

How Different Bilingual's Cultural Identification Influence Their Language Proficiency

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Abstract: This article investigates the relationship between bilinguals' cultural identification and language proficiency and tries to find out the strategy to improve bilinguals' language proficiency. It was written in a literature review format, summarizing ten articles about bilinguals, and comparing them to research the topic. The study mostly researches three bilingual groups: immigrants, heritage language speakers, and transnational students. Moreover, found that immigrants would either identify with both cultures or deny one of them. Their attitude toward the culture will also reflect their language proficiency; they either have balanced language proficiency in both languages or show a preference for one. For heritage language speakers, their cultural identification can be consolidated through involvement in a kind of "cultural background;" then, heritage language speakers would raise their willingness to improve their language proficiency of heritage language. Finally, the transnational students, if they can identify themselves as "successful students," might hold more confidence to study the language and gradually get better proficiency. This article concludes with three directions to help bilingual people improve their language proficiency based on their cultural identification. This could be concluded as producing a better bilingual community, recommending HL speakers' parents use more about their heritage language before their children, and helping bilingual students build the identification as "successful students."

Keywords: Bilingual, culture, language, identification, proficiency

1. Introduction

Since the trend of globalization, nowadays, there are more bilinguals in this world: Based on the research by Hayakawa et al., according to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, more than 66 million residents over the age of 5 in the United States speak a language other than English at home. [1] Many of those bilinguals are included in different backgrounds. For example, they may be immigrants from other places who learn the local dominant language as their second language, the local children learn their heritage language as a second language, or the transnational students who learn their second language in a school in another educational system.

Although all those groups are bilinguals, their different cultural backgrounds form their different cultural identification. For example, an immigrant may feel that they belong to both two languages, but the child might either feel far from the culture taught by elders, or the opposite. Those identifications made bilinguals' language proficiency different. However, researchers often consider "bilingual" as a single group, and think they will have close cultural identification and language

proficiency. Some researchers realize the difference, but it is still hard to generalize the clear relationship between different bilingual's cultural identification and different language proficiency.

Therefore, this study will research how different bilinguals' cultural identification influences their language proficiency. It will be helpful for researchers to identify different kinds of bilinguals, and make a better hypothesis. And also helpful for language education towards bilinguals, by suggesting teachers will know how to foster bilingual students' language proficiency based on their cultural identification. This research will be a literature review of the previous research about bilinguals, summarize and generalize how different cultural identifications influenced Bilingual language proficiency, and try to put forward some directions to help bilingual people improve their language proficiency based on their cultural identification.

2. Literature Review

This literature review was enlightened by Hayakawa et al.'s research, which mentioned the difference between different bilingual groups, and how this difference might influence their language proficiency and cultural identification. Hayakawa et al. begin with a hypothesis that a relationship might exist between the linguistic predictors associated with self-reported measures of proficiency and cultural identification in different groups of heritage bilinguals. [1] For the result, Hayakawa et al. conclude that self-reported proficiency and cultural identification differ depending on heritage speakers' native languages, the acquisition of the heritage and majority language, and the use of these two languages, highlighting the importance of considering individual language history when combining different heritage speaker groups. [1]

Although Hayakawa et al. mentioned the existence of differences in bilingual groups, they just focused on the research of the heritage speakers. This study will include more different bilingual groups, which might include immigrants, HL speakers, and transnational students. Many of those identities might overlap, but this study will focus on each of them, and generalize their separate influence on language proficiency.

2.1. Immigrants: balanced identification and community/society influence

Immigrants are the bilingual group who moved to another country (or region); they have a high language proficiency in their first native language but learn their second language for daily use. Chen et al. researched the Mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. Though Hong Kong and Mainland China share the same written language, most Hong Kong Chinese speak Cantonese. Thus, to adapt to the Hong Kong culture, learning and using this new language becomes an important component for Mainland Chinese immigrants who typically speak Mandarin. [2] In addition to learning the language, Chen et al. also mentioned that Mainland Chinese immigrants need to acquire knowledge about Hong Kong culture, which is heavily influenced by Western elements from British rule. [2] The results of the research, these immigrants identified with both cultures and reported comparable levels of use and fluency in Cantonese and Mandarin. [2] This example of Mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong shows that when immigrants have high identification with both cultures because they are close, their proficiency in two languages might be balanced.

However, not all immigrants show balanced cultural identification and language proficiency. Yang and Curdt-Christiansen researched an immigrant group called RMW, which means "rural immigrant workers." After the economic reforms in China, millions of RMWs moved from rural to urban, from western inland regions to southeastern coastal regions for job opportunities and better lives. During the research of sociolinguistic change, studies have found that RMWs tend to shift from fangyan (dialect) to Putonghua (The official language, "Mandarin") and construct multiple identities through their language choices. [3]

Yang and Curdt-Christiansen found that long-term polarization between rural and urban has created RMWs' self-perceived inferior identities. This inferiority caused RMW parents to perceive Putonghua as an ethnic identity marker that does not reveal their rural origin owing to its role as common speech. As a result, they make a purposeful choice of using Putonghua as the parent-to-child language. [3] Finally caused the shift from fangyan to Putonghua in the family domains. [3] Different from what Chen et al. find about Mainland Chinese immigrants, RMWs have an unbalanced cultural identification: They feel inferior because of their rural. This makes them try to only use Putonghua before their children and causes kinds of "intentional" unbalanced language proficiency.

Another example shows this kind of unbalance from the research of Cody. Which researched three generations of a Mexican-origin family, including the speakers of Texas Spanish and English who were born and raised in San Antonio. [4] For the research, Cody found that Respondents varied in their assessments of the role Texas Spanish plays in their ethnic self-identification, and they were not likely or even linguistically able to exploit the role of Spanish and validate their ethnic identity. Due to linguistic insecurity, language and culture-based racial discrimination, and a diffuse ethnic identity in society. [4] The proficiency of Spanish for those groups got worse. Since those groups are not actual "immigrants," they are not like the immigrants the study talked about before who have an overall tendency, the condition among the specific bilingual families of Mexican origin is highly different. However, Cody's research shows an important factor also exists and influences immigrants' cultural identification, which is the society and community where they moved, which would either trigger a resonance between their two cultural identifications or push them to deny one of them.

In conclusion, immigrants' cultural identification would be extremely different: They would either identify with both cultures or deny one of them. Their attitude toward the culture will also reflected in their language proficiency, and they would either have balanced language proficiency in both languages or show a preference for one of them (even though they have just ignored another). Two of these situations are highly dependent on the society and community where those immigrants are involved.

2.2. HL speaker: backgrounds promote willingness and parents/family influence

Most HL speakers were not born in another country (or region) but learned their second language from family. Mills provided the example of the third-generation Asian bilingual people from Pakistan. The samples are 10 mothers and 10 of their children from the West Midlands, UK, who are bilingual in English, Punjabi, Mirpuri, or Urdu. They are also Muslim and of Pakistani heritage. The research is mostly focused on children's responses. [5]

For the result, Mills found that although most of these children acknowledged a lack of proficiency in speaking Urdu or Punjabi. There was also an emphasis on the importance of the lives of their languages and the ways that these linked them to the core values of their heritage, family, and community. Those children averred they identified with their heritage languages because of continuing familial links, both within their immediate community and with relatives in Pakistan. [5] This result shows that if children are involved more in a cultural environment, they will prefer to identify with this culture and be more willing to improve their language proficiency. Although HL speakers begin with low language proficiency for their heritage language, if the family can consolidate their cultural identification through building this kind of "cultural background," by using HL in daily life, it will raise HL speakers' willingness to improve their language proficiency of HL.

Curdt-Christiansen and Morgia made a more specific analysis of the HL management of different HL speakers' families, which are the Chinese, Italian, and Urdu-speaking Pakistani families in the UK. [6] They are using different strategies for managing children's HL: Chinese families tend to use HL most of the time among all family members. The Italian group's use of English was almost equally shared with the use of Italian in their daily interaction. And the Urdu-speaking Pakistani family

members tended to use English more frequently. [6] For results shown on the children, Chinese children tend to use less English when interacting with siblings. Italian children's English use was on the rise, as indicated by English taking up more than half of their language use. For children in Urdu-speaking Pakistani families, there has been a noticeable language shift that children's English use falls largely in the 75–100 % range. [6]

Most of the three groups try to cultivate their children's identification with the English culture. But they have different minds for cultivating identification with the HL: Compared with the Pakistani families, Chinese and Italian families were much more conscious of their HL in their language planning efforts. [6] This difference in family language management influences children's language proficiency: children in Chinese families are more willing to use their HL language, children in Pakistani families are more willing to use English, and children in Italian families show a balanced willingness to use both languages. This research shows that if the family tends to produce an environment that only speaks one of the languages, the children's HL speaker will also identify with this environment and be willing to speak this language more.

Curd-Christiansen and Wang show a more complex situation in the research about family language planning in China, exploring how Chinese middle-class parents implement family language policies for three different languages in their everyday lives: fangyan, Putonghua, and English. [7] Putonghua is a lingua franca that is widely promulgated by the central government. The intensified promotion of Putonghua has gradually changed the linguistic landscape from being dominated by fangyans to using Putonghua widely. The promotion of English education emerged during the economic reforms in China, over the years, English has become considered as a language for international participation, and English education has been advanced from secondary to primary schools. [7]

Curd-Christiansen and Wang find three characteristics in these families: First, the absent cultural/emotional attachment to fangyan by parents since they would rather speak Putonghua since it is a lingual franca [7]. This produced a sense of detachment for children and fangyan; as they are not involved in the cultural background of Fangyan, they will show less willingness to learn this heritage language. Second, parents would comply with the societal ideology about the differentiated functional values of the three languages. [7] For example, Parents would consider English to have more instrumental values to children's future opportunities, and pound children to this idea, thus although children did not identify with the English culture, they still show a preference to improve their English proficiency. Finally, parents can implement strong management of children's language acquisition. For example, for learning English, parents can pay extra tuition or purchase the learning materials; in addition to creating an environment, parents also provide exterior help to improve children's language proficiency. This research is not very suitable for a "bilingual" topic since HL speakers are talking about three languages. However, it does reveal parents can evaluate the "value" of their languages and choose one to produce an environment to cultivate children's cultural identification.

In conclusion, HL speakers may begin with low language proficiency for their heritage language; however, their cultural identification can be consolidated through involvement in a kind of "cultural background," then HL speakers would raise their willingness to improve their language proficiency of HL. Parents and family are important in this process because they are to build this cultural background through using the HL daily. On the other hand, if the parents feel inferior about their HL, or evaluate their HL as low "value," they are also able to avoid using it before children, which may finally cause kind of language loss.

2.3. Transnational students: education strategy and sojourner identity

Finally, transnational students are the group who studied their second language in an environment they are not familiar with, for example, Bartlett researched the educational trajectory of a young Spanish-speaking newcomer immigrant called Maria, who was studying at a bilingual high school “Luperon.” [8] In the earlier study, Maria had been labeled as a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE), which indicates students whose education was interrupted or limited because of social and political factors. Based on the experiences of school, the term SIFE was usually reserved for students who were considered hard to succeed at Luperon since they had too many learning problems. [8]

In the beginning, Bartlett thought Maria would not complete high school because of her SIFE label. [8] However, in critical social interactions across classroom contexts, Maria drew upon the locally defined model of school success to position and be positioned herself as a successful student through bilingual literacy practices. As her identity as a good student gradually “thickened,” it shaped her opportunities for learning spoken and written English as well as other elements of the curriculum. [8] This example shows for transnational students, their cultural identification may not only include the culture of the language they learned but also include the culture of the school or educational system they joined. If the students can identify themselves as “successful students,” they might hold more confidence to study the language and gradually get better proficiency.

In addition to identifying with “students,” many of the transnational students often have another identity, which is “sojourner,” who lives in a place but is not a citizen there, for the sojourner, there is something unique that is sometimes their language proficiency also influenced their cultural identification. Wu and Liu researched another group of transnational students, which is the Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s complex linguistic culture is mutually shaped by local (Cantonese), national (Mandarin), and international (English) languages. Cantonese functions as the local dominant community language for everyday communication, while Mandarin and English as the national and international lingua franca may function as alternative languages in certain domains. [9]

In the research, Wu and Liu found when Mainland Chinese students use Mandarin/English, they may experience more perceived discrimination than Cantonese usage since they lack proficiency in the host language. [9] However, Cantonese usage also did not lead to lower perceived discrimination; it might be because those students who have higher proficiency in Cantonese may perceive more discrimination as they understand subtler discriminatory cues in Cantonese. Thus, the relationship may be offset by poor Cantonese speakers who perceive stronger discrimination and good Cantonese speakers who perceive subtler discrimination. [9] So, when the transnational students have high or low language proficiency, they will be treated by the host differently: Either be accepted or discriminated against, which would influence transnational students’ identification with this culture differently.

In conclusion, the cultural identification of transnational students may include not only the culture of the language but also the culture of the school. If the students can identify themselves as “successful students,” they might hold more confidence to study the language and gradually get better proficiency. And since Some transnational students have the identity of “sojourner,” inversely, their language proficiency will also influence their cultural identification: when the transnational students have high or low proficiency, they will be treated by the host differently, which would influence transnational students’ identification with this culture.

2.4. The media effect on cultural identification

Today, media plays a pervasive role in our lives, encompassing various formats such as written, auditory, and visual media. These media sources not only serve as a means of entertainment and information but also can shape our cultural identities in much the same way as our families and social environments do. This influence can be particularly significant for bilingual individuals, as their language usage and attitudes may be affected by the media they consume. It is important to explore how media influences bilingual language use and attitudes, as this can provide insights into the complex interplay between language, culture, and media in our increasingly interconnected world. Specifically, Clément et al. have found relationships between bilingual minority groups and media effects, through research what are the differences between majority and minority Francophones' consumption of English media relative to French media. [10] For the result, Clément et al. find that while television and books played a significant role in foreign students' acculturation to American values, radio, and stereo music did not forms of media do not appear to play a significant role in the acculturation process. While the minority group initially consumed more English media than the majority group, over time, the majority group significantly increased their use of English public and written media. Finally, no direct effect of media change affected Francophone identity, but written media, and (to a lesser extent) audiovisual media, made those people who evolved towards more usage of English increase their identification with Anglophones. [10] In conclusion, compared with the radio and stereo music media, television and book media would be more helpful for strengthening bilinguals' cultural identification.

2.5. To improve bilinguals' language proficiency through identification

Based on the article, there are some ways to improve bilinguals' language proficiency through cultural identification: First, producing a better bilingual community that accepts different cultures would be helpful for bilinguals to build balanced cultural identification, and make both their languages maintain high proficiency. It means the need to help bilinguals build linguistic security, stopping the racial discrimination and diffuseness of ethnic identity.

Second, recommending HL speakers' parents use more about their HL before their children can make HL speakers feel involved with the language, and have more willingness to improve their HL language proficiency. The main problem might be how to eliminate parents' feelings of inferiority toward their heritage languages and make them consider their HL as valuable.

Third, helping bilingual students build their identification as "successful students" might make students hold more confidence to study the language and gradually get better proficiency. At the same time, since many transnational students were sojourners, the local speakers needed to understand their identity, showing less discrimination, and providing more help to improve their language proficiency.

Finally, for a bilingual in the process of studying a second language, it might be helpful to contact the television and book media instead of the radio and stereo music media, which would strengthen their cultural identification, and provide willingness to improve their proficiency. By the way, those media also can become the resources to study those languages.

However, a new question was raised: Bilingual's cultural identification is influenced by many elements: Society may discriminate toward them, their parents may devalue the HL, and the school may not teach them in a correct strategy. Which were hard to solve in linguistic ways but reach other different realms. To find the solution, further research is needed to include more information from the realms of sociology or education and determine how to address those further issues.

3. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify how different bilingual groups' cultural identification influences their language proficiency, based on a literature review format to summarize different articles about bilinguals and compare them to find out the research topic. The research focuses on three bilingual groups: immigrants, HL speakers, and transnational students. Immigrants would either identify with both cultures or deny one of them. Their attitude toward the culture will reflect in their language proficiency: either have balanced language proficiency in both or show a preference for one. For HL speakers, their cultural identification can be consolidated through involvement in a kind of "cultural background;" then, they would raise their willingness to improve their HL language proficiency. Finally, the transnational students, if they can identify themselves as "successful students," might hold more confidence to study the language and gradually get better proficiency.

While this research clearly illustrates how different Bilingual's cultural identification influences their language proficiency, it also raises another question: many strategies that can improve bilingual people's language proficiency based on their cultural identification are out of the linguistic realm, and reached the realm of sociology, education, even politics, which means further research is needed to include more information from these realms and determine how to address those further issues. However, this research still put forward directions for further research, which could be concluded as producing a better bilingual community, recommending HL speakers' parents use more about their heritage language before their children, and helping bilingual students build the identification as "successful students."

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