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Experiencing Difficulties: English Language Issues Among Immersed Third Culture Kids


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Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are defined as children who have spent a significant part of their developmental years living in, or interacting with two or more cultural environments. The levels, abilities, and use of the heritage language of TCKs returning to their host country from being immersed in a second language environment can cause difficulties. This case study explored the experiences of immersed TCKs using English upon reentry to the United States. The participants are adult TCKs, have English as their heritage language, and were immersed in a second language environment as a child. This research found the following four major themes described by the participants: experiencing difficulties in general, experiencing a lack of confidence, experiencing cycles, and experiencing shifting identities.

Key words: TCK, language, acculturation

The iconic picture of American childhood is growing up from kindergarten through high school in a homogenous community, never changing homes or neighborhoods. For many children this is an accurate picture of their childhood (United States Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau, 2011). However, some children grow up in far different circumstances. These children live in a global neighborhood, possibly moving multiple times, have friends from around the world, and experience multiple cultures during their developmental years. These children are known as third culture kids.

The term third culture kid (TCK) was first defined by Useem (1966) and clarified by Pollock and Van Reken (2009). These are children who have spent a significant part of their developmental years living in, or interacting with, two or more cultural environments (Van Reken, 2012a). The definition does not refer to the sociological or economic status of the culture. The terms expatriate kid and TCK are two concepts that are interrelated. The common theme is they are living and interacting with multiple cultures during their childhood. Some scholars differentiate TCKs from other expatriates based on the representational role of their parents. Cottrell (2012) defines the TCK as those with parents who are working abroad in a representational role while the expatriate children have parents who are not sponsored while abroad. However, not all scholars agree with the premise of Cottrell (2012). For the purpose of this paper a broader definition of TCK will be used to include any child who has lived abroad in at least two countries. These TCKs have assimilated to the second culture to such a degree that their dominant language has become the language of the host country. For clarity, this subset of TCKs will be called “immersed third culture kids.” This research is focused on immersed TCKs with a heritage language of English yet have fluency in the language of their host country to such a degree it becomes their primary language.

It is difficult to capture the number of American TCKs living away from their home culture of the United States. These children grow up in multiple cultures and countries. Their parents can be military, United States government employees, missionaries, businesspersons, teachers, media personnel, or those who choose to live abroad for a period of time. The United States Department of State recently estimated there were 8.7 million Americans living abroad and many are raising children with plans to eventually repatriate (United States Department of State, 2015). Therefore, it is likely there are millions of children that will have spent part of their childhood years outside the United States and a significant number of those children that have become immersed TCKs.

Statement of the Problem

Repatriation, or return to the home country from living in a foreign culture, is experienced by a majority of the TCKs, either by returning home with their family or for further education (Van Reken, 2012). Research has identified repatriation and readjustment as a dominant theme in the lives of TCKs. A return to the home culture for the TCK requires a readjustment to the language, trends, values, and school (United States Department of State, Family Liaison Office, 2012). The issue of their readjustment is complicated by the lack of knowledge about their unique attributes, especially among educators (Ittel & Sisler, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Rydenvald, 2015). This lack of understanding is partially due to the fact that these children look like their peers in their home culture and do not have the usual diversity distinctions such as race, ethnicity, or nationality (Van Reken & Bethel, 2008). This unrecognized diversity is referred to as “hidden diversity” and can manifest itself in different characteristics and attitudes due to having broader worldview, social, and academic experiences as compared to monocultural children (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Van Reken & Bethel, 2008). Pollock and Van Reken (2009) further explain the problem, “No one makes the same allowances for the ‘Third Culture Kid’ lack of knowledge or miscues as they would an obvious immigrant or recognized foreigner” (p. 55).

Additionally, there are potential multiple linguistic challenges for the immersed TCKs upon repatriation when their dominant language is the language of the host culture instead of their own heritage language. There is an outdated assumption based on a monolingual perspective that the TCK can return to their home culture without linguistic problems (Rydenvald, 2015). However, research has shown the complex and diverse nature of the multilingualism of the TCK is not without problems (Rydenvald, 2015). The loss of fluency in the heritage language and not knowing specialized vocabulary are two of the challenges for TCKs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). An additional problem for immersed TCKs is the potential not to be able to develop proficiency in their heritage language (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 121). This lack of proficiency could result in these children entering the United States educational system having a second language that is more familiar to them than their heritage language of English. In addition, immersed TCKs can mask linguistic issues upon repatriation because they look and sound like their peers (La Brack, 2012; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Van Reken, 2012).

The problem is that the heritage language experiences, levels of fluency, and abilities of immersed TCKs repatriating to their home culture are unknown and can impact their education due to an undetected gap in their language skills and proficiency (Carhill, Suarez-Orozco, & Paez, 2008; Polinsky, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). There has been extensive study of Japanese TCKs heritage language issues upon repatriation to Japan, yet little study of immersed TCKs with English as their heritage language (Cottrell, 2012). There has been some research on the sociological issues of repatriating TCKs, however, the area of English heritage language proficiency of immersed TCKs has largely been ignored despite recommendations for further study of the problem (Klemens & Bikos, 2009; Ma, 2010; Rydenvald, 2015; Sicola, 2005; Viswanath & Polinsky, 2012; Wandersee-Wiemer, 2011; Wrobbel, 2009). This research focuses on TCKs who have been immersed in the host culture to such a degree that the dominant language is not their heritage language. Specifically, the research examines the repatriation issues of immersed TCKs using English language upon repatriation to their home culture.

Review of Literature

The relevant literature for a study on immersed TCKs returning to their heritage country focuses on two topics: TCKs and second language acquisition. The majority of the literature on the topic about TCKs has focused on the repatriation and readjustment to the culture and not on language readjustment. The majority of the pertinent second language acquisition literature has focused on incorporating a new language or a heritage language while living in the host country and not on language issues upon return to their home country. This research explores the area between the literature of the repatriation and readjustment issues of the TCK and the literature of second language acquisition difficulties by examining the issues of the repatriation of immersed TCKs in the area of language and cultural identity.

Third Culture Kid Literature

Two distinct themes in TCK literature are relevant to the research on the language adjustment of immersed TCKs upon repatriation. The first area of literature is the discussion of transition difficulties for TCKs upon repatriation to their home country. Transition back to the United States has been found to be challenging for these students (Hervey, 2009; Limberg & Lambie, 2011; United States Department of State, Family Liaison Office, 2012). The United States Department of State considers the return to the United States after living in another country to be the most difficult school adjustment both socially and academically (United States Department Of State, Family Liason Office, 2012). Other transition difficulties include sociocultural adjustments such as anxiety, culture shock, identity, and a lack of confidence (Bikos, et.al., 2009; Limberg & Lambie, 2011).

The second theme in TCK literature with relevance to the study is how a TCK creates, or negotiates, their identity positioning. The cultural identity of the TCK has been described as complex and dynamic with language, self-definition, cultural belongingness, and emotions woven together (Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015). Tannenbaum and Tseng (2015) posited that the multilingual TCK might not view identity as the traditional TCK identity of a mixing or sliding between cultures. Instead, the multilingual TCK identity construct is found in their languages instead of a particular place or culture (Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015). A more traditional description of cultural identity by Moore and Barker (2012) describes the TCK identity positioning in three categories: a blended cultural identity, a sliding continuum cultural identity, or a shifting cultural identity. The Moore and Barker (2012) model of a cultural identity positioning was chosen as a framework for this research.

A sliding continuum of cultural identity occurs when the cultural identity of a TCK is based on their affinity for a culture. McCaig (2012) describes the TCK cultural identity as a continuum between being having full cultural identity with their heritage culture and having full cultural identity with their host culture. The TCK identity resides at some point along the continuum between their heritage culture and the host culture yet is rarely static (McCaig, 2012, p. 53). The transitions and stages of the life of a TCK can cause a movement along the continuum, especially as a TCK searches for a definitive sense of identity (McCaig, 2012). A sliding continuum can be explained using the example of an ocean. The ocean is always in motion; sometimes the waves are small and at other times they are big. While in the ocean you will

encounter and compensate for the different motions during your swim, just as a TCK compensates for the sliding cultural identity by moving along the continuum.

In contrast to the sliding cultural identity is the shifting cultural identity. The shifting cultural identity of a TCK is the ability to move between multiple cultural identities depending upon the context of setting. The shifting identity of a TCK allows for intuitive cultural sense of identity in multiple cultures (Moore & Barker, 2012). The shifting cultural identity can be visualized as a series of calm lakes. Each lake is different and you can swim in each lake, but you must get out and move from one lake to another, just as a TCK must shift from one cultural identity to the other.

The blended cultural identity of a TCK is a feeling of being a part of many cultures without a sense of belonging to any of them (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). A TCK with a blended sense of cultural identity has integrated elements of all the identities into one cultural identity (Moore & Barker, 2012). This blended cultural identity is a singular multicultural identity from a combination of multiple cultures (Moore & Barker, 2012). The blended cultural identity can be visualized as a mix of the ocean and the lake. You will be in water but it will comprise both the ocean and lake without being able to separate the two. The immersed TCK is expected to have the blended pattern of cultural identity due to the level of the immersion into the host culture.

Second Language Acquisition Literature

The field of second language acquisition is interdisciplinary in nature and has produced a wide range of research. Second language acquisition research with direct relevance on the language issues of immersed TCKs focused on conversational versus academic language. Academic language is the formal language used in academic settings and conversational language is the language of communication used in social settings. The theory of academic and conversational language¹ differentiates between the two types of language and states they are not always learned at the same rate and proficiency (Cummins, 2009). The lack of academic language proficiency has been attributed to a lack of formal study, the linguistic demands of academic language, and the amount of time spent using the academic language (Carhill et al., 2008; Lucero, 2012; Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). In addition, studies have shown lower reading comprehension due to a lack of academic vocabulary causing heritage language students to spend more time on homework than their monolingual peers (Davidson & Lekic, 2013; Kieffer & Box, 2013).

There are potential implications in overall language proficiency for children returning to the United States from being immersed in a second language environment (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; McCaig, 2013; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Sicola, 2005; Van Reken, 2012). One of the defining characteristics of a TCK is being a part of two cultures and not feeling a part of either (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The immersed TCKs returning to the United States have the potential to know their heritage language and a second language, yet not feel fully proficient in either language (Van Reken, 2012). This lack of full proficiency in language could have a direct impact upon their return to the United States.

¹ Theory of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2009).

The loss of proficiency in a heritage language has been noted in the literature on the subject and can be due to several factors including: attrition, incomplete acquisition, lack of input, and language transfer (Bylund & Diaz, 2012; Polinsky, 2011; Viswanath, 2013). The speed and variation of language loss has been shown to be greater in children (Bylund & Diaz, 2012). Additionally, a heritage language is more frequently learned as a conversational language and not academic language (Krashen, 2000; Wrobbel, 2009). Furthermore, the loss of heritage language proficiency is often due to the lack of input (Krashen, 1985; Montrul, 2013). The immersed TCK often has a similar amount of spoken heritage language input as the native speaker and less exposure to written input compared to a monolingual native speaker. The lack of availability of reading materials in the heritage language was shown to reduce the comprehensible input needed for academic language proficiency in a heritage language (Lai, 2009).

Material and methods

This research was designed to explore the English language experiences, use and abilities of TCK returning to the United States after being immersed in a second language environment. The case study interviews began with the research question and asked participants to describe the experiences of English language use upon their return to the United States. The findings were categorized into four major themes: experiencing difficulties in general, experiencing a lack of confidence, experiencing cycles, and experiencing shifting identities.

Research Method and Design

The intent of this case study design was to explore the English language experiences of immersed TCK upon their return to United States. The flexibility to explore tangents into the language experiences of students returning from being immersed in a second language setting was an important aspect of the research. Currently, little information is available about the heritage language experiences of these students. Students returning from being immersed in an overseas environment are not a homogenous group and many have lived in a variety of countries and life situations. The context and the experiences as described by the participants was an integral part of the exploration of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

The population for the study was immersed TCK, now age 18 and older, who have English as their heritage language, and have developed fluency in a second language while being immersed in a second language environment as a child before returning to the United States.

Sample

This research is an exploratory case study of the experiences of adult TCKs who have considered English as their heritage language and return to the United States after being immersed in the language of their host culture. The case study design of two individuals with diverse situations underscores the variability and the consistency found within immersed TCKs experiences. The names of the participants are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

“Bob” is a 23-year-old male United States citizen born in Bogota, Columbia with American parents. At the age of five his family moved from Columbia to Mexico City. Two years later the

family moved to a mid-size city in Mexico. His parents were missionaries sponsored by an organization. Although the family visited the United States occasionally for short periods of time, they have not resided in their home country of the United States. Bob had a bicultural and bilingual education, attending local Mexican schools and simultaneously home schooled in US curriculum in English. He speaks English and Spanish fluently, as do both of his parents. At the age of 18 he came to the United States for college. After finishing the first year at the college he returned to Mexico and spent a year at home. He then returned to a different college in the United States to complete his BA degree.

“Sue” presents an interesting comparison. Born in the United States with Korean expat parents, she lived in the United States until age seven. She refused to learn Korean while living in the United States. At the age of seven the family returned to Korea and she attended Korean schools with minimal English instruction for 10 years. At the age of 17 she returned alone to the US to complete high school. She completed a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree and is working on her Ph.D. at American universities. Both parents have a low level of proficiency in English. While technically her heritage language is Korean, she adamantly self-identifies as American (not even Korean American) and considers English as her primary and heritage language. We accept her self-definition in this regard.

The reason for the selection of these particular cases was to examine various types and situations of immersed TCKs. Sue has the highest amount of education in the United States although she has parents with a low level of proficiency in English. Bob has the highest amount of time in a second language setting yet his parents are fluent in English.

Materials/Instruments

The data collection included interviews of the individual cases, observation of lessons in English, and data from assessments. The interviews took place in person. Additional interviews to clarify information took place in the same manner.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

The data collected was from interviews, observations, and assessments of purposefully sampled participants. The interviews used language that was easily understood in order not to presuppose the participant had the necessary English language skills to completely understand the questions. The cases were assigned a number in order to protect the privacy of the participant. In addition, the participants signed a consent form and interviews were audio recorded for accuracy.

The interviews began with a general statement and the research question. The research question asked, “How do adults, who as children grew up in cross-cultural second language environments, describe their experiences of English language use upon their return to the United States?” Field observations on English proficiency were made during the interviews and during one-on-one tutoring sessions. Case study notes were written during observations. Additional emails and interviews were done for clarification and review of the transcribed interviews.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcription was transferred to the MaxQDA qualitative analysis software program. Several cycles of open coding followed by analytical coding were performed on the transcripts (Saldana, 2013).

The small number of cases could have been a limitation of the study, however, the participants selected provided a sampling of the very diverse population of immersed children and replication logic (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). The cross-case analysis of the data presented similar findings in the cases.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research have indicated that immersed TCKs do experience difficulties upon their return to the United States from a second language setting with the possibility of hidden gaps in their education. The immersed TCKs were also found to have shifting identities and cyclical language proficiencies based on the context around them. The findings also suggest that the difficulties in writing, communication, academic language, and a lack of confidence are possibly due to a lack of availability in instruction and resources and not because of a lack of abilities.

There were examples of shifts in languages and cultural affinity based on their context during the interviews. Sue explained she speaks “English but it depends on who is talking to me. If they were talking to me in Korean then I would think in Korean. If someone talks to me in English then I would think in English.” Bob explained, “All my friends back home are Mexican and all my friends here are American. It’s kind of the people I am surrounded by.” The shift between their languages is consistent with the recent research on the ability of the multilingual TCK to move between contexts while using different languages (Rydenvald, 2015).

The answers to the questions about their identity as defined by the PolVan model of cultural identity (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 55) showed that the participants aligned with descriptions that involve shifting identities. The PolVan model of cultural identity describes the changing relationship of the identity of the TCK compared to the culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p.55). The relationship between identity and the culture can change based on their perception of the world around them (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Van Reken, 2012). The PolVan model is a description of the identity the cross-cultural children feel they are in comparison to their context at the current time.

It is not unexpected that the participants would choose two different descriptions in the PolVan model of their relationship to their culture based on the current culture. The participants viewed their identity as a total shift from one identity to the other, not a continuum between the cultures. They identified with one culture or the other culture but not a mix between the various cultures.

The answers by these participants provided insights into the nature of their cultural identity. The cultural identity of immersed TCKs can be described as blended although not in the commonly thought of definition of blended. The homogeneous mix of the host culture and the heritage culture blending into another cultural identity is not the construct these participants identified. Instead, these immersed TCKs have indicated a heterogeneous blend of distinct cultural identities that are used at different times to negotiate within their multiple

cultures. The answers of the immersed TCK participants corresponded to the findings of Moore and Barker (2012) describing multiple cultural identities with the ability to navigate between cultures intuitively and easily.

Both participants have above average abilities with university and postgraduate degrees, yet reported a lack of confidence upon their return to the American educational system. The lack of confidence upon repatriation is corroborated by the literature that identifies multiple contributing factors such as: the challenge of transition, cultural disparity, and not fitting in (Bikos, et al., 2009; Hervey, 2009; Limberg & Lambie, 2011; United States Department of State, Family Liaison Office, 2012). Bob was surprised by the longer period of adjustment to the culture of the United States compared to what he thought it would be. However, the primary cause of their lack of confidence was not the adjustment to the culture. According to the participants, the feeling of inadequacy in all areas of language proficiency was the largest contributor to their lack of confidence. It is possible that the cyclical nature of language of the immersed TCK has a direct relationship to the feelings of inadequacy in proficiency that causes a feeling of a lack of confidence. When asked about her lack of confidence Sue stated, "I felt like I was a total loser" and the reason Sue gave was, "Because I felt like my English wasn't perfect at the time I kind of limited myself too. I was kind of intimidated at that time." Bob expressed regret at the "holes" in his American high school curriculum and felt it would have helped his self-confidence if he had a more American-style instruction and classes.

The experience of having difficulties in language was a common occurrence for the participants. The difficulties were more severe in the areas of writing and academic language and less severe in communication. The participants did have some difficulty communicating in English upon their return particularly in the area of expressing feelings and emotions. Bob explained saying,

I would want to say I think I communicate better in Spanish. Just because it is so much more nuanced and I know how to do it a lot better. Like I know how to express myself a lot better with facial expressions and phrases and different things. I think there is a certain amount of comfort that comes to me when I communicate in Spanish as opposed to English. Not to say that I can't do it in English but a lot of times I feel like I'm struggling to express myself where in Spanish I feel like I expressed and at least maybe, more than expressed, I feel understood better.

Sue also responded that expressions were sometimes harder to communicate in English due to a lack of knowing the appropriate words. She stated, "I don't know a lot of ways to express when I'm angry. Other than I'm angry." The difficulty in the expression of emotion corresponds to the indications that a heritage language may not be the significant language for expressing emotion for a TCK (Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015).

The academic language skills were more difficult to master than the communicative skills for both participants. The difficulty could be attributed to several factors including the difference between communicative and academic language, and a lack of opportunities in academic language (Cummins, 2009; Krashen, 2000). Although Bob and Sue found it easier to communicate in English, they found the linguistic demands of the classroom to be very difficult upon their return to the United States. The participants reported spending more time on

homework due to the linguistic demands. Sue recalled having to do the homework in her textbook while cross-referencing the dictionary to be able to understand what she was reading. Bob felt the reason he did not get better grades at the beginning of college was because he did not take the longer time required to do the homework. Additionally, he recalled the lack of knowledge of specific academic expectations was difficult. He explained,

I didn't know how to study and people didn't warn me about finals week. Finals week rolled around and I had no clue, like it just took my breath away. And then someone said, "Oh, didn't you know about finals week?" and I was like no I didn't. And when they told me it was hard that way I felt so much better because I felt like there was something terribly wrong with me.

Sue presents an interesting example of the distinction between understanding the language of mathematics and the language of academic English. She had a perfect score on the GRE for math though her scores for verbal and writing were well below the mean. In my observations, she still had difficulties with some formal language use. She knew the correct grammar rules when asked but had difficulty applying them when speaking.

Sue was asked about her return to high school in the United States and she said, "It was hard. Simple conversation was ok. Like if they asked me a question I could answer it yes and no." She also explained, "It was difficult." The discussion of specifics about what was difficult included the responses: course work for specific classes, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and making friends. In particular, she found the first semester history class extremely challenging. She stated,

But the hardest class for me was history class that was my first year when I got there. It was history combined with English. It was a two-hour class and the teacher would not write anything on the board.

It was hard. I mean it was a hard class too. Because he doesn't write notes on the chalkboard so you have to write down everything he says and it's not exactly from the textbook. So, he has his own lecture kind of thing, so at that stage I wasn't up to that level I would say. I can understand what he was saying in the general idea, like World War 2, but he would turn on a video, I think about World War 2, and then we had to jot notes about it. It was way too fast and I can't remember all the names of the country, or not the country name, but like the area, and I was used to Korean history not the American history. It was all new to me.

Bob had more time in an academic language setting due to completing an American education homeschool curriculum concurrently with a local Mexican school. He still had difficulties in academic language skills upon entering college in the United States despite having the dual education. Bob expressed experiencing difficulties upon entering college in the United States and explained, "I definitely felt behind and I still feel behind from going into the classroom." The specific areas of difficulty he mentioned were writing, vocabulary, study skills, and communicating expressions.

It cannot be stated with certainty that the difficulty in academic English is solely due to the difference between academic and communicative language. It is possible the difficulties experienced by the participants are also due to a lack of opportunity to learn and use academic language at the level required to reenter school in the United States at a high school or college. The lack of having available reading material in English was specifically mentioned by Bob as a cause of some of the difficulties he experienced upon his return to the United States.

The difficulty in writing was a large concern for both Bob and Sue. They attributed the difficulties to a lack of instruction and lack of practice of the skills necessary. It was apparent from observations that they knew the rules of grammar. The frustration they both felt was due to the lack of knowledge about how to write an essay or paper in English. Bob and Sue reported the factors that contributed to the difficulty in writing in English were: the lack of writing instruction, the lack of practice in writing, and a lack of fluidity with words. Although they mentioned some concern with grammar neither considered it especially difficult. They did specifically mention the lack of writing ability required to meet the expectations for high school and college level course work. Sue explained,

Maybe because I didn't have a lot of chance to do writing and no one really sat down with me to say, oh this is.... I mean teachers could correct me, like you shouldn't write this word or use a different sentence but no one would sit down with me and tell me why it's incorrect. So, I never learned, I would say, even though I would write a paper.

She also commented on the lack of practice in writing and attributed her low score on the GRE to the lack of practice in writing. Bob described similar experiences saying,

I didn't have very much, any really writing experience. Like, I didn't really have a writing teacher. First time I went to write essays was I was practicing essays for the SAT. That was the first time I really was learning to write an essay and that was kind of my only exposure and then I show up at college and you are expected to write papers and essays all the time. I didn't know what MLA format was, I didn't know how to structure an essay. I knew thesis, I think I knew my thesis and topic sentence but thinking through each one I didn't. It was harder for me and I definitely had some holes.

When asked what was difficult about writing Bob answered,

Mechanics was part of it and also just fluidity with words and you know, I think writing an essay is always a little bit of struggle but some people can do it real easily. Just being able to write at another level the way I would have liked to. I think I was a little behind. But I think just my lack of practice was a huge one.

The difficulty in writing experienced upon the return to the United States was an unexpected result of this research. These are students that can write sentences and score well in all areas of standardized testing yet cannot correctly write an essay or lengthy paper. This is an important consideration for immersed TCKs returning to the United States to enter secondary or higher education. They may know grammar rules, communication, and

pronunciation like a native speaker, yet there are still gaps in their proficiency that go undetected.

The cyclical nature of language proficiency was another unexpected result of the research. The fact that the language loss occurred was not surprising given the literature on attrition of a heritage language. However, the cycle of language loss occurred in both languages, not solely in the heritage language. The problem for immersed TCKs is not the influence of the second language on the heritage language as originally thought by researchers (O'Grady, Lee, & Lee, 2011; Schmid, 2011). Instead, the problem is the cyclical nature of the language loss between the heritage language and the second language. The loss of proficiency occurs when one language is the dominant language and the other language becomes dormant. The cycle starts when immersed TCKs begin using the dormant language and it becomes the dominant language. The previously dominant language is now dormant and becomes the one that experiences the loss of proficiency. It does not matter whether it is the heritage language or the second language. Either language experiences a loss of proficiency when it becomes the dormant language. Both participants described the language loss as a cycle of using one language while losing the fluency and comfort in the other language. Sue described her experience of having cyclical language abilities as saying, "I do get sluggish. Such as it could be the structure of the language." Bob commented that although both languages inform each other, he has noticed the lack of fluidity in one language when predominately using the other one. Bob described trying to remember the rules of punctuation in either language saying, "Definitely those things get fuzzy sometimes because I can't remember which one goes where." He also expressed difficulty with fluidity in words in a language different from the language of the culture around him. He explained, "It's harder to remember the words in Spanish when everyone is speaking English around you. Just like it's harder to remember the words in English when everyone is speaking Spanish around you." He also contemplated the effect of cyclical language loss if he had returned to Mexico,

And you know, I wonder sometimes what would happen if I were to go back to Mexico and go to a really good college in Mexico. And I would be challenged with some academic Spanish. I think that would be a different experience for me than what I have living in town and just talking to my friends and just people who already love me. I think at this point there would be a little growing pains stretching back into academic Spanish.

It is possible that because of the cyclical nature of the languages, the dormant language does not get enough quality input to maintain proficiency. Research studies on input have only discussed the loss of proficiency in one language. In addition, the influence of the second language on the heritage language does not seem to have produced the changes to the heritage language as suggested by researchers (Schmid, 2011). The immersed TCKs are in a setting that uses two or more languages concurrently but not always equally. In the experience of these participants, the dominant language and the dormant language remain separate and intact. The participants experienced difficulty in recalling the correct usage of the language, not a confusing mix of the two languages. Bob and Sue expressed that they think and converse in the language of their context. They do not think in one language and then translate to the second language to communicate.

The cycle of the dominant and dormant languages frequently shifting into and out of use is a unique consideration for the immersed TCKs. The implication for these children is the possible misunderstanding of their issues in proficiency of English when they return to the United States. It could be a result of the dormant language shifting to become the dominant language used again.

It is possible that there is a causal relationship between the four themes found in this research: experiencing difficulties in general, experiencing a lack of confidence, experiencing cycles, and experiencing shifting identities. The immersed TCKs have shown in this exploratory research to have a shifting identity and cyclical language abilities. The shifting and cycling that occurs can potentially cause the difficulties in language as mentioned by both participants. The difficulties specifically in the areas of academic language, communication, and writing can contribute to the lack of confidence. It is likely the four themes have a symbiotic relationship to each other although it is unknown at this time if there is a definitive causal relationship between the four themes of this research. The number of participants in this case study research limits the applicability of the causal hypothesis.

Recommendations

The four themes of difficulties found in this research study point to a need to better understand the language and identity needs of the immersed TCK. The overarching recommendation for parents and educators is to be aware of the possibility of hidden difficulties experienced by immersed TCKs. The following specific recommendations are intended to assist parents and educators when dealing with these difficulties for the individual immersed TCK.

First, in order to address the need for academic language, teachers and parents should encourage immersed TCKs to read more resources using advanced vocabulary in English. Additionally, parents should look at what literature is common in the United States schools to provide cultural literacy and vocabulary to make the transition to higher education in the United States easier. Second, the lack of writing skills is problematic and does not have an easy solution. The participants felt they lacked writing instruction in how to write essays and papers. Parents and educators of immersed TCKs should provide some type of basic instruction with plentiful practice on how to write an essay or lengthy paper for American standards before any return to the United States educational system. Third, the issues of shifts of language and identity require time to adjust to the new language and identity before the immersed TCKs returns to enter the United States educational system. Parents could escort their child to school in the United States earlier to provide this extra time. Educators could allow the immersed TCKs in the classroom extra time at the start of the school year to feel comfortable in the new situation.

The fundamental and most important recommendation for all parents and educators of immersed TCKs is to consider the whole construct of the child. The elements of shifting identities and languages, along with their confidence in their language proficiency, are intertwined. Educators and parents focusing on any of these areas separately will only be addressing a part of the difficulties for the immersed TCKs as they enter the educational system of their cultural home.

Conclusions

The difficulty in academic language, writing, lack of confidence, cycles of language proficiency, and shifting identities present a clearer picture of what the immersed TCKs' experiences upon returning to the United States. However, these difficulties can often be disguised by their communication ability. It is important that families, educators and transition experts understand these difficulties faced by the immersed TCKs returning to the United States for school in order to address the potential problems that may occur.

Immersed TCKs are unique individuals. The dilemma is trying to define them in terms of one particular construct: one culture, one language, or one identity. These immersed TCKs have a cycle of language proficiency that weakens and strengthens according to the dominant language in the culture. In addition, the cultural identity of the immersed TCKs is also a cycle of shifting from one context to the next. As a result, the immersed TCKs have a heterogeneous blend of these cultures and languages that shift and change in relation to the culture around them. In essence, the construct of the immersed TCKs is similar to a chameleon that constantly varies and changes in response to the environment around them.

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