Acculturation and Language Acquisition: A Look at Schumann’s Acculturation Model

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Abstract
This is a brief overview of the Acculturation Model designed by Schumann (1978). After a short explanation of the model itself, I will look at criticisms by prominent researchers. Next, I will introduce my research study on the effects of acculturation on one eleventh-grade male student from the Islamic Saudi Academy in Alexandria, Virginia. By using Schumann’s model as a guide, I have examined the student’s academic environment and outside community as well as his effort to learn English as a Second Language (ESL) and to acculturate to life in the United States. This research helps to further examine the relationship between social and psychological factors in second language acquisition.

Introduction
Immigrant students to the United States have to face extreme social and cultural situations, which in turn affect their own social and ethnic identities. Many theories attempt to explain the relationship between learners’ second language acquisition and their social and psychological factors. Schumann’s (1978) Acculturation Model provides a valuable context theory toward second language acquisition. Although there is substantial criticism against the model itself, I feel that the variables discussed in the model are extremely important to understand the significance of the socio-psychological aspects of second language learning and acquisition.

I will examine Schumann’s model in this paper, pointing out what makes it an important model bringing us closer to understanding the language learner’s acquisition by external factors. I designed a fifty-one-question survey based on the variables in the model and implemented a short study with one student to test whether he is acculturating to life in the United States. Schumann’s model emphasizes the relationship between language learner and target language community, giving us an interesting theory that the more a second language learner becomes part of the target language community, the better they will acquire the target language.

Schumann’s Acculturation Model Explained
Schumann’s (1978) research argues that social and psychological distance between the second language learner and the target language community is a major factor in determining the degree to which the language learner will acquire the target language without the development of pidginization. The simplified form of speech characterized in a pidgin language, according to Schumann, “shows that social and psychological distance exists and the speech
of the second language learner is restricted to the communicative function” (Schumann, 1978 p. 76). The model proposed by Schumann includes the following eight social variables which affect the quality of contact that second language learners have with the target language community (simplified from Schumann, 1978):

1) **Social dominance**: When the English Language Learning (ELL) group is politically, culturally, technically, or economically superior to the target language (TL) group, then it will tend not to learn the target language. On the other hand, if the ELL group is inferior to the TL group, they may resist learning the target language.

2) **Assimilation, preservation, and adaptation**: If the ELL group chooses assimilation as the integration strategy, it gives up its own lifestyle and values and adopts those of the TL group. Similarly, preservation means that the ELL group maintains its own lifestyle and values and rejects those of the TL group. Adaptation means that the ELL group adapts to the lifestyle and values of the TL group, but maintains its own lifestyle and values for intragroup use.

3) **Enclosure**: Enclosure refers to the degree to which the ELL group and TL group share the same social constructs such as schools, churches, clubs, recreational facilities, crafts, professions, and trades. If the two groups share these social constructs, enclosure is said to be low, and the L2 acquisition is facilitated.

4) **Cohesiveness**: If the ELL group is cohesive, it will tend to remain separate from the TL group.

5) **Size**: If the ELL group is large, the intragroup contact will be more frequent than contact with the TL group.

6) **Congruence**: If the two cultures are similar, social contact is potentially more likely and L2 learning is more easily facilitated.

7) **Attitude**: If the ELL and TL groups have positive attitudes toward each other, L2 learning is more easily facilitated.

8) **Intended length of residence**: The longer an L2 learner plans to remain in the TL environment, the more likely it is that they will feel the need to learn the target language.

**Psychological Distance**

Additionally, there are four psychological variables included in Schumann's model. Language shock, cultural shock, motivation, and ego play an important role in determining the success of language acquisition. If language
shock and culture shock are not overcome, the learner will be unable to associate with the members of the TL group thus preventing the learner from acquiring the language skills to identify him or her as a member of the TL group.

Motivation

It is important to note that there are two types of motivational tendencies, integrative and instrumental. They both contribute to achievement in the second language but need to be delineated. A learner with integrative motivation is interested in acquiring a second language in order to meet and communicate with valued members of the target language community. A learner with instrumental motivation is one who has little interest in the members of the target language community but wants to learn the target language for more self-oriented reasons, such as furthering career opportunities or earn more money. Therefore this requires minimal psychological distance.

Criticisms of Schumann’s Model

There are many criticisms on the acculturation model, including Schumann’s work beginning with its formal incompleteness. First, Freeman & Long (1991) state that Schumann did not specify the combinations and/or levels of social and psychological factors to predict language outcome. Various social and psychological factors can be used to account for learner’s acquisition, and it is impossible to determine what is the most significant one of these factors or the degree to which one factor contributes to the acquisition. Also, Schumann did not explain how these factors affect the rate of attainment. (Freeman & Long, 1991 p. 264) Next, Schumann did not account for the change of the social or psychological distance over time (Freeman & Long 1991, Baker 2001). One important difference in the comparison of the Acculturation Model and Giles and Byrne’s Accommodation Model is that Giles and Byrne (1982) point out that the relationships between the two groups are constantly changing (Baker, 2001). Naturally distance changes as a learner acquires the target language. The current social and psychological distance while the learner acquires the language and how it correlates to the learners’ proficiency is not taken into account in Schumann’s model.

Furthermore, the model does not show how these social and psychological factors vary from individual to individual. Freeman and Long (1991) pointed out that the model is unable to be tested because no reliable and valid measures of social and psychological distance exist. Some researchers like Stauble (1978) and Kitch (1982) found rough correlation between psychological distance and ESL proficiency, others like Kelley (1982) and Stauble (1981) found no relationship between acculturation and proficiency (Freeman & Long, 1991). Researchers have concluded that individuals go through the stages of adjustment in another culture at different rates and can ultimately combine elements of the psychological distance variables. Schumann does not include important personal factors such as age, family separation, previous educational experiences, or the traumatic experiences of the refugee. These additional stress factors can determine how well a student performs in a new school environment.
“The extent to which the ‘host’ society and its institutions are responsive to the needs of recently arrived immigrants, and the effects of other stress factors that may exist, will have an effect on the adjustment and acculturation process” (Coelho, 1998 p.31).

We may conclude that this model serves only as a rough outline of the relationship between social and psychological variables in second language acquisition.

Graham and Brown (1996) researched the reasons why native Spanish speakers in a small town in northern Mexico developed native-like proficiency in English. A sample of the Spanish-speaking population was asked questions related to Schumann’s acculturation variables. They concluded that the proficiency being acquired by native Spanish-speaking was due to three factors: favorable attitudes toward the English-speaking community, enrollment in a two-way bilingual program in school, and the development of close friendships with native English-speaking peers. This high level of achievement in two languages may not be that unusual in communities where minority language students are learning the majority language. “The unusual thing about Colonia Juarez is not so much that the English-speaking minority would be developing high levels of competence in Spanish, but that the Spanish-speaking majority would be developing native-like ability in English” (Graham & Brown, 1996 p. 236).

Although Schumann’s acculturation model has been applied mostly to situations unlike Colonia Juarez, it is exactly this kind of application that may help in determining the accuracy and efficacy of the model itself. Finally, it helps to prove the importance of social factors in second language acquisition.

Islamic Saudi Academy and Research Questions

A study of the unique environment where I currently teach ESL would be a valuable addition to the existing research on the acculturation model previously discussed. The male students in grades 7-12 at the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) in Alexandria, Virginia are mostly from Saudi Arabia with a few from surrounding Gulf countries. Their first language is Arabic and they are Muslim. The dual curriculum allows them to take Arabic as a first language and Islamic Studies taught in Arabic. Although a high percentage of students speak English fluently, most students, teachers, and administrators choose to speak Arabic therefore making it the dominant language. The school does not typically represent a United States secondary ESL program. Although similar ESL teaching material is used in the curriculum, the socio-psychological variables for successful language acquisition, like those Schumann puts forward in his model, are what interest me in this unique setting. The students at ISA have strong ties to their native countries, some in fact, stay for a short time since they are children of diplomats. Some parents, on the other hand, who are American citizens or permanent residents, choose to have their children study in an Arabic curriculum over a public education and perhaps unknowingly create a greater social distance between their children and the target language community. The most interesting aspect of ISA is that there are two groups of students, one that is and has been bilingual in English and Arabic, and one that speaks Arabic while at the same
time learning ESL in a formal, traditional curriculum. I have adopted a case study based on Schumann’s model of acculturation with Talal, an eleventh-grade male student from the Islamic Saudi Academy in order to measure the effectiveness of the model’s social and psychological variables by testing the degree to which Talal has acculturated.

Research Questions
I put forward the following research questions:

1. Are the social conditions within the Academy and in the outside community favorable to the student’s English language acquisition?
2. Does the student make an effort to acquire English beyond the routine of their daily English class and if so, to what extent?
3. Does the application of the variables in Schumann’s Acculturation Model to the student aid in helping educators understand the social and psychological implications in second language acquisition?

Background Information on Talal
It is important to add some information about the student in the research study. Talal was born in Saudi Arabia and is the oldest of six children in his family. His father is a diplomat and the family moved to Spain when Talal was four years old. The family moved back to Saudi Arabia after ten years in Spain. Talal attended early childhood education in schools with native Spanish speakers, but changed to an Iraqi Islamic Academy with a curriculum similar to the Islamic Saudi Academy for the time he lived in Spain. After his father’s service in Spain, the family moved back to Saudi Arabia for four years and then moved to the United States in 2000, where he presently resides and attends school. Talal is currently in my ESL II class, the second of four ESL classes before students are placed into regular English classes at grade level.

It is interesting to note that Talal speaks very little Spanish even though he spent ten years there. I hypothesized that Talal is acculturating faster than his peers because of several factors: he shows more motivation to learn English than his peers, he shows more self-confidence in using English in everyday conversations, and he takes the time to produce high quality work in our English class.

Design for Data Collection
I designed and implemented a survey and student log, which relate to the social variables in Schumann’s model. The fifty-one questions on the survey covered the model’s social distance factors like attitude toward the target language community, length of residence, size, social dominance, and cohesiveness of the second language learning group. Additionally, there were questions pertaining to four psychological variables: language shock, culture shock, motivation, and ego.

In addition to the survey, I asked Talal to keep a log for a period of two weeks. Student journals and logs help visualize a day in the life of a student. I
wanted Talal to reflect on the time he knowingly or unknowingly took reading, writing, listening, and speaking English inside and outside of school. Talal cooperated fully in providing accurate data.

A personal interview with Talal was another approach I used to collect data needed for the analysis. I recorded our conversations relating to the forty-item questionnaire to elicit more information from him. He spoke comfortably about each item and gave his opinions freely. This also provided speech samples, which may or may not determine the degree to which Talal’s speech is pidginized.

**Data Results and Discussion**

Talal was very thorough in providing an excellent two-week log in which he indicated moments when he spoke, read, wrote, and even listened to the English language. At times he also indicated when he used Arabic which provided a good contrast. Upon first glance, it seems that Talal spends more time listening to English than any other language skills. In his log, Talal wrote that he watched about 10 hours of television in the two-week period and listened to English radio stations at least once everyday. Talal likes movies and he spends time going to the cinema as well as renting videos to watch at home. Although Talal mentioned that he read the local English paper a few times during the week, he read an Arabic paper twice as much. Furthermore, he spoke only to his friends from school on the telephone or by chatting on the computer. Since I know the students that Talal is friends with, I know that they certainly spoke only in Arabic. He only logged conversations with three of his best friends who are his classmates.

Although Talal agrees that more contact with the target language community will be favorable to his acquisition of English, he makes less effort than what I would have hypothesized. He “agrees” or “strongly agrees” to questions on the acculturation survey that would show the assumption that he is adapting and acculturating.

Talal “strongly agrees” that he wants to learn English to make American friends and to understand Americans and the way they live. He even “strongly agrees” that he would like to think and act like Americans. In class, Talal is very curious when we talk about American ways and culture yet despite this curiosity I don’t see him making significant efforts to learn more outside of school. “I don’t like school because guys here just want to be your friend if you have a nice car and know girls. They don’t care about you or what they want to do. I think public school is better” (Talal, personal communication, April 23, 2002).

In response to the first research question I would say that the academy’s social conditions are not favorable to Talal’s acquisition of English. Talal may go to the local movie theater but does not involve himself in any other community activities. He does not belong to any clubs or sports teams. The enclosure variable as described in the model is therefore high. Schools, churches, clubs, crafts, and trades are not shared between the two cultures. Talal does not have an after school job. It is interesting to add that Talal told me he wanted to speak English more than Arabic. Based on the information he has given me, both in the
log, and in our conversations, this is not happening. He contradicts himself by later saying that he only speaks Arabic with his family and friends.

Talal contradicts himself in other ways as well. In question number 23, he says he wants to learn English to enter a university in the United States. In the next question, it seems he does not want to go back to Saudi Arabia, at least during his college years. But then in question 49 and 50, “strongly agrees” that he wants to go home. I think Talal is at a difficult stage in acculturation. He wants to share and learn so much from his surroundings and he feels trapped. Because he is somewhat unsatisfied with his presence at school, Talal may feel homesick and longs for the familiarity of home and his true friends, even if going home is not what he really wants. Though this survey may not be the most accurate instrument for evaluating the degree to which a student accultirates, it at least shows us a side of the students we teach and what issues regarding the answers to these questions may or may not require attention.

I genuinely believe that Talal has a good attitude toward learning English and believes it is useful for him in his future. He has more integrative motivation to learn English than many of his classmates at the academy. Because of his constant involvement with his friends and the social conditions both at school and the closed environment in which he lives, he seems very inhibited from using his full potential. He lives in a strong Arabic-speaking environment with little exposure to opportunities for making American friends.

Implications for Teaching

I believe it is important for teachers to understand the backgrounds and attitudes of all the students they teach. This survey is one way to take a look at their motivation, attitudes, and rationale for studying English and perhaps more importantly, living in the United States. Researchers have suggested a strong connection between these social variables and the successful acquisition of another language. Teachers can understand some of the factors that affect their students.

While working at the academy, I hypothesized that the social environment inhibited English language acquisition. Upon closer examination, this seems to be true. The students are enclosed in an environment that does not motivate them enough to speak English. By looking at data results from this survey, or instruments like it, teachers can evaluate the social conditions in the classroom and school, evaluate the social conditions in the lives of the students outside of school, and make professional adjustments to the curriculum. These adjustments may include special activities for students after school, field trip opportunities, and home visits. Teachers may also do some community investigation that provides students with information on opportunities for involvement in local clubs, groups, or teams.

Additionally, arrangements could be made to bring local professionals into the classroom to speak to students about their lives in certain careers. By bringing the community to them, students may become more open and motivated to learn. This can also be achieved by introducing lessons involving local newspapers. Cartoons, advertisements, and classifieds provide a rich array of
cultural topics and help to informally lead to language acquisition at the same time. This supports Schumann’s theory that language is really one aspect of the culture of a particular ethnic group and that the relationship of that to the learners' language community is extremely important. While research continues in the relationship between socio-psychological distance factors and second language learning, it is important for educators to be aware of the issues affecting students in different social environments.

References