Korean ESL Learners' Individual Differences in Intercultural Sensitivity and Language Development*

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Choe, Mun-Hong. (2023). Korean ESL learners' individual differences in intercultural sensitivity and language development. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal, 31*(3), 175-193. With the aim of exploring how second language (L2) learners' understanding and responsiveness to cultural differences influence their progress in L2, this study investigated a group of 32 Korean-speaking elementary school students in the United States. Using a combination of measurement scales and interviews, their variations in intercultural sensitivity and L2 English development in oral communication and literacy skills were examined. The outcomes from the scales reveal a substantial connection between differences in intercultural sensitivity and advancements in L2. Specifically, those who exhibit greater affective sensitivity in cross-cultural situations tend to excel in the development of oral proficiency. Insights from qualitative information suggest that the most notable contrast in the learners' experience with their second culture and language appears to arise from individual differences in the extent of immersive versus observational learning on one hand and in preferences for skill learning through rehearsal versus ideational learning through representation on the other.

Key Words: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, child learner, second language acquisition, English as a second language

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1. Introduction

While culture plays a vital role in the process of learning a new language, studies in second language (L2) acquisition and language teaching have demonstrated limited enthusiasm for investigating the diversity in cultural disparities and individuals' aptitude to grasp them. This might partially stem from their reliance on contemporary theoretical linguistics, which accentuates the universal features of linguistic competence and language acquisition, decoupled from any distinct cultural milieu. The manner in which individuals acquire a second culture alongside its associated language has only been considered within the realms of social constructivism and the theory of acculturation. These perspectives rooted in sociocultural understanding have concentrated on unraveling the factors that impact L2 learners' attitudes toward the culture and society of the host environment (e.g., Barjesteh & Vaseghi, 2012; Lantolf & Beckett, 2009; Shumann, 1978, 1990). Learner age, perceived social distance, length of sojourn, and attitudinal-motivational orientation have been the most studied ones in relation to L2 achievement, and these were believed to cause the learner variation observed in the process and outcome of L2 development.

Although the notion of non-native culture acquisition is not commonly acknowledged as an individual trait in L2 research, the last thirty years have witnessed an increasing interest in multicultural competence as a predictor of successful integration into a foreign community. A range of fields, such as communication, social psychology, and business, have probed into the idea of cultural competence, proposing that individuals diverge in their aptitude to acquire and adjust to new cultural norms, which in turn affects their efficacy in diverse cultural contexts. This characterization of learning a new culture as a unique ability has been expressed and substantiated by empirical investigations across a spectrum of disciplines (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Byram, 2020; Hammer, et al., 2003; Ott & Michailova, 2018). However, it remains relatively underexplored in L2 research.

Building upon this foundation, the present study aims to bridge the existing void by examining the distinctive traits among L2 learners in their capability to assimilate the culture associated with their target language, relative to their advancements in L2 proficiency. As an initial stride toward this objective, an investigation was carried out involving 32 young Korean students learning English as an L2 in the United States. The focal point was to ascertain if these learners display notable variations in their aptitude to embrace a foreign culture and how their responses to cultural disparities impact their progress in L2. Furthermore, this study is anticipated to offer practical insights rooted in

empirical evidence, paving the way for the complexities and considerations that future studies related to acquiring a second language and culture may have to confront.

2. Background

2.1. The Notion of Intercultural Sensitivity

For individuals to integrate into an unfamiliar culture, they must possess certain characteristic attributes such as a genuine fascination for that culture, the capacity to discern cultural distinctions, and a willingness to adapt their thoughts and behaviors in accordance with the norms of the people around them, whether explicit or implicit. These traits collectively fall under the banner of intercultural sensitivity, a theoretical concept designed to comprehend and predict an individual's effective assimilation into a new culture. This perspective brings about a series of significant inquiries, akin to those formulated in Shumann's (1978, 1990) influential acculturation-pidginization model — whether learners differ in their perceptions of cultural disparity, their attitudes toward such disparity, and the extent to which these variances influence their advancement in L2.

An aspect less traversed pertains to whether individuals indeed exhibit substantial deviations in their responsiveness to novel cultural customs and meanings. This in turn engenders a cascade of more specific questions: Does an individual's level of sensitivity increase with an accumulation of experience residing in the target culture, or does it predominantly remain constant? Do different forms of culture demand varying levels of sensitivity? Would individuals residing in a largely uniform society tend to manifest reduced sensitivity and heightened ethnocentrism compared to those in settings where frequent interactions with culturally diverse individuals are imperative? These inquiries, alongside the scientific endeavors undertaken to resolve them, will illuminate our comprehension of the acquisition of both language and culture.

Assessing individual differences in intercultural sensitivity poses a significant challenge in this line of inquiry. Several tools have been proposed (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Deardorff, 2011; Hammer et al., 2003). These assessments strive to gauge an individual's proficiency in discerning cultural disparities, cultivating empathy for individuals in the target culture, adapting skillfully within cross-cultural situations, and refining their perceptiveness through exposure. As such, they encompass diverse facets,

including the recognition of novel cultural notions and practices, manifesting enthusiasm for intercultural communication, and exhibiting a readiness to employ cultural insights.

As widely acknowledged, initial research in L2 acquisition primarily concentrated on learners' innate endowment, particularly in relation to their linguistic ability. Structural attributes and forms that diverged among languages were deemed fundamental for linguistic prowess and thought to be unattainable after a biologically determined sensitive period. While this field has progressively extended its horizons across various domains, the intricate interaction between learners' native language and individual differences in constructing L2 knowledge remains a contentious topic. Running in tandem with the cognitive-behavioral perspective, Schumann's acculturation-pidginization model (1978, 1990) presented an alternative stance. This model posits that how learners perceive the psychological gap between their original culture and the culture they are striving to integrate into shapes the quality and quantity of input they receive. A large perceived gap results in reduced conformity and interaction with individuals from the target culture, thereby leading to inadequate input for language acquisition. Consequently, learners are prone to reaching a plateau, similar to the process of pidginization. Schumann (1990) additionally introduces a neurocognitive element that mediates an individual's emotional and cognitive responses to a second culture. The alignment of this viewpoint with Talmy's (2000) cognitive culture system remains unclear.

Assuming all else remains constant, being acquainted with the target culture and possessing a desire to assimilate oneself into it would encourage interaction with individuals in the host community, streamlining language development. In a similar vein, the closer the learner's native language is to the target language, the smoother communication tends to be, increasing the probability of language acquisition. However, it is important to note that the influence of the native culture cannot be disentangled from that of the first language in real-world settings. Thus, the field has concentrated on the concept of interlingual distance, as it can be defined and gauged with more objectivity. For instance, the contrastive analysis hypothesis, an early theoretical explanation of L2 acquisition, ascribed the appearance of difficulties faced by learners solely to the resemblances and disparities between their native and second languages.

Talmy (2000) introduces a cognitive perspective regarding the interplay between culture and language acquisition, proposing that the aptitude to acquire culture constitutes a special cognitive module with its own distinctive developmental, inhibitory, and achievement attributes. This inherent capacity for cultural assimilation mirrors the process

of language acquisition, wherein advancement is not steered solely by behavioral learning but unfolds through incremental stages characterized by the development of coherent systems. While certain developmental aspects are universal and driven by an inborn faculty, the precise nature of acquiring a second culture remains an unresolved query.

To illustrate, the findings of Kordes (1991) and Minoura (1992) lend support to the notion of a sensitive period for culture acquisition. This hypothetical cultural acquisition module gains significance when interlinked with the developmental facets of acquiring a second language. The concept of a critical period for culture acquisition implies that specific cultural elements can be fully attained only during early life, encompassing not only recognition but also a willingness to engage with and reproduce cultural patterns. Furthermore, culture acquisition might manifest on a gradient spectrum; when exposed to novel cultural patterns later in life, an individual might intellectually comprehend them without undergoing fundamental alterations in their sentiments, thoughts, and behaviors.

This perspective, which considers culture as an integral aspect of intelligence, diverges from the sociocultural standpoint of acculturation, which predominantly hinges on individuals' personal perceptions. Instead, it asserts that acculturation, both in its progression and outcomes, is contingent in part upon individuals' capacity to discern and replicate cultural patterns. The idea that certain intricate elements of culture can only be attained during a sensitive period aligns with the analogy of first language and second language acquisition. Language learners who have internalized the linguistic principles and structures of their native language are unlikely to grasp culturally imbued meanings in a second language through mere exposure. Similarly, individuals originating from specific cultural backgrounds might struggle to master culture-specific attributes in a non-native language.

2.2. The Measurement of Intercultural Sensitivity

The notion of intercultural sensitivity as a distinctive individual trait has proven to be valuable in domains like social psychology and international business. Among the prominently recognized models are the cultural intelligence scale (Ang, et al., 2015), the intercultural sensitivity scale (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Portalla & Chen, 2010), the acculturation scale (Berry, 2006), and the intercultural development inventory (Hammer, 2012). The initial two models underscore the cognitive-affective aspects of culture learning, whereas the latter two accentuate the strategic-developmental dimensions that fluctuate

among individuals and within them. Each of these measurement models will be briefly examined.

The term "cultural intelligence" has been utilized within the realm of human resources management, referencing an individual's capacity to adapt and function in a foreign environment (Earley & Ang, 2003). This conceptualization, which views culture as a distinct intelligence, aligns with theories such as social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and other pragmatic intelligences. Arguably the most renowned model in this context is that put forth by Earley and Ang (2003), which introduces four dimensions of the ability: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. The metacognitive component pertains to an individual's conscious awareness and vigilance over their cultural knowledge and behavior. The cognitive aspect evaluates an individual's grasp and comprehension of cultural disparities. For instance, items such as 'I am knowledgeable about the values and beliefs of various cultures' and 'I am familiar with the legal and economic systems of different cultures' are employed to assess this dimension. The motivational facet of cultural intelligence is tied to an individual's satisfaction and self-assuredness in interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Items like 'I find enjoyment in engaging with people from varying cultures' and 'I possess confidence in my ability to socialize with individuals from differing cultures' are indicative of this dimension. Lastly, the behavioral component of cultural intelligence aims to measure an individual's inclination and capability to modify their behavior in alignment with the norms of the host culture. Items like 'I adjust my verbal and nonverbal conduct when cultural circumstances demand it' and 'I modify my facial and gestural expressions in response to cross-cultural interactions' serve to measure this dimension.

In their updated iteration, Ang et al. (2015) characterize cultural intelligence as an underlying construct that generates variations among individuals in perceiving and valuing nonnative cultural patterns. This characteristic sets it apart from other personality traits. In this regard, it aligns with the perspective that culture necessitates a distinct aptitude for acquisition. Nevertheless, the interpretation of cultural intelligence as elucidated by these researchers does not imply an inborn endowed faculty. Rather, it is a malleable attribute that can evolve over a person's lifespan, independent of factors like maturation, and can be cultivated through experiences and guidance.

Another term that is widely embraced to denote the same concept as cultural intelligence is intercultural sensitivity. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) define it as individuals' open-mindedness toward cross-cultural disparities, their capability to comprehend cultural

patterns, and their adaptable conduct in diverse cultural environments. Chen and Starosta (1996) further differentiate intercultural sensitivity from intercultural awareness. According to their distinction, intercultural sensitivity relates to the affective-emotional responses to cross-cultural differences, whereas intercultural awareness pertains to cognitive and metacognitive competencies employed in cross-cultural interactions. This differentiation allows them to focus exclusively on affective-emotional attributes in their measurement scale, specifically targeting aspects like enjoyment, confidence, open-mindedness, empathy/ appreciation, and respect. Items such as 'I find pleasure in engaging with individuals from different cultures', 'I am self-assured when interacting with people from diverse cultures', and 'I hold esteem for the values of individuals from varying cultures' are employed for assessment.

Within this framework, cultural sensitivity essentially forms a compound construct that mirrors individuals' affective-emotional responses to cultural disparities, from which cognitive and behavioral reactions emerge. This is broadly consistent with Shumann's acculturation theory but stands in contrast to the perspective that culture acquisition is an inherent ability. The measurement scale introduced by Chen and Starosta (1998) comprises five sections and a total of 24 items. These sections were categorized as engagement, confidence, enjoyment, attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences through the process of factor analysis. Despite their endeavors to validate the scale, the degree to which it can explain the observed variations was not particularly high. They acknowledged this as a constraint of the scale, implying that focusing solely on affective-emotional aspects might not comprehensively capture cultural competence. Another significant limitation is that the scenarios presumed by the scale are confined to academic settings, thus rendering it inappropriate for application to other groups of learners and diverse situations.

While the preceding models emphasize cultural sensitivity as cognitive and affective characteristics in reaction to cultural differences, the subsequent models pivot their attention towards its strategic and developmental aspects. First, Barry (2001) and Berry (2006) contend that acculturation can be understood as diverse coping styles and strategies individuals adopt when in a foreign country. This perspective aligns closely with the acculturation-pidginization model, as both underscore the significance of individuals' varied perceptions and actions concerning cultural adaptation. Indeed, the way individuals handle cultural disparities and strive to reconcile their identity has been a focal locus of substantial discourse within counseling psychology. As an example, in the context of

Asian Americans' acculturation preferences and strategies, the Suinn-Lew self-identity scale has found extensive usage in numerous studies (see Suinn, et al., 1995 for a comprehensive review).

An additional noteworthy aspect of acculturation examined through this perspective is that individuals do not acculturate in a one-dimensional manner to a new culture. Instead, they often adopt diverse styles and strategies depending on specific cultural patterns or subcultures within that overarching culture. This highlights the need for a measurement scale to encompass a range of specific contexts that can elucidate individuals' selective acculturation. According to Barry (2001), individuals' acculturation styles generally fall into four categories: separation, marginalization, assimilation, and integration. Separation signifies an individual's inclination to uphold their ethnic identity and traditions without actively engaging in the host culture. Marginalization pertains to situations where an individual intentionally isolates themselves from both their native culture and the host culture. Assimilation takes place when an individual relinquishes their ethnic identity in an attempt to assimilate into the host culture. Lastly, integration denotes an individual's cultivation of multiple self-identities, enabling them to adapt their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors flexibly in different cultural contexts.

Drawing on this framework, Barry (2001) designed a measurement scale tailored for Asian students in the United States. To evaluate separation styles and strategies, the scale incorporates items like 'My closest friends are Asian' and 'I feel that Asians treat me as an equal more than Americans do'. Items connected to assimilation styles and strategies encompass statements such as 'If asked to write poetry, I would prefer to write it in English', 'Americans seem to understand me better than Asians do', and 'I find it simpler to express my emotions to Americans than to Asians'. For marginalization and integration styles, the scale includes items like 'I feel valued by both Asians and Americans' and 'Sometimes, I struggle to trust both Asians and Americans', respectively.

The final model under consideration was originally introduced by Bennett (1993) with the aim of designing training programs. These programs were designed to assist employees in cultivating cultural relativism and the behavioral skills necessary for unfamiliar cultural environments. The model hence takes into account the developmental phases individuals commonly experience during the acculturation process, spanning from the initial stage of ethnocentrism to the ultimate stage of recognizing and valuing cross-cultural differences. This emphasis on the evolving aspects of acculturation, though broadly classified along a one-dimensional continuum, is demonstrated through Bennett's depiction of cultural

competence as the ability to 'transform' oneself across various cultural contexts.

Implicit in this model is the notion that individuals significantly differ in their capacity to acquire another culture, resulting in many reaching a plateau midway while some manage to progress to the stage of ethnorelativism. However, the factors influencing the facilitation or hindrance of this developmental process have not been thoroughly explored. Building upon this premise, Hammer et al. (2003) introduced the intercultural development inventory. This measurement scale divides the acculturation developmental sequence into six distinct phases, with each phase reflecting individuals' distinctive mindsets. The affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects corresponding to these mindsets are incorporated into measurement items. The initial three phases are categorized as ethnocentric phases, where individuals tend to disregard cultural relativism, champion their own culture, and minimize the significance of recognizing cultural differences. In contrast, the subsequent three phases constitute ethnorelative phases, commencing with the acceptance of diverse worldviews. This is succeeded by the adaptation phase, in which individuals endeavor to interact with the host culture's members and contribute to the community. The ultimate phase is integration, characterized by an emerging identity that individuals construct to align with the host culture. At this stage, individuals possess the ability to manage their cultural identities and exhibit effective behavior in both their native and nonnative cultures. The inventory is structured into six sections, mirroring these six phases. The latest iteration consists of 50 statements that employ a Likert-type scale.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 32 Korean L1 elementary school students in the United States (mean age: 9.68, SD: 2.23). They recently immigrated to the United States with their parents in pursuit of better educational opportunities. At the onset of data collection, they had been in the United States for 1.34 years on average (SD: .61). Among them 19 were males and 13 were females; 5 had experience in living in a foreign country other than Korea over 6 months, while 27 did not. Most of them came from middle-class urban backgrounds. They grew up speaking Korean as first language. They were fluent in Korean

and were able to communicate effectively with adults. They were asked to fill in a 20-minute long questionnaire about cultural adaptation patterns. They participated in the study voluntarily in response to advertisement through electronic media and personal contacts.

Before moving to the United States, their exposure to English was limited to basic vocabulary and formulaic expressions through occasional English classes at their school where the primary language of instruction was Korean. Graded readers and educational media content were the main sources. They did not have regular opportunities for engaging in interactions with English speakers, and so initially they were not able to interact effectively in English.

3.2. Instruments

To evaluate individual differences in intercultural sensitivity among the subject learners, the scale model introduced by Choe (2022) was employed. This scale consists of four distinct sections: affective, cognitive, behavioral, and developmental. Affective sensitivity pertains to learners' emotional responses, attitudes, and interpersonal sentiments regarding the target culture and its inhabitants. This facet encompasses the assessment of learners' motivational emotions, such as intrinsic interest and enjoyment, along with their interpersonal sentiments like empathy and respect. Additionally, it also takes into account negative emotions such as shyness, anxiety, and marginalization that learners might feel during the process of cultural adaptation. Cognitive sensitivity refers to the learners' consciousness and comprehension of cultural disparities. This dimension involves their capacity to dissect and assess cultural information, showcasing their intellectual aptitude to perceive, understand, and analyze patterns, norms, and deviations within the target culture. Behavioral sensitivity pertains to the learners' intention and actual capability to adapt their behaviors within the target culture. Those displaying behavioral sensitivity can modify their behavioral tendencies to align with the cultural context. This aspect includes fundamental assimilative-imitative skills, where learners strive to imitate typical members of the culture. At more advanced stages, learners exhibit the ability to exercise control and employ modificational-integrative strategies to function adeptly in diverse cultural environments. Behavioral sensitivity thus embraces the capacity to replicate cultural patterns, adapt or integrate behavioral norms in accordance with cultural contexts, and display proficiency in establishing and managing relationships within the cultural milieu.

Lastly, developmental potential pertains to an individual's higher-level ability to govern and enhance the three facets of cultural sensitivity, namely, one's overarching aptitude to mold and refine cultural sensitivity as a unified construct. Individuals with developmental sensitivity can adjust their inherent tendencies to strike a balance between the competencies necessary for acculturation. They can recognize gaps in their sensitivity and strategically work to identify and minimize them.

The participants' development in L2 English was assessed by standardized proficiency tests and researcher observations through interviews. As mentioned, language competence is multifaceted, and so learners may excel in certain areas while remaining underdeveloped in others. In order to measure the participants' development in English proficiency, ACCESS for ELLs 2.0, a composite standardized test to screen and diagnose ESL students in the United States, was used. This test has been used nationwide for elementary and middle school students who need to enroll in ESOL classes. It measures four language skills, oral communication, and literacy proficiency. The oral communication section assesses the learners' ability to understand a range of spoken English, including conversations, lectures, or audio materials. It also measures their overall fluency, accuracy, and ability to convey their thoughts clearly and coherently. The literacy test assesses their ability to understand different types of texts, extract information, infer meaning, and make connections within the text, along with their ability to produce coherent and well-structured texts, employ appropriate vocabulary and grammar, and use proper punctuation and spelling.

Finally, interviews were carried out with each learner, and their responses were categorized according to prevalent themes. This enabled a comprehensive understanding of their cultural adaptation progress and advancements in English proficiency. Additionally, the researcher's observational notes were subjected to a thematic analysis. This dual-source analysis yielded a range of themes, with the most prominent ones being acceptable and unacceptable differences, friendships, acknowledgment from peers, desired self-image, and areas where the self falls short of the ideal.

4. Results

This section presents the results from the measurement scales explained above. Findings from interviews will be discussed in the next section. Table 1 shows the

correlation coefficients between overall intercultural sensitivity, oral communication proficiency, and literacy skills.

Table 1. Correlations (Pearson r) between Overall
Intercultural Sensitivity and L2 Development

		Oral communication	Literacy
Intercultural sensitivity (N = 32)	Pearson r	.560**	.495**
	p	.001	.004

There was a statistically significant association between an individual's intercultural sensitivity and their achievement in L2 literacy and oral communication proficiency. The findings reveal that individuals with higher levels of intercultural sensitivity tend to exhibit more advancements in both written and spoken language skills. This outcome underscores the substantial role of intercultural sensitivity in facilitating not only effective communication but also language learning as a whole. The strong correlation observed between them highlights the interplay between the ability to grasp cultural disparities and the development of language competence in both written and spoken domains within cross-cultural contexts.

Table 2 shows the correlations between each dimension of intercultural sensitivity and oral communication proficiency.

Table 2. Correlations between Intercultural Sensitivity and
L2 Oral Communication (N = 32)

Sensitivity dimension		Affective	Cognitive	Behavioral	Oral communication
Affective	r	.	.192	.660	.644**
	p		.292	.000	.000
Cognitive	r			.362	.308
	p			.042	.087
Behavioral	r				.327
	p				.068

There was no significant relationship between cognitive-behavioral sensitivity and development in L2 oral communication proficiency. However, the analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between one's affective sensitivity and their advancement

in oral communication proficiency. The results suggest that individuals who exhibit higher levels of affective sensitivity tend to show greater improvements in their oral communication skills. This underscores the interconnectedness between emotional responsiveness to cultural differences and the development of oral communication abilities, highlighting the role of intercultural sensitivity in fostering communicative competence.

Table 3 shows the correlations between each dimension of intercultural sensitivity and L2 literacy skills.

Table 3. Correlations (Pearson r) between Intercultural Sensitivity and L2 Literacy (N = 32)

Sensitivity dimension		Affective	Cognitive	Behavioral	Literacy
Affective	r	.	.192	.660	.311
	p		.292	.000	.084
Cognitive	r			.362	.557**
	p			.042	.001
Behavioral	r				.258
	p				.154

The analysis of the correlation data reveals interesting insights into the relationship between different facets of intercultural sensitivity and the development of L2 literacy. Notably, there is a statistically significant correlation between cognitive sensitivity and advancements in L2 literacy. This suggests that individuals who demonstrate higher levels of cognitive awareness and understanding of cultural differences tend to exhibit greater progress in their written language skills. However, the examination also shows that there is no significant relationship between affective/behavioral sensitivity and the enhancement of L2 literacy. This implies that emotional responsiveness and behavioral adaptability to cultural disparities might not directly contribute to improvements in written language proficiency. These findings emphasize the distinct roles played by different dimensions of intercultural sensitivity in language learning, with cognitive sensitivity being particularly associated with literacy development while affective-behavioral sensitivity might have a more impact on oral proficiency development.

Overall, the participants showed a lesser degree of variation in their L2 literacy development, and so their difference in oral communication ability can be attributed to their cultural dispositions to a larger extent. These further support the significant role of

intercultural sensitivity in relation to L2 development.

5. Discussion

Adjusting and integrating into a new culture — its customs, norms, and social expectations — are perhaps the most difficult challenge for L2 learners. The findings of this study support that individual differences in cultural sensitivity influence L2 development to a considerable degree. Those who possess a higher level of affective sensitivity appear to have an advantage in the development of L2 oral communication proficiency. They are more attuned to cultural nuances, social cues, and appropriate language use, which enables them to engage in the new cultural context more actively. This sensitivity allows them to develop an understanding and appreciation for the target culture and language.

The close relationship between cultural sensitivity and language development implies that individuals who are receptive to cultural differences tend to have a more positive attitude towards new cultural experiences. Being open to different cultural practices and perspectives enhances their ability to adopt new language patterns and adapt their communication style accordingly. Moreover, the learners who possess social skills and resilience tend to cope better with the challenges and frustrations that can arise during the process of acculturation and L2 learning. Because acculturation involves adjusting to new social norms, communication styles, and cultural expectations, those who are more adaptable to the transcultural differences can deal with these changes more effectively, which enhances their L2 learning experience. It is also noteworthy that the learners who possess culturally flexible communication skills are better able to overcome cultural differences, establish meaningful connections with speakers of the target language, and engage in authentic interactions (Byram, 2020; Deardorff, 2011; Hammer et al., 2003). These skills may in turn facilitate language learning by creating opportunities for practice and exposure to the target language in real-life contexts.

Some significant discoveries were also made through the analysis of qualitative data from interviews. When it comes to second culture learning, the most notable difference was seen in their attitudes toward new cultural norms and practices. For some, new cultural experiences were nothing but new sources of enjoyment. For others, however, unfamiliar cultural experiences were often evaluated and judged negatively. Some were

attentive to the novelty of a cultural element or practice, whereas others were more attentive to how it is different from their native culture. During the interviews, a learner frequently expressed her negative attitudes towards cultural differences:

"I found it very difficult to understand and accept their inconsiderate behavior. They are always so noisy and selfish. That made me feel uncomfortable and have a sense of judgment. I know I should try to overcome these feelings but there's no other way than to just suppress them as they arise."

More specifically, there were two recurring themes of their dissatisfaction with American culture: peer students' hygienic practices and imprudent behavior. Comments on these were numerous and consistent throughout the period of observation. These attitudinal-motivational differences naturally led to differences in their ways of learning the target language. One account of the differences can be based on the contrast between immersive and observational learning (cf. Makransky & Petersen, 2021). When acquiring new cultural values and behaviors, some learners fully engaged themselves in immersive learning while some initially held a spectator stance and then gradually became more participatory. Others maintained their spectator stance throughout the whole period. Immersive learning occurs in the environment where the target culture is actively and extensively practiced. Surrounded by English-speaking peers and their expectations, they have to demonstrate socially desired behaviors. Immersive learning provides direct and immediate feedback through interactions with other children or adults. This feedback facilitates their development in cultural skills and language use.

On the other hand, observational learning primarily involves passive observation. Learners tended to interpret the behaviors of other pupils, adults, or media representations in the target culture, while their own participation was limited. Their observational learning mainly took place in formal settings such as classrooms, where more nuanced cultural norms and practices cannot be replicated to a sufficient degree. Moreover, in observational learning, feedback and guidance are less prominent. They rarely receive social feedback during the observation phase, and so must rely on their own analysis and interpretation of the observed behavior.

There were also notable differences in the learners' motives and strategies for L2 learning. On the face of it, the most characteristic difference in their L2 learning can be described in terms of rehearsing versus representing. These are two distinct processes that

serve different purposes in language learning. Rehearsing involves the practice and repetition of language elements. It focuses on developing fluency, automating patterns, and improving accuracy through repeated practice. It is an active process that requires learners to engage with the language elements they are practicing, often involving speaking or repeating words, phrases, or sentences aloud. Rehearsing places emphasis on developing fluency and automatizing language use. It primarily focuses on immediate application and production of language elements. The practice and repetition of language elements seem to help learners use them productively in real-time communication.

In contrast, representing refers to the mental process of creating and storing internal representations of knowledge. It involves organizing linguistic information in memory, creating mental models of language rules, structures, word networks, and other language-related concepts. Representing is a more passive process that occurs primarily in the mind. Learners create mental representations of linguistic forms and rules without necessarily engaging in active production or rehearsing at that moment. Unlike rehearsing, representing requires the learner's conscious analysis of language input. The focus is on creating meaningful representations that support personalized comprehension and production. It is thus more concerned with long-term acquisition and storage of linguistic knowledge. The mental representations created during this process serve as a foundation for future language use and learning.

Another difference among the learners was their attitudinal orientations. To put it succinctly, Some learners tended to seek here-and-now well-being in the unfamiliar environment while some were more attentive to less-than-ideal aspects of self and less-than-ideal conditions for their well-being. This suggests that ideal-self may not always promote L2 learners' development. At times, it can be detrimental to their psychological well-being, especially when their ideal identity shaped in the first culture is in discord with desired identities in the second culture. There seem to be several reasons why some learners focus on less-than-ideal self and less-than-ideal conditions in learning. They had a fear of failure, or a fear of falling short of reaching their goals and expectations. They constantly focused on their perceived shortcomings, which led to a fixation on less-than-ideal conditions. Furthermore, external factors such as constant comparisons with others, a fear of falling short of expectations, pressure from parents, and a competitive learning environment can contribute to young learners' focus on less-than-ideal self and conditions. It seems that these factors often interact and reinforce each other.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated whether individuals differ in their ability to acquire a new culture and to what extent such differences impact their L2 development. The findings support that there exist substantial differences in intercultural sensitivity among learners and these differences impact the way they approach and engage with language learning. In particular, affective openness, resilience, and interpersonal adaptability seem to play a crucial role in L2 acquisition by modulating learners' willingness to explore, understand, and produce the cultural aspects of the target language.

Findings from interviews also suggest that intercultural sensitivity influences the nature of learning second culture and language to a large extent. Younger children tend to be fully immersive and rehearsive in their learning of a new culture and language, whereas older children are more observational and representational. Immersive learning involves active participation, real-life contexts, and direct engagement with the target language and cultural skills, while observational learning relies on non-participatory observation, indirect modeling, and less engaged practice. Rehearsing is characterized as active, and often immediate, repetition of various language units to improve fluency and accuracy, while representing involves creating mental representations and organizing linguistic knowledge for long-term use and understanding. Rehearsing is thus a process of skill-building in nature while representing has more to do with knowledge acquisition and organization. These complementary modes of learning bring about individual differences in second culture acquisition, which is also closely associated with the learner's developmental process and ultimate attainment in the target language.

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