

Impact of Overseas Immersion Homestay Experience on Linguistic Confidence and Intercultural Communication Strategies

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Abstract

This paper attempts to use Clements' linguistic confidence theory (Clement, 1980) to explore the relationship between students' intercultural communication strategies, and their linguistic confidence in their second language (L2) both before and during immersion programmes, particularly in the context of the homestay experience. Questionnaire and student interviews were conducted before and after the immersion programmes to investigate levels of anxiety and linguistic confidence which in turn affected the intercultural communication strategies employed. With the results found in this study, this paper also attempts to modify and elaborate Clement's (1980) linguistic confidence theory. Results indicated increased L2 linguistic confidence and lower anxiety levels after students interacted with their host families. Intercultural communication strategies employed at the pre-immersion stage and during immersion differed. The intercultural communication strategies employed in the pre-immersion stage were decidedly passive which directly affected students' linguistic confidence, but students became less anxious as they interacted directly with host families which in turn led to stronger linguistic confidence.

Keywords: *linguistic confidence theory, intercultural communication strategies, immersion, homestay*

Introduction

Within immersion programmes, the homestay experience provides second-language (L2) learners with authentic situations for the development of both linguistic and intercultural communicative competence. As Noel, Pon and Clément (1996:49) say, "Self confidence with using English as a second language was related to linguistic acculturation and may also be related to cultural acculturation in certain context." Past studies believed that students studying and living abroad with a host family would have a large amount of language contact which in turn would lead to language proficiency development (Brecht, Davison, & Ginsberg, 1993; Chaseling, 2001; Coleman, 1997; Freed, So & Lazar, 2003; Isabelli, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004) because the homestay experience provides an immediate and non-threatening environment that exposes students to authentic linguistic situations to use and learn the new language (Carlson, Burn, Useem & Yachimowicz, 1990; Chaseling, 2001; Koestler, 1986; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990). It also allows for tertiary socialisation into the target community, as stated by Alfred & Byram (2002). In addition, families indicated that they helped students in the home in three major ways: Linguistically, culturally and psychologically (Knight & Schimidt-Rinehart, 2002).

However, past studies have not investigated whether L2 linguistic confidence is related to intercultural competence nor intercultural communication development. This matter was first raised by Noel, Pon and Clément (1996). Even though some attempts have been made to link language and acculturation (Berry, 1997; Clément, 1986; Lanca, Aksnis, Roesse & Gardner, 1994; Young & Gardner, 1990), the issue of the complex relations among language, acculturation, adaption and language skills development has received scant attention. The most relevant study was conducted by Noels and Clément (1996; see also Noels, Pon & Clément, 1996) when they investigated whether L2 linguistic confidence mediated the effects of contact on identity and cultural adjustment. They found that L2 confidence has three facets of advantage: 1) increased communicative competence in the L2; 2) increased identification with the L2 group; and 3) increased psychological adaptation (Noels & Clément, 1996; Noels, Pon & Clément, 1996). However, no studies have examined how the quality and quantity of interaction with a target group member of another speech community has affected the adoption of intercultural communication strategies, nor have any evaluated how L2 linguistic confidence affects the development of the intercultural communication process. Therefore this paper will investigate how L2 linguistic confidence affects the development of intercultural communication strategies.

Theoretical framework

Most second language acquisition models focus on either linguistic or psycholinguistic aspects of language acquisition (e.g. monitor theory (1982); interaction theory (Long, 1985) and competition model (MacWhinney, Bates & Kliegl, 1984). Since this study aims to investigate the social and cultural aspect of second language acquisition, this study adopts Clément's social context model of second language acquisition (Clément, 1986; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985). This motivation model emphasises the importance of L2 confidence in bringing out the desire for future communication. Linguistic self-confidence, as proposed by Clément (1980), is a socially defined construct. Clément describes linguistic self-confidence as a powerful mediating process in a multicultural setting that affects a person's motivation to use the language of another speech community. In a multiethnic context, a positive attitude on the part of the L2 learners would direct them to seek contact with the target L2 community members. If the quality and quantity of interaction with the L2 community are relatively frequent and pleasant, self-confidence (operationally defined in terms of low anxiety and high self-perceptions of L2) and competence in using the L2 would develop (Noels & Clément, 1996; Noels, Pon & Clément, 1996). This conversely means that anxiety may encourage students to avoid native speakers (Allen & Herron, 2003) and therefore also negatively affect the quality of potential future communication (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b).

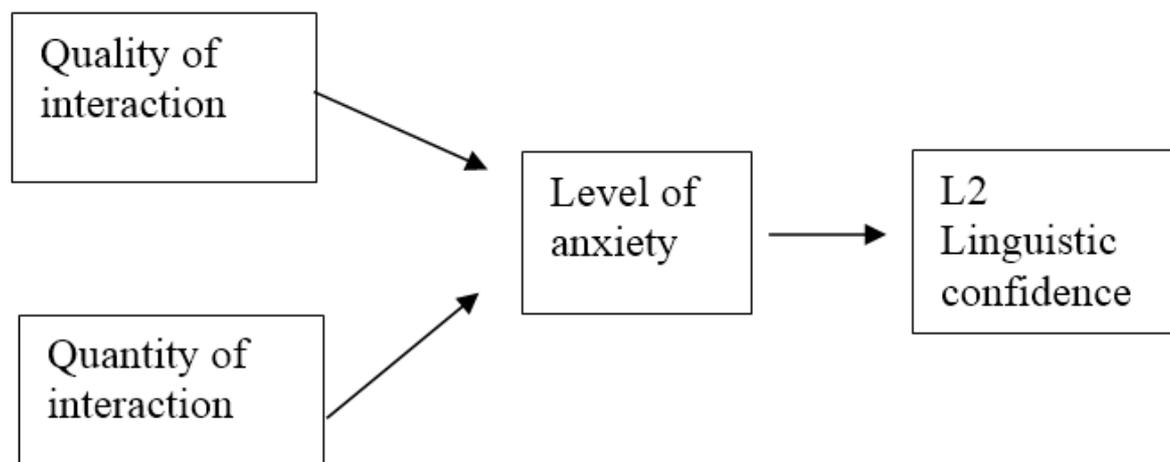


Figure 1: Clément model of L2 linguistic confidence

Purpose of study and research questions

With the purpose of investigating intercultural communication strategies employed by students of difference linguistic confidence, the following research questions and hypotheses were set for testing:

- RQ1: How does L2 linguistic confidence impact the intercultural communication strategies employed before immersion?
- Hypothesis 1: Students who are linguistically less confident will employ particular intercultural communication strategies.
- RQ2: How does L2 linguistic confidence impact the intercultural communication strategies employed and language skills enhancement during immersion?
- Hypothesis 2: After immersion, students will become more linguistically confident.
- Hypothesis 3: Students who are linguistically confident will employ different intercultural strategies from those before immersion.

Methodology

Design of research methods

In educational research, there are numerous ways to conduct reliable studies. These include naturalistic and ethnographic research, historical research, longitudinal research, correlational research, action research, *ex post facto* research, quasi-experiments and single-case research. Data is collected using questionnaires, interviews, accounts, role-playing, observation, tests and personal constructs. This study will adopt mixed method to investigate how linguistic confidence affects intercultural communication strategies. The use of mixed methods may answer the set research questions from several perspectives hence lead to greater validity.

In view of time constraints and the need for a broad-based investigation, it is believed that a questionnaire will collect sufficiently-reliable data to capture students' linguistic confidence and intercultural communication strategies before departure and upon returning home, as it reduces bias and is less intrusive. A questionnaire based on a five-point rating scale was set for a group of English major university students (N=93) to determine their L2 linguistic confidence and the anticipated intercultural communication strategies when communicating with host families before immersion. The questionnaire was designed based on the interview data collected from the previous cohort of students who had been to immersion. The first part of the questionnaire aimed to examine participants' linguistic confidence and their perception of language skills competency. The second part aimed to investigate the intercultural communication strategies participants would employ during immersion. After the questionnaire was piloted, the students completed the same questionnaire upon returning from their host countries in order to ascertain changes in linguistic confidence and intercultural communication strategies. Pre-departure and post-return interviews were also conducted with 10 randomly chosen respondents to elicit further details on the quantitative data collected, as well as to fill any gaps in understanding.

Participants

The sample in this study was comprised of 93 Hong Kong and Mainland China students majoring in English education; 12 weeks of English immersion was required by English Education major programmes. Students were allowed to state a preferred destination from among four countries: the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia or Canada.

Procedures

A pilot study was carried out before the final questionnaire was set. Students completed the questionnaire and were invited to comment on its language and content. Appropriate changes were made after several items were determined to be vague and other questions found to be statistically unreliable. A reliability test on the questionnaire items was run to determine their internal consistency. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach alphas) was high, with an alpha value of 0.857, meaning the internal consistency of the questionnaire was high.

Following the pilot study, all participants were invited to answer the questionnaire, to be completed in the lecture hall, where the supervising researcher read the questionnaire's instructions aloud. Students were assured that the information they provided would only serve the purpose of this study. Respondents were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that all data collected would remain confidential. Informed consent forms were also distributed. Thirty minutes were allocated to complete the questionnaire, with additional time given upon request.

The second part of the study required students to be interviewed. As Kvale (1996:11) indicated, "The use of the interview in research marks a move away from seeing human subjects as simply manipulatable with data as somehow external to individuals, and towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversation (cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001: 248). Cohen et al (2001:265) also stated, "interviews enable participants... to discuss their interpretations of the world... and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view." Interviews with the respondents were conducted in a small meeting room, where the researcher first thanked participants for joining the study, then stated the purpose and manner of the interviews. Respondents were also reminded that the interview would be tape-recorded, and that their responses would remain confidential.

Statistical analysis and procedures

In order to distinguish participants who were linguistically (and less) confident and examine their intercultural communication strategies, all questionnaires were anonymously coded for further data analysis. To address research questions, data analysis included several procedures: First was descriptive data analysis which aimed to outline participants' linguistic confidence and their inclination to the immersion programme. Second was a *Principle Components Analysis* of the questionnaire items set in the questionnaire which aimed to screen out any factors with loadings lower than 0.4 within their own factors (Stevens, 1996), and thus to perform data reduction. Second, to isolate which intercultural communication strategies were significant to the participants' intercultural communication, *Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)* was employed, mainly due to its ability to elicit clusters of intercultural communication strategies as well as spot inter-relationships within a set of variables.

To observe to what degree the phenomenon is present in the population, the effect-size calculation is used. The effect size is used to express the magnitude of a difference in means in standard deviation units. Standardized effect sizes are obtained by removing the effect of the metric, allowing for comparison of results across studies when different metrics are used to measure dependent variables (Thompson, 2006). The Pearson r value is 0.874 which shows there is a positive relationship between variables.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in an attempt to better understand student responses regarding how the quality and quantity of interaction affected their linguistic confidence and hence intercultural communication strategies employed and language skills development. Qualitative data was obtained in English, as students were all fluent. All data was then transcribed for coding.

Results

RQ1: How does L2 linguistic confidence impact student intercultural communication strategies before immersion?

Hypothesis 1: Students who are linguistically less confident will employ particular intercultural communication strategies.

In the homestay pre-immersion stage, the quantity and quality of interaction with host families were non-existent. The only information given was the host family's name, address, occupation(s), number of children, and whether they had pets. Anticipating interaction with this limited knowledge, about 35% of students did not look forward to the homestay experience, and nearly 30% had mixed feeling about it (see Table 1).

Table 1: Attitudes toward homestay experience (F4)

<i>Q: Do you look forward to your homestay experience?</i>	
Responses	Percentage (%)
No, not at all	4.2
A little	2.1
Mixed feelings	29.2
Somewhat	35.4
Yes, very much	29.2

Perceived language proficiency influences communication and it is the perception of one's own competence that will determine the choice of whether to communicate (Clément, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003). Before the immersion, less than 40% of the students believed that they were confident or very confident in using English to speak with their homestay family (see Table 2).

Table 2: Confidence in talking to homestay family (C6)

<i>Q: Confidence in ability to use English with host family</i>	
Responses	Percentage (%)
Not at all confident	0.0
A little confident	14.6
Somewhat confident	45.8
Confident	33.3
Very confident	6.3

After identified the group of participants who were linguistically less confident (n=56), further statistical analysis procedures were conducted. The following table shows that loadings of each intercultural communication strategy which are greater than 0.3. Principal components analysis aims to discard strategies that have loadings lower than 0.4. According to the analysis, seven intercultural communication strategies were generated: self-study, passivity, minimalism, physical absence, attitude, integration and proactivity. According to the data analysis, the seven intercultural communication strategies accounted for 82.12% of the total variance explained. Among them, avoidance was the intercultural communication strategy that mostly taken by the students, as predicted by the students before immersion, followed by avoidance, passivity, observation, open-mindedness, integration and proactivity.

Table 3: *Intercultural communication strategies before immersion (n=56)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Self study							
Do more reading	.748						
Observe cultural differences	.692						
Look up dictionary	.658						
Stay in own room	.522						
Learn local culture through TV	.436						
Observe how they speak	.422						
Passivity							
Stay quiet during conversation		.814					
Nod heads during conversation		.766					
Will not initiate new topics		.652					
Smile politely		.613					
Only speak up when able to		.486					
Only answer when asked		.424					
Answer briefly		.402					
Minimalism							
Silence as response			.834				
Do nothing			.766				
Just say "I don't know"			.588				
Physical absence							
Hang out with own friends				.684			
Write emails to host family				.656			
Spend more time outside				.627			
Avoid seeing host family				.549			
Attitude							
Be ready to change my habits					.722		
Be ready to accept differences					.692		
Be positive					.581		
Integration							

Comply to their daily routines								.677
Mingle with all host family								.586
Proactivity								
Suggest weekend outings with host family								.955
Eigenvalue	6.06	5.34	4.22	3.56	3.12	2.44	1.82	
% of variance explained	14.99	13.97	13.74	11.68	10.38	9.38	7.98	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

Rotation covered in 24 iterations.

After data reduction, 65.27% of the total variance was accounted for by 3 main intercultural communication strategies: rejection, avoidance, and passivity.

Table 4: Intercultural communication strategies by linguistically less confident group before immersion (n=56)

	Avoidance	Passivity	Rejection
Do more reading	.746		
Hang out with own friends	.728		
Look up dictionary	.656		
Stay in own room	.468		
Write emails to host family	.382		
Stay quiet during conversation		.722	
Nodding heads during conversation		.680	
Will not initiate new topics		.644	
Smile politely		.548	
Only speak up when being able to		.426	
Silence as response			.622
Do nothing			.484
Eigenvalue	5.50	3.58	2.05
% of the variance explained	28.21	20.68	16.20

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

Rotation covered in 4 iterations.

Qualitative data also supported quantitative data. Interviews revealed why speaking with homestay hosts was particularly concerning to students. Since students had no interaction with the host families before the immersion, they could not anticipate the linguistic environment based simply on the background information about the host family. That is, they attributed their lack of linguistic confidence in L2 to expectations of different accents (Excerpt 1), the pace of

the speech (Excerpt 2), limited conversation topics (Excerpt 3), and difficulties in expressing themselves (Excerpts 4). Their anticipated problems were in fact commonly found in other studies. Naysmith & Corcoran (2001) and Gumperz, Jupp & Roberts (1979) believed that perceived dissimilarity of speech conventions and mismatching of interpretations can contribute to cross-cultural misunderstandings.

My host family, because she is a 65 year old lady, I am afraid that she will have a very different accent. (Accent) Excerpt 1

Or maybe they are speaking too fast. (Speech speed) Excerpt 2

I am afraid that I can't handle or keep a good conversation with the host family because it is really different to express ourselves in English than in Chinese... when we are living with the host family the first thing is we are not familiar with the vocabulary of daily use. (Difficulties in using L2 in expressing oneself) Excerpt 3

Most of the participants in the pre-departure interviews repeated that their biggest concern was the different living styles between themselves and their host families. Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight (2004) found that food, telephones, opposite sex issues, messy rooms and door-slamming were the most common adjustment problems for immersion students. Anxiety over different living styles and the language barrier had brought on language contact avoidance—an intercultural communication strategy in the pre-immersion stage.

Students were also worried that the different living styles might bring conflicts between themselves and their host families. To deal with cultural differences, there were three implied intercultural communication strategies they would employ: 1) rejection—directly ask the host family for permission to do things that they are usually allowed to do in Hong Kong, which may possibly cause cultural conflicts (Excerpts 4, 5); 2) avoidance—avoid asking for permission and comply with the house regulations of the host families (Excerpts 6); 3) passivity—many students about to go on immersion could be considered passive players in intercultural communication, preferred to behave reactively in accordance to the given contextual cultural environment (Excerpts 7, 8).

Well, at home I can do lots of things. I can watch TV, play on my computer, or even talk with my parents. But in England... using the computers, I'll have to ask them for permission...for television, I'll have to ask them again too. So lots of things are limited. Excerpt 4

Or maybe, I sleep very late...about 1 or 2 am at midnight, but for the Australians – they sleep very early. We may have some conflict. Excerpt 5

In HK I always play computer games and sing karaoke. I am afraid I can't do that in Australia. Excerpt 6

I am afraid that I don't know whether my host family is talkative or not...whether she wants to talk to me. Excerpt 7

A family has their own rules, and we need to fit in with their rules. Excerpt 8

In summary, due to limited language contact or interaction before immersion, students were anxious and did not have sufficient L2 linguistic confidence—hence their intercultural communication strategies could be categorised as “rejection”, “avoidance” and “passivity” (see Figure 2). Based on the data found, hypothesis 1 is therefore well-supported.

Confident	33.3	60.4
Very confident	6.3	35.4

Table 6: Attitudinal change towards homestay experience (F4)

<i>Q: Did you enjoy your homestay experience?</i>		
	Pre-immersion expectation	Post-immersion
No, not at all	4.2	0.0
A little	2.1	3.2
Mixed feelings	29.2	12.9
Somewhat	35.4	22.6
Yes, a lot	29.2	61.3

Since participants were requested to fill in the same questionnaire upon their returning from immersion, the researcher was able to analyse what intercultural communication strategies they employed during immersion. With the linguistically confident group (n=89), same statistical analysis procedures as RQ1 were conducted. The following table shows that loadings of each intercultural communication strategy which are greater than 0.3. Principal components analysis aims to discard strategies that have loadings lower than 0.4. According to the analysis, six intercultural communication strategies employed during immersion were: initiation, observation, acceptance, integration, self-study, perseverance and attitude. According to the data analysis, the six intercultural communication strategies accounted for 79.98% of the total variance explained.

Table 3: Intercultural communication strategies during immersion (n=89)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Initiation						
Suggest weekend outings with host family	.762					
Exchange cultures	.669					
Talk about own cultures to exchange views	.638					
Teach them Chinese	.422					
Cook Chinese dinner for hosts	.402					
Observation						
Observe cultural differences		.832				
Observe how they speak		.749				
Learn local culture through TV		.724				
Compare my English with their English		.685				
Learn slangs		.439				
Observe their table manners		.414				

Acceptance						
Be ready to accept differences						.866
Be ready to change my habits						.742
Be positive						.688
Integration						
Comply to their daily routines						.782
Mingle with all host family						.649
Share house responsibility						.592
Integrate with their lives						.446
Self-study						
Look up dictionary						.732
Read more local magazines						.592
Look up words for dictionary						
Study new words learnt every day						.521
Perseverance						
Keep asking questions						.629
Bring smart phone along to look up words						.436
Attitude						
Hardworking						.598
Eigenvalue	6.89	6.64	5.84	4.82	3.91	2.34
% of variance explained	19.88	16.82	14.56	12.28	9.28	7.16

*Extraction Method Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
Rotation covered in 22 iterations.*

After data reduction, 72.48% of the total variance was accounted for by 4 main intercultural communication strategies: proactivity, open-mindedness, integration and observation.

Table 4: Intercultural communication strategies during immersion (n=89)

	Proactivity	Open-mindedness	Integration	Observation
Keep asking question if not understand	.788			
Take initiative to talk to hosts	.695			
Suggest weekend outings with host family	.643			

Talk about own cultures to exchange views	.487			
Cook Chinese dinner for hosts	.426			
Be ready to change habits		.768		
Be ready to accept differences		.658		
Be positive		.584		
Believe all things are possible		.531		
Mingle with host family more			.686	
Comply to host family routine			.622	
Do what they do instead of own			.463	
Observe how they talk				.696
Observe cultural differences through TV				.586
Eigenvalue	5.98	4.86	3.45	3.22
% of the variance explained	22.98	20.96	16.08	12.46

*Extraction Method Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.
Rotation covered in 6 iterations.*

When interviewed, most students agreed that having more interaction with host families could enhance their linguistic confidence, and thus emboldened, they would be more willing to negotiate cultural and linguistic differences with the target language group members. Summarising student interview responses, several different intercultural communication strategies surfaced, in a different speech community which echoed the statistical results found in the previous section, i.e., “observation”, “open-mindedness”, “proactive behaviour” and “integration”.

Observation

Students observed cultural differences enabling them to behave in a culturally correct manner (Excerpt 10) resulting in better social and cultural adjustment. Observing culturally-different table manners is one example.

I think a lot about different table manners when you have different types of food. Excerpt 10

Open-mindedness

Students, open-minded and positive about their different cultures and social differences, chose not to live in the style of their home country (e.g., frequent use of the Internet) but rather to be open-minded and accept the social difference—and more importantly, choosing to see the cultural difference from a constructive and positive point of view.

I think my family did not provide computers or internet service. It was a good opportunity for me to speak more and read more books... I think it was really good that I stayed away from the Internet. Excerpt 11

I think I learn a lot about the country, because I just shared the culture between the Chinese and Italian with my host family. We shared the concept of family and siblings and friends and lovers and affairs in our culture. And I find the Italian culture is quite similar to Chinese culture. Excerpt 12

Proactivity

Showing initiative indicates a motivation to adjust and integrate. Further proactive behaviour was also evidenced by voluntary questioning of hosts and taking initiative to introduce Chinese cultures to hosts—all indicative of positive integration.

I will ask my homestay family what was the meaning of those words. If I still do not understand, she may show me the real objects. Excerpt 13

I will take the initiative to talk about Chinese cultures to my host family and I even cooked Chinese dinner for them once! Excerpt 14

Integration

The following excerpts also show that students were eager to integrate with the local community by taking part in a variety of social gatherings.

I enjoyed spending my time with my host family. They treat me as one of the family. I enjoyed chatting with them and we enjoyed watching films together. And also they took me out on different sort of activities together. Excerpt 15

My host mum... has her birthday and... she took me to the Chinese restaurant and we had a good time and I give her a present. Excerpt 16

They're very nice and always took us to different place, to bowling... to beach... something like that. Excerpt 17

Prior to immersion, students were not very confident about interacting with their host families due to lack of experience, hence they initially tended to use the intercultural communication strategies of rejection, avoidance and passivity. However, after sufficient positive interaction with the host families, students were less anxious and thus became confident in communicating with the host families. “Observation”, “open-mindedness”, “proactive behaviour” and “integration” were the intercultural communication strategies identified through student interviews. To systematically summarise the results, a figure was generated which embraces the essence of Clément’s theoretical framework and intercultural communication development. With the results found in this section, hypotheses set for RQ2 were well supported. The following figure shows the relationship between linguistic confidence and intercultural communication strategies.

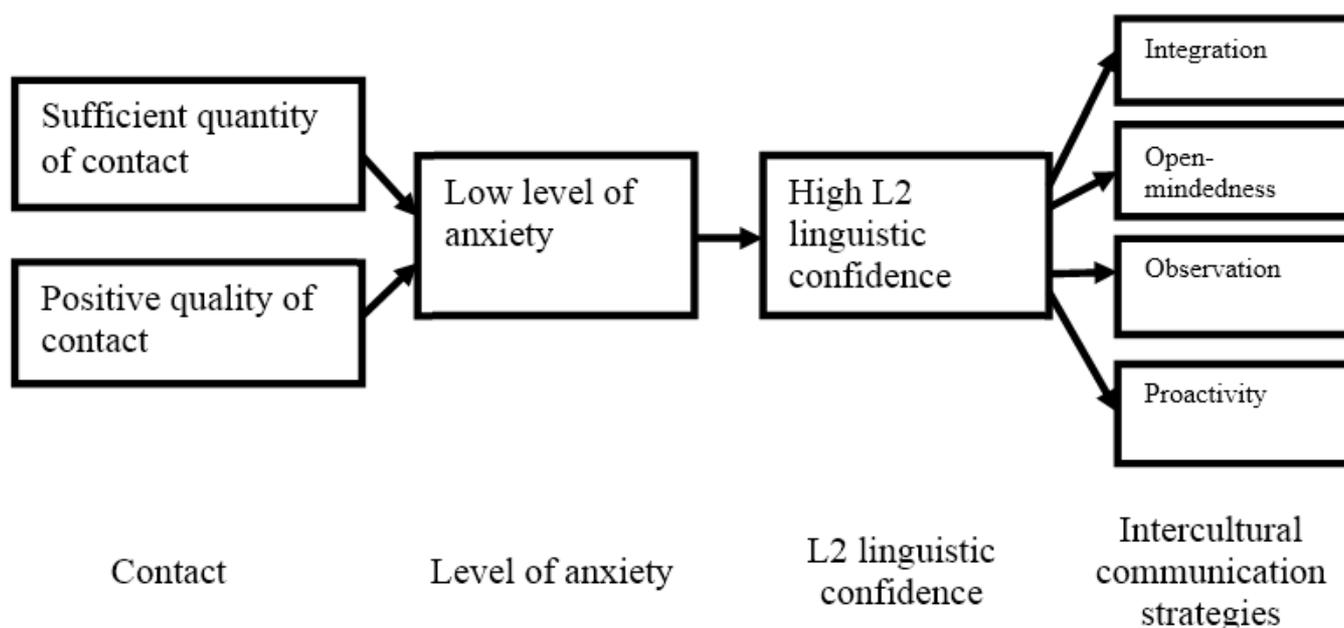


Figure 3: During/Post immersion L2 linguistic confidence and intercultural communication process

Discussion

Before immersion, students were anxious about the homestay experience due to their lack of quality and quantity of interaction with the host families in this study. Without such interaction, students had mixed feelings towards the homestay experience because of anticipated uncertainties. Oberg (1960, cited in Kim, 1988:23) defines culture shock in the following way: “the anxiety which results from losing all family signs and symbols of social intercourse.” Clément’s social context model of second language acquisition emphasises the importance of contact and linguistic L2 confidence in L2 acquisition. If the quantity and quality of interaction between the L2 learners and the target L2 community is relatively frequent and pleasant, self-confidence in using the L2—operationally defined in terms of low anxiety and high self-perceptions of L2 competence—would develop (Clément, 1986; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985). Byram also (1997: 34) identifies “attitude, knowledge and skill” as important factors in the development of intercultural communicative competence. In the pre-immersion stage, students relied upon “avoidance”, “rejection” and “passivity” as their intercultural communication strategies; therefore little intercultural communication could be developed or facilitated.

Throughout the pre-immersion stage, students indicated that they would not try to negotiate with their host families over their differing living styles; i.e., students would rather avoid their favourite activities than ask for permission to do them—proof of “avoidance”, “rejection” and “passivity” intercultural communication strategies. Interestingly, these types of intercultural communication strategies are in fact deeply rooted in Chinese culture—that is, when a guest, one should follow the culture and rules of the host country (入鄉隨俗). It is even a Chinese strategy noted in the world’s oldest military book, “The Art of War” (孫子兵法) by Sun-zi—being passive overrides being active (以靜制動). Chinese students are generally passive players in cultural negotiation and would rather comply with the host’s rules than express their own preferences. However, it is not possible to conclude whether these intercultural communication strategies were adequately employed, or whether intercultural communicative competence could be developed, because in the pre-immersion stage there has yet to be any face-to-face language contact or interaction.

Upon commencement of the immersion programmes came the chance to interact with host families, and anticipated uncertainties of many students were soon addressed and minimised. The quantity and quality of interaction indeed helped to increase their linguistic self-confidence. Again, it showed that Clément’s model explained how quantity and quality of interaction enhanced student linguistic self-confidence. During immersion, students were found to be linguistically confident, employing the intercultural communication strategies of “observation”, “open-mindedness”, “proactivity” and “integration” in a community of different speech and culture. The positive interview responses proved the intercultural communicative competency had improved, as Taylor (1994: 154) defines intercultural competency as an “adaptive capacity, based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture.”

The results found in the present study bore witness to the proposed models of Bennett (1986) and Kohls (1996). Bennett’s (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) states denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration are identified as stages of awareness of cultural difference, which is relevant to the explanation of the intercultural communicative process. As for Kohls (1996), he posits a classic culture-shock cycle of four stages: initial euphoria; irritability and hostility; gradual adjustment; and adaptation and biculturalism. However, both Bennett’s and Kohl’s models do not capture the fluidity of how Chinese culture itself impacts intercultural adjustment. Among the strategies found, “avoidance”, “passivity”, “observation”, “tolerance” and “proactive behaviour” as Chinese characteristics have never been studied by previous research. An official Chinese government website (Index-China, 2009) states, “Chinese in general are reserved and humble. They believe in harmony and never look for confrontation.” This is an accurate description of Chinese people generally, confirming that “avoidance”, “passivity”, “observation”, and “proactivity” should not be surprising results of the present study.

Also evident in the study was the common nature of the intercultural communication strategies employed. “Avoidance” and “passivity” were used in the pre-immersion stage, and “observation” and “proactivity” during immersion; these are strategies that reflect the traditionally reserved Chinese nature, showing how these deeply-rooted Chinese characteristics impacted student ideology toward cultural differences and directed their external behaviours.

Apart from the impact of Chinese ideology on intercultural communication, host families also played a significant role. As Berry (1997) mentions, acculturative outcomes are subject to the influence of a number of social and collective factors. Immersion increases language contact and cultural contact in many ways, through the influence of cultural immersion via TV, films, newspapers, music and even overhearing native conversation. Mealtime was also found to be a significant opportunity for interaction. These results echoed past studies like Coleman, 1997; Regan, 2003; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; and Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004. There is great opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of what family life is like in the target culture and to use the language in an informal setting (Paige, Kappler, Chi and Lassegard, 2002: 77). Immersion students benefit from a host family’s welcoming attitude and caring approach, while both sides should exhibit an open attitude towards the different living and communication styles of the other culture. These approaches will help ensure successful acculturation, adaptation, and effective language learning during each student’s immersion.

Conclusion

Homestay experience in immersion programmes provides learners with authentic situations and an environment conducive to the development of both linguistic and communicative competence. The present study revealed that student L2 linguistic confidence was improved and language anxiety was reduced. Due to lack of contact with the host family in the pre-immersion stage, students adopted rather reserved intercultural communication strategies. However, intercultural communication strategies were employed differently after having face-to-face authentic language and social interaction with the host families. The use of positive intercultural communication strategies will serve to minimise the level of anxiety and enhance linguistic self-confidence. With the findings of this study, future studies may focus on whether pre-immersion communications between students and host families can facilitate or reduce linguistic anxiety. Besides, a longitudinal study may also be conducted to examine whether Chinese students' intercultural strategies employed would be adjusted over time with the increasing understanding of the major culture in a foreign country through the host families.

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