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# Sociocultural Models of Second-Language Learning of Young Immigrants in Canada

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“People in America don’t realized how funny I can be. When I was in China, I was known as quick-witted. I was always the first to make a funny joke about an ironic situation. Now, when these situations arise, I am trying to translate from Chinese to English what might be funny, but by the time, I do this, someone else has already made the witty joke. People around me here don’t think I have a sense of humor. I feel I have lost a part of me when I moved here.”

-25-year-old Chinese immigrant

## Abstract

The most significant challenge for the minority immigrant is learning a new language. They arrive in a new culture and community hoping to master English quickly in order to achieve their academic and career goals. However, many immigrants have mentioned general barriers resulting from being unable to communicate with peers outside their cultural and linguistic group. Recent research has identified several cognitive variables such as vocabulary, reading aloud, and grammatical judgment related to second-language learning in immigrants; however, little attention was given to sociocultural factors such as acculturation, motivation, and cultural learning because learning a language is a necessary aspect of being socialized into a particular culture. This chapter reviews research of sociocultural models in relation to second-language learning of immigrant youth in Canada. We address this paradigm for research by incorporating both acculturation and sociolinguistic approaches, as well as more traditional cognitive-linguistic approaches, to models of second-language learning in immigrants.

**Keywords:** Canada, language learning, acculturation, sociolinguistics, immigrants

## 1. Introduction

Many individuals who migrate have little or no exposure to the majority language(s) of the country to which they immigrate. This is especially true of people from developing countries, who migrate to developed countries, such as Canada and United States. In addition, many individuals, who learn English in their country of origin before they emigrate, learn the language from non-native speakers. Therefore, how can a person succeed when that person cannot communicate effectively with other people on a daily basis? Most research has focused on the fact that language proficiencies in the mainstream language play a key role in most accounts of acculturation [1, 2, 6, 9, 10]. However, there has been surprisingly little research conducted that examines how cultural orientation and participation have an impact on language learning in the mainstream society. For example, learning the mainstream language varies among individuals with different levels of acculturation [3, 4]. Key questions include the following: do sociocultural factors such as acculturation, cultural learning in, and cultural orientation to the values of the mainstream culture of the host country have an impact on immigrants' second-language proficiency beyond cognitive-linguistic variables traditionally used in the literature?

In an attempt to investigate this question, this chapter reviews theories of and research about sociocultural factors in relation to immigrants' second-language (L2) learning. There are many similarities between learning a language and learning a culture. A very appropriate proxy for how familiar a person is with a culture is his or her skill with the language (e.g., how he or she communicates verbally and in writing). Hence, one possible explanation for the relationship between language learning and acculturation is that it is easier for the immigrant to adapt the mainstream culture once they have a good grasp of the society's majority language. Understanding the patterns of language learning and cultural engagement in immigrants will lead to the development of improved programs to assist recent immigrants in becoming more successful learners.

## 2. Definition of acculturation

Acculturation (as indicated in other chapters) refers to the change in the pattern of affiliation to one or both cultures that results from intergroup contact [5] including psychological and sociocultural adjustments [6]. Psychological adjustments refer to the person's general satisfaction with the society of settlement and are influenced by changes in cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors. Sociocultural adaption includes the ability to successfully interact with and fit into the mainstream culture.

John Berry laid the foundations for research on acculturation within psychology [6]. He has proposed that two issues are critical to the outcome of one's acculturation. The first issue involves how well people attempt to participate in the larger society of their new culture. Do people have positive attitudes toward the mainstream culture, and are they actively seeking to fit in? The second issue involves how well people are striving to maintain their own heritage culture and identity as members of that culture. Do people have positive attitudes toward their heritage culture and are they actively seeking ways to preserve the traditions of the heritage culture?

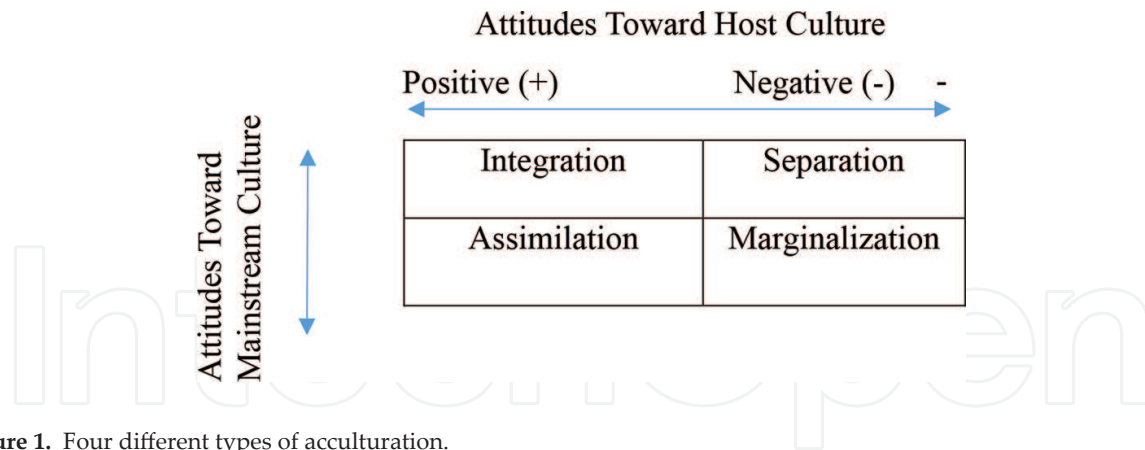


Figure 1. Four different types of acculturation.

Figure 1 illustrates different acculturation styles. The style that involves attempts to fit in and fully participate in the mainstream culture while at the same time striving to maintain the heritage culture is known as *integration*. People attempt to fully participate in the mainstream culture while making little or no effort to maintain the heritage culture is known as the *assimilation*. *Separation* involves efforts to maintain the heritage culture while establishing little contact with the host culture. Lastly, *marginalization* involves no effort to participate in the host culture or maintain the heritage culture.

### 3. Major models of acculturation and second-language learning in immigrant

In Schumann’s model, the main contributor to second-language learning is social distance from the mainstream culture [7]. He argued that the assimilation strategy is one of the most important social factors affecting L2 learning. If immigrants fully assimilate and adopt the mainstream lifestyles and values, social distances between the immigrant and mainstream culture are likely to be reduced. This strategy decreases social and psychological distances between the two groups and improves acquisition of the target L2 proficiency. Attitudes toward the mainstream culture are other important factors in acculturation that are related to L2 learning. If immigrant groups have positive attitudes toward the mainstream cultural groups, L2 learning is more likely to be enhanced than if the groups view each other negatively. Schumann also argued that the length of residence in a specific culture needs to be considered in relation to L2 learning. If the immigrants have been in the country for a long period of time, they are likely to develop more extensive contacts with mainstream groups [7].

Gardner’s socio-educational model [4] postulates that achievement in L2 is related to a variety of social psychological outcomes such as “integrativeness,” which refers to individuals’ attitudes toward the mainstream cultural community, an acceptance of other culture, and an interest in participating in social interactions with members of the mainstream community. Immigrants who are eager to make contact with members of the mainstream community would be more interested in learning the language than individuals who do not. A few

studies have indicated that “integrativeness” is positively related to L2 motivation and proficiency [4, 8]. For example, Masgoret and Gardner studied 248 Spanish-speaking newcomers to Canada [8]. Their results showed that the newcomers who adopted an assimilation mode of acculturation (a combination of high levels of English contact and low levels of Spanish contact) had higher levels of L2 English proficiency than the newcomers who demonstrated other acculturation strategies.

Clément and Bourhis [9] expanded the socio-educational model to include the construct of language confidence, which refers to confidence in being able to communicate in a well-organized and well-articulated way when using the L2. Studies have demonstrated that individual confidence in communicating in L2, along with subsequent language achievement, is a function of the frequency and quality of contact one has with the host culture [10]. However, it should be noted that the frequency and quality of contact require not only the willingness of the newcomer to communicate with members of the mainstream community but also the willingness of the mainstream community to interact with newcomers [11].

Cultural learning theory also offered an insight into the importance of acculturation and language learning through the concept of intercultural contact [12]. Ward and Searle [13] indicated that positive interactions with members of the mainstream cultural group are an essential factor for sociocultural adaptation, which enhances L2 proficiency. Despite this finding, studies conducted in Canada and USA have consistently shown that although newcomers expect and desire contact with members of the mainstream culture, the level of contact tends to be relatively low, and intercultural friendships are infrequent [2]. Lybeck [14] examined the social contact networks of English-Norwegian speakers. She found that building network connections with native Norwegian L2 speakers was positively related to more native-like pronunciation of Norwegian in L2 learners when compared with L2 learners who had greater difficulty establishing these connections. However, Harwood [15] argued that different types of social interaction had not been examined extensively. He proposed two dimensions with which to examine interactions: (1) being extensively involved in the interaction versus observing the social interaction and (2) interacting via social media versus face-to-face interactions.

In addition to intercultural contact, cultural learning researchers have examined mass media exposure and usage [16]. Immigrants make use of various types of mass media, such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines, which not only provide L2 exposure and practical day-to-day information but also provide knowledge about cultural norms and values for interpreting the cultural environment [16].

## **4. Other important factors that need to be considered in the research**

### **4.1. Distance from mother tongue to English**

The ease with which people learn English is influenced by how distant their mother tongue is from English. One source for assessing how easily people learn the language of the mainstream culture is the average score for each country of origin on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). People who wish to immigrate to Canada typically need to

Mother tongue	Average IELTS score (General Training Test for Immigration)
Germany	7.0
Australia	6.8
France	6.7
Brazil	6.6
Nigeria	6.5
Egypt	6.3
Philippines	6.2
Turkey	6.1
China	6.0
Japan	5.6
Korean	5.5
United Arab Emirates	4.7

**Table 1.** Average scores on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

pass the general training test on IELTS. Although average country scores on the language tests are influenced by many factors, these scores also vary considerably based on the participants' own mother language (**Table 1**). Individuals who grew up speaking languages that are similar to English or have the same roots (e.g., Spanish, French, or German) perform better than those who grew up speaking other European languages. Moreover, speakers of Indo-European languages tend to perform better on the IELTS than those who grew up speaking languages, which have linguistic roots that are distant from English such as Japanese and Korean [17]. Written languages can also vary markedly in terms of writing systems and scripts that determine ways in which sound-symbol relations are represented, with alphabetic scripts differing from morpho-syllabic scripts [18, 19]. For example, Chinese orthography codes language at the syllabic and morphemic level [19]; however, English is written using an alphabetic system. Other differences in written language include types of scripts, and the direction in which the language is written.

#### 4.2. Previous experience with other cultures

General knowledge about the mainstream culture and previous experience abroad [13] plays a role in relation to social adjustment and L2 learning. For example, Bernaus et al. [20] found that background experiences with the language and culture of the host countries were significantly related to the degree of acculturation of British teachers in Spain. It is suggested that generic skills learned in overseas settings might be applied to new cultural contexts. In line with this finding, research has found that immigrants' adjustments tend to increase with the length of residence [20]. Sociocultural adaptation was found to increase markedly between 1 and 6 months of residence in the specific country. However, language learners require 6–8 years to acquire high levels of L2 literacy [21].



### 4.3. Age of L2 acquisition

Related to the age of L2 acquisition is the argument for the critical period hypothesis of L2 learning, with later L2 learners being less malleable to input than early L2 learners [22]. Traditionally, it was believed that early language learners who acquire their L2 in early childhood (ages 5–6) become more fluent than late learners who acquire their L2 later in childhood (ages 10–12), in adolescence or in adulthood, after the developmental window of the language acquisition. The concept of this “critical period” was based on the idea of loss of neocortical plasticity with maturation of the brain by 10–12 years of age, after which implicit language acquisition can no longer occur [22]. In addition, Krashen [22] argued that the process of first-language acquisition is complete by the age of 5 years and that a second language learnt after that time is not adversely affected. However, researchers examining bilingualism argue that the optimal age for learning L2 really hinges on the acquisition of different linguistic structures such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which are differentially related to the age of the learner [23]. For example, Bialystok and colleagues illustrated that phonological acquisition is more sensitive to age than grammar and vocabulary. They found that new sounds are easier to pronounce with native-like accuracy than sounds that are similar but not identical to those found in one’s first language [22]. Thus, people who learn their L2 after puberty often maintain a permanent accent related to their mother tongue, despite gaining proficiency in other aspects of language.

### 4.4. Age of exposure to the mainstream culture and mainstream acculturation

Because learning a language and being socialized in a culture are closely intertwined, age of cultural acquisition should also be expected. Heinz and colleagues [24] argued that immigrants who moved into a new culture after the sensitive window of language acquisition (i.e., after puberty) would have a difficult time to adjusting to their new culture [24]. They studied different generations of Hong Kong immigrants in Vancouver, Canada. Questions about their identification with Hong Kong and questions about how much they identified with Canada were asked. The results indicated that immigrants who arrived in Canada before the age of 15 identified more strongly with the Canadian culture and that this was related to how long they lived in Canada. However, those immigrants who arrived in Canada after early adulthood did not identify more closely with the Canadian culture over time. It is possible that because a critical window for cultural acquisition was largely closed for this latter group, repeated exposure to a culture that they had difficulty relating to became increasingly frustrating over time [24].

## 5. Three methodological challenges

The first methodological challenge is to strive for a cohesive definition of acculturation. Some researchers have argued that the acculturation is a linear, unidimensional process, in which individuals inevitably lose their own heritage culture and language as they adopt the culture and language of the mainstream society [7]. However, recent research has indicated that the acculturation process is a bidimensional or even multidimensional process [6, 16, 25]. For example, acculturation is described as “the process of adapting to the norms of the domi-

nant group,” and enculturation is described as “the process of retaining the norms of the heritage group” [26]. Acculturation and enculturation occur at different rates across various life domains such as language acquisition, social interaction, and the learning of values and norms. Involvement in mainstream culture does not necessitate a decrease in involvement with the heritage culture. Researchers found that successful L2 learners created a mixed identity that embraced both their heritage culture and mainstream culture suggesting that the successful adaptation might be tied to the adoption of both cultures [3].

A common outcome of this unidimensional definition of acculturation is the phenomenon of heritage language loss. The immigrants who are newcomers to a country are trying to learn the L2. In this process, some immigrants avoid speaking their native tongue and subsequently the next generation, their children, become monolingual speakers of the majority language [26]. Even though some immigration countries such as Canada and the United States are multicultural/multilingual societies [1, 3], the use of English is reinforced through government, education, social media, and business. Especially, the United States has a history of suppressing the active use of non-English languages for the purpose of promoting the assimilation of the immigrants [26].

The second challenge to conducting research on acculturation and language learning is that most studies used self-report methodology to measure language proficiency. Even though self-report is one of the most broadly used approaches to measure language proficiency, using self-report has been criticized by recent researchers [1, 3, 28, 29]. For example, language learners might underestimate or overestimate their language ability in self-report [1]. Simple self-rating scales are not sensitive enough to place language learners on a scale of greater or lesser language fluency [1, 3, 28]. Language proficiencies for both academic language and conversation are complex constructs that require better measurement strategies [1]. Only a few studies have used standardized tests rather than self-report data to measure language proficiency [3, 27, 28, 29].

The third challenge is in determining the directionality of the link between acculturation and language learning [3]. In the literature on immigration, language proficiency has been identified as an important indicator of sociocultural and psychological adjustment [1, 3, 16, 7, 16, 25]. In sociolinguistic literature, acculturation has been recently incorporated into models of reading literacy [29]. However, the two bodies of research have rarely overlapped with each other. It is reasonable to assume bidirectional processes between acculturation and language learning. During immigrants’ settlement process, more confidence in speaking the L2, the language of the mainstream society, gives rise to more positive interactions which in turn lead to a reinforcement of the immigrants to acculturate in the mainstream cultural group [1, 29]. This reinforcement keeps motivating and facilitating the immigrants’ L2 learning.

## 6. Our projects

Our research has been instrumental in demonstrating a link between language proficiency and acculturation among immigrants in Canada. Our research program builds on past research and extends it in several ways. In 2014, we recruited a group of 94 Chinese-born immigrant



adolescents (60 females and 34 males) who were learning English as a second language in Canada. This group differs from adult immigrants who have passed the critical period of language and cultural acquisition as we discussed above. These immigrant adolescents were enrolled in grades 7–12 (average age was 16) and lived in medium-sized to large urban areas in southern Ontario. In addition to the large range of ages, a wide range of lengths of residence in Canada were included (6 months to 17 years) to capture variability in the acculturation and language-learning processes. We divided our sample into recent immigrants/L2 learners with a length of residency in Canada of less than 6 years and long-term immigrants/L2 learners, with a length of residency in Canada of more than 7 years. All participants completed a number of self-assessment measures of acculturation and individually administered standardized language tests of Chinese (Mandarin) and English. For the standardized tests, we asked participants to read a list of words and pseudowords of increasing length and difficulty to assess their reading accuracy. Participants were also asked to read short passages and answer multiple-choice questions. For vocabulary knowledge, participants were asked to choose a picture in an array of four that best described the orally presented word. For morphological awareness, we presented with a target word and then presented an incomplete sentence in both oral and written forms. Participants were asked to complete the sentence with the correct derivation of the target word.

First, comparisons were made between the two Chinese immigrant groups who completed the standardized language proficiency tests. In both groups, participants were born outside of Canada, but could speak, read, and write both Mandarin and English. Mainstream acculturation and heritage enculturation on the Vancouver Inventory of Acculturation [30] were highly correlated after controlling various individual variables such as age, gender, and length of residence in Canada. Participants' English proficiency was highly correlated with the length of residency in Canada in years. Despite their similarities, these two bicultural groups provided systematically divergent responses. For the recent immigrant adolescents, there was significant correlation between mainstream acculturation and their vocabulary knowledge, reading accuracy, and reading comprehension. For the long-term immigrant adolescents, the correlation between mainstream acculturation and English proficiency was not significant (see **Table 2**). The results suggested that the link between acculturation and L2 learning might have a time limit depending on the student's length of residency and immigration status.

We also tested the link using similar measures in Spanish immigrant children living in Canada  $N = 51$ , average age was 11 years old [31]. They had lived in a large metropolitan area

	Recent immigrants $\leq 6$ years	Long-term immigrants $\geq 7$ years
Reading comprehension	0.49**	0.19
Word reading	0.38*	0.21
Vocabulary	0.36*	0.03

\* $p < 0.05$ .  
\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 2.** Correlations between acculturation and English proficiency.

in Canada for an average of 6 years, but showed high variability in terms of their time living in Canada (standard deviation  $SD = 3.3$  years). Half of the participants were classified as Spanish dominant (Spanish was predominantly used at home and they had higher scores in Spanish than in English), while the other half of the participants were classified as English dominant (English was predominantly used at home and they had higher scores in English than in Spanish). Although mainstream acculturation was related to English-reading comprehension, acculturation was no longer significantly related to the English-reading comprehension when vocabulary and reading accuracy were statistically controlled. This finding that acculturation is not uniquely related to reading comprehension suggests that younger children might not necessarily need to be acculturated in order to learn their L2 because they still have the ability to acquire their L2 relatively easily. Cognitive variables such as building vocabulary and reading words accurately and quickly were more important in determining L2-reading comprehension. Thus, mainstream acculturation may play a less important role in the L2 acquisition of elementary school-aged children than cognitive variables. The finding that acculturation had such a minor impact on L2 learning among long-term Chinese immigrant adolescents and young Spanish children supports the hypothesis of sensitive period for both language and cultural acquisition.

One major limitation of studies examining the relationship between sociocultural and cognitive-linguistic literatures is the correlational nature of the data that prevented us from establishing causal relations between acculturation and language learning. We proposed a longitudinal study to investigate this link. Two developmental paths should be observed: (1) a higher level of early-onset acculturation would lead to immigrants' growth in English proficiency and (2) developing higher levels of acculturation through cultural engagement would provide another pathway for growth in English proficiency. Growth and changes across time in English proficiency and acculturation will be followed up over 2 years. Standardized tests of language proficiency will be administered at each wave of data collection.

Moreover, qualitative methods (life-narrative interviews) to assess acculturation will be implemented into the research in addition to questionnaires. McAdams states that the stories that people tell about their lives reflect a synthesis of how they make sense of life events and the sociocultural environments in which the stories are embedded [32]. As a result, narrative methods could provide insight into nuances and multiple facets of complex multicultural adaptation. In our proposed study, immigrants will be asked several questions about their engagement with the mainstream culture, and will be asked to tell a cultural immersion story. For example, "please describe an episode through which you underwent substantial change in your approach to adapt into Canadian culture."

## 7. Conclusion

When immigrants arrive in a new country, they face many challenges including language barriers. Specifically, a lack of English language skills may lead to low levels of confidence in interacting with members of their new culture, which will influence cultural immersion. In this chapter, we reviewed sociocultural factors in relation to immigrants' second-language learning with a

focus on immigrants to Canada. We addressed this research paradigm by incorporating both the sociolinguistic approach such as acculturation, distance between the mother tongue and English, previous experience in host countries, age of L2, and acquisition of the mainstream culture as well as including key variables related to the cognitive-linguistic approach when examining models of second-language learning in young immigrants. However, we propose that the social context of the language learner affects the level of proficiency attained. In contexts where it is necessary to speak as native, the speaker will continue to progress in their L2 skills rather than fossilizing at the level of adequate communication, albeit with a non-native accent.

We are currently addressing this paradigm of research by incorporating both acculturation and sociolinguistic approaches in models of second-language learning in young immigrants. With regard to assessing language learning and proficiency, we suggest the use of standardized language tests rather than self-report data. This procedure will allow us to disentangle the impact of psychological and social factors of acculturation on language-learning processes, and vice versa, and to determine whether the causal relationship can be advanced. This reciprocal link can be tested for its general applicability across different cultural backgrounds and levels of immigration status. We have suggested that relations within the construct of acculturation and between acculturation and second-language acquisition are complex and merit further examination. Future studies should involve longitudinal measures of acculturation variables such as life stories, attitude, and engagement, and motivation toward learning the mainstream culture, along with demographic variables such as age of arrival, length of residency, cultural differences between the country of origin and the country of immigration, and linguistic differences between the first and second languages. Even though additional research must be conducted before we can make this causal association, we hope that we raised issues that must be resolved when examining relations between acculturation and second-language acquisition.

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