5.54	6.43	11.23	33.77	43.03	4.02	1.15
Integration	3.45	3.70	12.57	26.00	54.28	4.24	1.02
Separation	39.59	27.35	16.74	10.41	5.91	2.16	1.18
Marginalization	43.98	32.84	13.65	5.55	3.98	1.93	1.04

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree.

Within the Assimilation domain, 76.80 per cent of sojourners agreed (33.77 %) or strongly agreed (43.03 %) that they write better in English than in Persian, they typically speak English when they are in their apartment/house, they would prefer to write it in English if they were asked to write poetry, they get along better with Americans than Iranians, they feel that Americans understand them better than Iranians do, they find it easier to communicate their feelings to Americans than to Iranians, they feel more comfortable socializing with Americans than they do with Iranians, and most of their friends at university are American.

Within the Integration domain, 80.28 per cent of sojourners agreed (26.00 %) or strongly agreed (54.28 %) that they tell jokes both in English and in Persian, they think as well in English as they do in Persian, they have both American and Iranian friends, they feel that both Iranians and Americans value them, and they feel very comfortable around both Americans and Iranians.

Within the Separation domain, 16.32 per cent of sojourners agreed (10.41 %) or strongly agreed (5.91 %) that most of the music they listen to is Iranian, their closest friends are Iranian, they prefer going to social meetings where most of the people are Iranian, they feel that Iranians treat them as an equal more so than Americans do, they would prefer to go out on a date with an Iranian than with an American, they feel more relaxed when they are with an Iranian than when they are with an American, and Iranians should not date non-Iranians.

Within the Marginalization domain, 9.53 per cent of sojourners agreed (5.55 %) or strongly agreed (3.98 %) that generally they find it difficult to socialize with anybody Iranian or American, they sometimes feel that neither Americans nor Iranians like them, there are times when they think no one understands them, they sometimes find it hard to communicate with people, they sometimes find it hard to make friends, sometimes they feel that Iranians and Americans do not accept them, sometimes they find it hard to trust both Americans and Iranians, they find that both Iranians and Americans often have difficulty understanding them, and they find that they do not feel comfortable when they are with other people.

4.2 Discussion

The present study explored Iranian undergraduate English as Foreign Language students' acculturation attitudes during a one-semester academic sojourn in the United States. Findings of the study suggested that sojourners tended to have close contact with the people of the target society while maintaining their original culture. The acculturation strategies adopted by Iranians, in hierarchy order, were respectively Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization. Among the mentioned acculturation strategies, Integration and Assimilation strategies received the highest preference by sojourners while Separation and Marginalization strategies received the lowest preference.

Findings obtained from the current study indicate that Iranians generally tend to immerse in American culture and have contact with Americans while at the same time maintain their original cultural identities. The main factor which might have contributed to these findings is that Iran and the United States both possess a rich culture and history. Furthermore, Iranians and Americans have lots of cultural features in common. This might

have encouraged Iranian sojourners in this study to explore the new culture and adopt interesting features of the target language culture while maintaining their original cultural beliefs and identities.

The other factor which might have contributed significantly to these findings is that participants in this study were all undergraduate students. The participants in the study were all young adults with an age period ranging from 19 to 27. This is the age period when prejudice ideas and dependency toward original culture and identity have not been formed yet. This situation provides the opportunity to immerse in the culture of the target society for those who find the target culture interesting and would like to immerse in it.

The final factor might be attributed to the fact that the participants were students of English as a Foreign Language. Having the opportunity to improve oral language proficiency through interaction with native English speakers might be a good reason for students of English as a Foreign Language to seek to have a high level of contact with Americans. Furthermore, years of studying English in their home country had familiarized sojourners with lots of cultural features of the target language community. The sojourn in the target language country, consequently, provided the opportunity for them to explore those cultural features.

These findings support the findings obtained by Cara (2010) who found that Integration was the most preferred acculturation strategy adopted by Russian language learners in Latvia but Marginalization was their least preferred acculturation strategy. These findings are also consistent with the findings obtained by Waniek-Klimczak (2011) who found that both Assimilation and Integration were chosen as acculturation strategies by Polish learners of English in England. However, these findings do not support the findings obtained by Jiang et al. (2009) who found that Chinese learners of English in the United States were more immersed in their original culture than the target language culture.

5. Conclusion

The study found that Iranian sojourners in the United States had a high level of acculturation attitude toward the target language culture. They tended to have close contact with the people of the target society and explore the target language culture while maintaining their original culture. The acculturation strategies adopted by Iranian sojourners, in hierarchy order, were respectively Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization. Among the mentioned acculturation strategies, Integration and Assimilation strategies received the highest preference by sojourners while Separation and Marginalization strategies received the lowest preference.

These findings indicate that a sojourn of one semester can be sufficient to enhance language learners' acculturation attitudes toward target language culture which, as was proved in previous studies, can contribute significantly to their linguistic knowledge. Therefore, universities should provide opportunities for students of English as a Foreign Language to immerse in the target language culture through organizing academic exchange programs. Furthermore, English language lecturers should provide opportunities for their students to be exposed to the target language culture through supplementing their classroom instructions with authentic materials (Rafieyan et al., 2013a; 2013c; Rafieyan et al., 2013b).

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