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LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CULTURAL MEDIATION: VYGOTSKIAN THEORY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between culture and language acquisition within the framework of Vygotsky's educational theories, namely language and speech, first- and second-language (L1, L2) acquisition, bi/multilingualism and cultural mediation. Vygotsky's original theories were some of the first to offer unique insight into the connection between culture/environment and language learning. Specifically, theories of bilingualism and language acquisition have been strongly influenced by Vygotsky's understanding of the environment and its significance. The move toward the notion of culture as a fluid, dynamic experience where individuals are viewed as living culturally as opposed to belonging to one, static culture is monumental. This view of living culturally is especially pertinent in terms of the way in which English-as-a-second language (ESL) students, their peers and their teachers will participate in the language learning process. Not only are the technical aspects of language acquisition significant, but also equally important are the challenges experienced by ESL students learning and living culturally in new ways. Ultimately, a greater understanding of how students are affected by both their native culture and new culture will undoubtedly add valuable insight into existing language acquisition theory and practice.

Keywords: Language Acquisition; Cultural Mediation; Vygotskian Theory.

1. Introduction

Language Acquisition and Cultural Mediation: Vygotskian Theory

“He who does not know a single foreign language does not know his own completely.” (Goethe)

Born in 1897, Vygotsky emerged into the world, armed with the unforeseen ability and potential to forever change the manner in which language development and learning in general occurred. Influenced by Marx and Hegel, among other prominent sociologists and philosophers, Vygotsky proved to be a revolutionary force with his unique insights into the role that the environment and culture played in learning and development (Wertsch, 1986; Vygotsky, 1994). Given my interest in researching the challenges faced by Chinese English-as-a-second language (ESL) learners, Vygotsky's theories continued to provide a useful grounding for my future investigation. In a previous paper, I had focused on Vygotsky's theories on the ways in which thought, language and the environment influenced learning. For that reason, these issues that had been previously addressed will not be revisited in detail.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between culture and language acquisition within the framework of Vygotsky's educational theories (Lantolf, 1998). The goal of this examination is to come to a better understanding of cultural mediation and its role in

language acquisition, especially for bilinguals. Where appropriate, I will draw upon my personal learning and teaching experiences as they relate to second language acquisition. Primarily, various aspects of language learning and cultural mediation will be explored within a Vygotskian conceptual framework. Thus, the following topics will be discussed throughout this paper: language and speech, first- and second-language (L1, L2) acquisition, bi/multilingualism, and cultural mediation. First, Vygotsky's theory of language acquisition and specifically, the relationship between first- and second-language learning will be examined.

2. Language Acquisition

For Vygotsky, the necessity and importance of studying language acquisition was paramount to the foundation of his theories. "The acquisition of language can provide a paradigm for the entire problem of the relation between learning and development." (Vygotsky, 1978: 89). According to Vygotsky, without a thorough background understanding of the process of language learning, it would prove futile to attempt a discussion of any form of learning.

The Psychology of Language

Language is not a tool that can be simply defined in the same way for all people and cultures. The same word can hold a completely different meaning, depending on the language in which it is used. In English, the word "nice" normally means "kind," as in personality. However, in the Czech language, Czechs use the English word "sympathetic," to mean "kind." Even infants, who have yet to develop intelligible speech, are thinking in their "baby" language, which may take the form, not of words, but of feelings, forms and images awaiting naming once their speech has developed.

"We always think in some language....thinking readily discloses its social character and demonstrates that our personality is organized according to the same model as is social intercourse" (Vygotsky, 1997a: 171-172). Accordingly, the languages people use may also differ and adapt according to the social situation to which they are presented. For example, in a manual labour environment, the language that employees use will reflect their thinking, that is influenced by the work atmosphere. In contrast, a formal event may require more refined language, which reflects more formal and conservative thoughts. Thus, in addition to communication, language also serves the purpose of forming and defining people's identities (Clabaugh & Rozycki, 2007).

Vygotsky criticized traditional psychological science because it held the view that it was impossible to understand the mind of another person. However, Vygotsky offered what he viewed as a solution to this problem. He concluded that all psychological theories solved this problem by proposing that we get to know others insofar as we know ourselves. Ironically, Vygotsky offered somewhat of a contradiction regarding his notion of empathy.

It would be more correct to say that we know ourselves insofar as we know other people, or, more precisely, that we are conscious of ourselves only to the extent we are other for ourselves, i.e., somehow alien to ourselves. This is why language, this tool of social intercourse, is, in addition, also a tool of inner-communication between man and himself. (Vygostky, 1997a: 172)

This intercommunication would have been understood as inner speech for Vygotsky and egocentric speech for Piaget (Crain, 2000). Language serving an individual's goal of inner thought and self-reflection is just as important as it is a tool for social communication.

The Importance of Speech

For Vygotsky, not only were inner thoughts essential to one's overall development, but also inner speech was just as important. In response to the lack of research on hidden speech, Vygotsky argued:

It seems a naïve idea that speech participates only in the activity of such functions that involve an outwardly pronounced word.... Knowing how to think like a human being without words is, in the final analysis, made possible only by speech. Thus, it is not easy to eliminate the factors of speech: when we push speech out the door, it comes in through the window, and researchers must not ignore the whole multifaceted and qualitative uniqueness of these various forms of the participation of speech in the intellectual operations of the child (Vygostky, 1997c: 258).

Evidently, from Vygotsky's views on hidden/inner speech, he believed that not only did thought influence speech development, but speech also facilitated thought processes (de Guerrero, 2005). Furthermore, Vygotsky placed great emphasis on children's holistic development when he claimed that:

“not only intellectual development of the child, but also the formation of his character, emotions, and personality as a whole depend directly on speech and, consequently, we must disclose in one form or degree or another the connection between being mono- or bilingual and the child's speech development.” (Vygostky, 1997c: 259).

On this account, it is apparent that Vygotsky saw value in speech not only for academic purposes, but for psychological, social and emotional ones as well. As many bilinguals have pointed out, at times they think differently, depending on what language they are speaking. Consequently, one may seem to have a particular personality unique to a specific language and a different one related to their second language.

L1 and L2: Common processes

A controversy has always surrounded the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. Some theorists believe that L1 and L2 share more similarities than differences, while others now believe that L1 and L2 consist of completely separate processes. Susan Ervin-Tripp's article, “Is Second Language Learning Like the First?” (1974) described various research findings. Young Anglophone children, living in Geneva and learning French, showed similar skills and strategies to children learning a first language. This result was attributed to the “natural, nonschool” environment in which the children acquired their second language, French. Therefore, it seems that first- and second- language learning are most similar when L2 is acquired in a full-immersion, natural setting as young children learning a first language. If however, the second language is learned in an artificial environment, like a classroom, then the process is much different. Ervin-Tripp also found that older children learned languages better than young children. Thus, it has been postulated that older children learn faster or may be using different approaches to language acquisition (John-Steiner, 1985).

Similar to Chomsky's universal grammar theory (Crain, 2000), Dulay and Burt believed that people possessed innate universal mechanisms for acquiring both L1 and L2. Dulay and Burt supported the contention that L1 and L2 shared greater similarities than differences. The evidence they provided for their theory was found by studying young Chinese and Spanish learners who were observed to have learned eleven English morphemes in almost the same

order. Today however, it is more commonly believed that while L1 and L2 acquisition may share some similarities, they each involve even greater different processes (John-Steiner, 1985).

L1 and L2: Issues of Difference and Literacy

In contrast to prior linguists, Vygotsky offered a theory that stressed the unification of processes involved in both L1 and L2 acquisition:

Different paths of development, which take place under different conditions, cannot lead to completely identical results. It would be a miracle if the acquisition of a foreign language through school instruction repeated, or reproduced that which was done earlier, under different conditions, for the development of the native language. These differences, no matter how different they are, should not distract us from the fact that both of the processes of the native and foreign language have between them a great deal in common...*they are internally united*(Vygotsky, 1935: 26 cited by John-Steiner, 1985: 349).

Therefore, it was Vygotsky's view that L1 and L2 acquisition shared both similarities and differences. Different lines of development existed in L2 as compared to L1, especially if the learner was literate in his or her L1. The first language was learned unconsciously and unintentionally while L2 was learned through conscious realization and intention. (John-Steiner, 1985).

[I]f the development of the native language begins with free, spontaneous use of speech and is culminated in the conscious realization of linguistic forms and their mastery, then development of a foreign language begins with conscious realization of language and arbitrary command of it and culminates in spontaneous, free speech. But, between those opposing paths of development, there exists a mutual dependency just as between the development of scientific and spontaneous concepts. This kind of conscious and deliberate acquisition of a foreign language obviously depends on a known level of development of the native language (Vygotsky, 1935: 48, cited by John-Steiner, 1985: 350).

However, L2 may be learned consciously in varying degrees, depending on the context of learning, such as formal schooling or immersion. Evidence to support this claim was provided by Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa's large-scale study (1976) of Finnish immigrant students who were enrolled in Swedish schools. Those who moved to Sweden at ten years of age and knew their native language learned Swedish much better than their younger siblings of seven to eight years of age (John-Steiner, 1985). Perhaps, these 7 to 8 year-olds were too old to learn through play and yet too young to have developed literacy/cognitive strategies. Paulston (1978) explained this finding by the fact that older children have better memory storage, more developed conceptual systems, and make more conscious use of cognitive/linguistic strategies that had already been developed while learning their L1 (John-Steiner, 1985).

Interestingly enough, Vygotsky had already recognized a similar finding in 1935. "The child acquiring a foreign language is already in command of a system of meaning in the native language which she/he transfers to the sphere of another language." (Vygotsky, 1935: 48, cited by John-Steiner, 1985: 350-351). Furthermore, it has been shown that native language literacy has played an important role in L2 acquisition, because it is believed that learning to write contributes to a "deeper, more conscious awareness of one's own speech" (John-Steiner, 1985: 351). Vygotsky also strongly supported the development of biliteracy and bilingualism as he believed that the former greatly influenced the latter.

The intellectual power of biliteracy resides in being able to read a text in one language and discuss it in the other. In this sense, biliteracy mediates and amplifies the cultural experiences of learners in ways not possible in one language alone (Moll & Dworin, 1996, cited by Moll, 2000: 266).

The fact that L1 literacy positively influences L2 could have an interesting impact on future research addressing how English literacy could enhance oral fluency among Chinese ESL learners. In fact, in his research on bilingual thinking, Qi discovered that L1 literacy positively correlated with L2 oral proficiency (2003).

It was also found that 7 to 8 year-olds experienced rapid language loss, when starting to learn to read/write, and once social, private and inner speech began. Self-regulating speech positively influences memory, attention and representation schemes. Therefore, L2 acquisition pressure may interfere with the full development of this important inner speech, which would have been useful in L2 learning (John-Steiner, 1985).

In 1980, Swain conducted a large-scale study in Ontario of Anglophones in French immersion programs. Those who entered the program in the seventh grade and were tested in the tenth did much better on a French reading task than those who entered immersion in kindergarten (John-Steiner, 1985). Thus, it appears that older learners are better than younger ones at L2 learning, in school settings at least. Finally, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle's (1978) study of native English speakers in Holland had previously shown the same results. Since the older children were literate, it seems apparent that literacy is one of the factors that may have a positive impact on L2 learning. On the other hand, younger children are exposed to more opportunities for natural and spontaneous communication (John-Steiner, 1985). As a result, it is evident that younger and older children experience both advantages and disadvantages while learning a second language.

Vygotsky acknowledged that literacy contributed to linguistic-cognitive development. It is now believed that there is a link between interpersonal uses of language and the development of cognitive intrapersonal functions of speech. Wertsch and Stone (1985) and Flavell (1977) have also demonstrated support for this claim (John-Steiner, 1985). In addition, Cummins found that the level of cognitive academic aspects of language proficiency (CALP) in the native language was related to mastery of L2 (John-Steiner, 1985). In summary, it appears that L1 and L2 acquisition processes share some commonalities, but also involve different developmental lines that are unique to each. Understanding the developmental differences between L1 and L2 are especially important when it comes to examining the phenomenon of bilingualism.

Bilingualism/Multilingualism

Vygotsky believed issues of bilingualism were important due to the increase in multiculturalism his native country, the Soviet Union, was experiencing at that time. Vygotsky's understanding of the complex nature of multilingualism began with his criticism of Epstein's research. In "The Question of Multilingualism in Childhood" (1935), Vygotsky criticized Epstein's associationism model of bilingualism (John-Steiner, 1985). Epstein based his research on personal observation of polyglots, and their responses from questionnaire data. He proposed that two or more languages functioned without entering direct connection with each other, but one language system could inhibit another. Epstein further argued that polyglotism impeded thinking and was a social wrong; therefore, the least harmful was the passive use of several languages.

Later Ronget, among many other pedagogues-linguists, declared that the study of several languages promoted overall mental development, and a better understanding of one's native language. Ronget, a French researcher-linguist observed the development of his own child for

many years. Ronget's wife, a native German speaker, taught their child German, while Ronget taught him French. On that account, Ronget concluded that their child mastered both languages in parallel and completely independently of each other (Vygotsky, 1997c).

Vygotsky was deeply interested in the relationship between language and thought, as he investigated the internal structures in the speech development of bilinguals. In fact, John-Steiner posed a key question: "How do speakers of two or more languages achieve a separation of them at the production level while uniting them internally at the level of verbal meaning and thought?" (John-Steiner, 1985: 357-358). Accordingly, Vygotsky's focus on the role of verbal thinking transferred to his study of bilinguals. Today, it has been found that balanced bilingualism is best achieved by following certain strategies: leaning on the known, speaking to only one person at a time, maintaining a language-learning diary, listening to the radio, watching TV, reading a lot, and using processing learning strategies. These bilingual strategies illustrate how they have been influenced by Vygotsky's stress on literacy and the importance of functional learning systems (John-Steiner, 1985).

L2 learners rely on their native languages as the internal structure by which they analyzed and ordered their verbal output in L2. This concept mirrored a theory that Vygotsky emphasized.

The assumption that competent bilinguals 'think in English' while they speak in English and 'think in Spanish' when they speak in Spanish is based on a simplified notion of thought. The shift in internal processes referred to in these comments is one of subvocal processes of planning an utterance; it is the increasing ability to plan in one's weaker language that corresponds to the notion of 'thinking' in it' (John-Steiner, 1985: 365)

As a result, at the production level the two languages are separated, with unification at the level of verbal meaning and thought. To illustrate, note-taking in both languages would require simultaneous passive understanding that is then transmitted into either L1 or L2.

The act of interpreting and translating between two languages demonstrates the complex relationship between thought and word, where not unity of thought, but diversity of expression exists. Bilinguals will often switch between L1 and L2 while learning a new task. Interestingly, it has often been concluded that L2 proficiency determined switching, but Qi found that language switching depended more on the *type* of thought required (2003).

As Vygotsky noted:

a speaker often takes several minutes to disclose one thought. In his mind the whole thought is present at once, but in speech it has to be developed successively....Precisely because thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to words leads through meaning (Vygotsky, 1935: 150, cited by John-Steiner, 1985: 367).

Still today, to master two languages at this level is barely understood by linguists and psychologists. Vygotsky was well aware of the value of knowing more than one language. In fact today, it is believed that the process of learning a second language activates a portion of the brain that would otherwise remain untouched. To summarize, the role of language is important in thought, as the role of thought is important in language.

It is evident that thought, speech and language development played an influential role in Vygotsky's theories of language acquisition and learning in general. The relationship between thought and language within the phenomena of bilingualism continues to intrigue contemporary linguists and educators. It is also clear that both environmental and cultural influences would

play a significant role in the development of bilingualism/multilingualism. The next section will focus specifically on Vygotsky's emphasis on both culture and the environment and their impact on the language learning process.

3. Cultural Mediation

While many psychologists and educators had focused primarily on biological and psychological influences, Vygotsky was one of the first researchers to emphasize the impact of the social environment on learning. Consequently, the cultural mediation of educational practice has been inspired by much of Vygotsky's work (Daniels, 2001; Kozulin, 2003; Faruji, 2012).

Since all human actions, including acts of thought, involve the *mediation* of such objects ('tools and signs') they are, on this score alone, social in essence. This is the case whether acts are initiated by single agents or a collective, and whether they are performed individually or with others (Vygotsky, 1935, cited by Moll, 2000: 256).

Cole and Scribner (1974) further suggested that "socio-cultural factors play a role in influencing which of possible alternative processes [visual or verbal representation for example] are evoked in a given situation and what role they play in total performance" (Cole & Scribner 1974: 193). Most importantly, many educators' definition of culture has evolved from being a static to a dynamic one.

We are moving toward a more dynamic, processual notion: that cultural life consists of multiple voices, of unity as well as discord, including an imperfect sharing of knowledge; of intergenerational misunderstanding as well as common understandings; of developing both adaptive and maladaptive practices while discarding others – in short, of human actions that are always creative in the face of changing circumstances. That is, *we seek culture in human practices*, situated in people's involvement with (and creation of) the multiple contexts that constitute their social worlds. As Ingold (1994) has put it, it might be more realistic to say 'that people *live culturally* rather than they *live in cultures*' (Moll, 2000: 257-258).

Clearly, Ingold had expanded upon Vygotsky's understanding of culture, which was appropriate for his time period. Nonetheless, it is now necessary to move beyond the notion of people belonging to a fixed culture and toward their being influenced culturally in different ways, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. For example, a sample of ten Chinese ESL students may consist of various cultural backgrounds, due to the sheer size of China, and thus the variance of influences. Granted, Chinese ESL students will share some cultural commonalities, such as Confucius-based educational and familial belief systems. However, factors such as gender, social class, urban/rural lifestyle, economic status and contact with Western culture will have an impact on how Chinese students live culturally.

Learning Culturally

Schools, which are most often the sites of ESL learning, and "no matter how natural they may seem [to us], are always artificial settings in the sense that they are, as Scribner (1990a) put it, culturally constructed, historical in origin, and social in content" (Moll, 2000: 258). For that reason, teachers could develop theories and methods to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between ESL students' cultural home environment and their *new* school culture. As an adaptation of Vygotskian theory: "It seeks to understand culture as practice and to harness its resources to transform social (educational) reality" (Moll, 2000: 258). This cultural mediation would undoubtedly create a more pleasant and effective language learning environment for both students and teachers. Culturally negotiating between the home/native and school/foreign environments of ESL students would undoubtedly decrease culture shock severity.

Throughout his work, Vygotsky (1994) stressed the role of the social environment in second language learning. To illustrate, he had criticized a psychometric interpretation of low IQ scores of Chinese-American children in San Francisco (the test was in English). Vygotsky pointed out that “concrete conditions in which the children’s development took place” had been ignored. He argued that “the entire problem of bilingualism should be viewed dynamically, not statistically” (Vygotsky, 1935: 51). Vygotsky’s theory supports the necessity of considering the ESL student’s social, cultural and educational environment, in terms of where the student has been, where the student is, and where he or she is going in terms of language learning and overall development.

Unarguably, the role of comprehensible input is vital, as the learner must be able to link classroom learning to personally meaningful and rewarding experiences both in and outside the classroom environment. Support for comprehensible input arose from a study Bialystok (1978) where high-school students in L2 classroom situations found that outside activities, such as movies, reading and talking to native speakers (functional practicing) positively influenced their learning of L2 (John-Steiner, 1985). From my ESL teaching experiences, both overseas and in Canada, the students who achieved English proficiency the most efficiently had participated in activities similar to those noted in the Bialystok study. Thus, motivation to contact L2 in natural environments is sometimes more important than language aptitude. Accordingly, active learners have often been found to outperform passive learners.

The Zone of Proximal Development

It is important in both L1 and L2 acquisition to control not only the amount, but also the complexity of language input to which students are exposed. The amount and level of language input is important, for too much would be too challenging and thus, frustrates the learner, resulting in poor performance. In contrast, too little language at a low level would not be stimulating enough, resulting in stagnated development. Consequently, it is necessary to have the optimal amount of language input and degree of difficulty. This is where Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) makes sound theoretical and practical sense. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as “*the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

In accordance with Vygotsky’s ZPD, “we are examining a phenomenon whose explanation cannot be grounded solely in psychological or even microsociological processes. To paraphrase Cole (1985), “we are examining a case where socio-cultural forces and cognition create each other.” (Wertsch, 1991: 84). Vygotsky further stated, “What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1962: 104). In recent decades, Krashen’s *I + 1* theory (Wesche, 1994) clearly drew from and expanded upon Vygotsky’s ZPD theory. Krashen, was most likely influenced by Vygotsky’s emphasis on the role of the environment in the learning process. In fact, Krashen’s *I + 1* theory of scaffolding bears remarkable similarities to Vygotsky’s concept of the ZPD. Clearly, Vygotsky’s emphasis on culturally-influenced learning continues to influence contemporary educators in the language acquisition field.

Learning first-hand about the lived experiences of ESL students’ families, not through imposition, teachers would know:

“how humans organize life for new generations to rediscover and appropriate mediating artifacts – how, through the process of enculturation, older persons arrange for younger ones to acquire the accumulated artifacts of the group or culture. Here the notion of the *zone of proximal development* comes to mind, understood not only in terms of more

capable others assisting less capable ones but, more broadly, in terms of how human beings use social processes and cultural resources of all kinds in helping children to construct their futures.” (Scribner, 1990a: 92).

Thus, “the most important cultural artifact created by children is themselves, the formation of their personalities” (Moll, 2000: 262). This concept was inspired by a number of sources: Gonzalez Rey (1995), Vygotsky’s focus on inner speech or knowing oneself, and Bozhovich (1976), Vygotsky’s student. It is especially imperative that teachers are familiar with cultural mediation between generations in the case of Chinese students. From my experience, I would suggest that the generational gap for the Chinese is much wider than for Westerners. Riding the subway in China, I would see sitting side by side, an elderly Chinese woman holding a bucket of live fish and a Chinese teenager wearing a Gap t-shirt and listening to music from a Discman.

Vygotsky further stressed both psychological and social impacts on children’s learning and development. Regarding this dynamic learning process, Vygotsky wrote,

an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between people (interpsychological)*, and then *inside the child (intrapsychological)*. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978: 57).

Certainly, Vygotsky made it clear that learning not only occurs inside people’s minds, but begins with social interaction, which in turn, forms a complex, interactive, psychological and cultural process. Finally, Vygotsky concluded his discussion of higher mental functions, by examining the significance of cultural tools and their meaning in social interaction and learning.

The internalization of cultural forms of behavior involves the reconstruction of psychological activity on the basis of sign operations....The internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology (Vygotsky 1978: 57).

Despite similarities between animals and humans, animal research has contributed to people’s understanding of human beings, Vygotsky was adamant about the uniqueness of the human psyche. Remarkably, Vygotsky’s theories had a significant impact on many areas of research: language learning, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics and learning in general.

Conclusion

To summarize, despite Vygotsky’s brief life and thus opportunity to research, his contributions to the fields of psychology, linguistics and education have proven both invaluable and timeless. Even for present day educational theorists, this leading Russian psychologist continues to have a tremendous impact and influence on current language acquisition practice. Vygotsky was before his time, for even though other researchers had influenced the culmination of his ideas, his original theories were some of the first to offer unique insight into the connection between culture/environment and language learning. Vygotsky’s theories of bilingualism and language acquisition have been strongly influenced by his understanding of the environment and its significance.

In closure, the move toward the notion of culture as a fluid, dynamic experience where individuals are viewed as living culturally as opposed to belonging to one, static culture is

monumental. This view of living culturally is especially pertinent in terms of the way in which ESL students, their peers and their teachers will participate in the language learning process. Not only are the technical aspects of language acquisition significant, but also equally important are the challenges experienced by ESL students learning and living culturally in new ways. Ultimately, a greater understanding of how Chinese students are affected by both their native culture and new culture will undoubtedly add valuable insight into existing language acquisition theory and practice.



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