Received: 25 December 2022 | Revised: 10 May 2023 | Accepted: 15 June 2023

DOI: 10.1002/tesj.743

CONCEPTUAL FEATURE ARTICLE

WILEY

English language education and acculturation research: Problematic historical parallels and the path ahead

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Abstract

Multilingual education and acculturation research share a parallel history of problematic research paradigms that center the majority viewpoint and view minorities through a lens of deficit. This continual pathology of cultural difference has led to the pathologization of minority individuals, and has hampered our efforts to effectively understand and educate in a nuanced and culturally sensitive manner. In our focus on quantifying stress and deficiency, we have failed to understand emic experiences of joy and agency that can better inform our teaching and research. This article asserts a model of research and teaching that prioritizes narrative reclamation, while developing the concept of *acculturative joy* as a lens of study.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The fields of research surrounding the concepts of acculturation and multilingualism share a parallel history of problematic paradigms. Each field has a historical tendency to take the lens of the dominant culture and impose it as a measure of worth against minority individuals, with the effect of pathologizing differences in language and culture. Though there have been efforts to make the fields more inclusive, they have yet to gain significant ground within a fraught climate of politicized minority bodies. Even well-intentioned research has viewed minority cultures with a deficit lens and studied them from the perspective of pathology to be cured via Americanization.

Acculturation has long been conflated with assimilationist messaging and the erasure of the minority culture from the life of an individual. Similarly, many of the facets of multilingualism have been conflated with low intelligence, identity confusion, and lack of overall language ability (Baker & Wright, 2021; Sung, 2015). While there has been recent pushback on the deficit narrative in each field, there remains space to explore opportunities for research that prioritize the minority view, including incorporating a critical view of the concept of acculturation when teaching the English language through narrative storytelling, and exploring acculturation through the lens of emic joy, as this article will discuss.

2 | ACCULTURATION—THE MISUNDERSTOOD PHENOMENON

Acculturation is often misunderstood and weaponized against minority communities as a polite version of the term assimilation. This problematic conflation is not a phenomenon of the past, a recent English language teacher-training textbook states: "Acculturation is the process of adapting to a new culture" (Díaz-Rico, 2018, p. 15) and continues on to directly use the term acculturation as a one-to-one replacement for the term assimilation, instructing new teachers to find out how "acculturated to" American lifestyle the families of their students are, in an effort to understand the lengths to which the teacher will need to go to reach them. The same textbook asserts that certain students will be harder to reach depending on whether they are "castelike minorities" vs. "immigrant minorities," claiming that the former are labor-oriented as a culture, and thus uninterested in education (Díaz-Rico, 2018).

Before delving into the historical context of acculturation, clarification of the term for the sake of this article is in order. Acculturation is not a linear process by which students pick up more and more culture until they become "acculturated"—it is the instances of shared meaning making across culture upon contact with new information. Students are in a state of making innumerable judgment calls about new ways of understanding that they find valuable, and ways they don't. Acculturation is similar to a series of micro-transactions for identity. Classrooms introduce new cultural concepts through language which will need to be reconciled with the students' established ways of knowing. Students don't "acculturate to" a new culture—that implies an ideal destination that exists in the "target" culture, and is a direct conflation with assimilation rhetoric. An analogical example would be that of a cell membrane, as shown in Figure 1, where each individual may accept or reject new values in the meaning-making process, and share their epistemic traditions as they are exposed to those of others. In this way each individual creates their own micro-culture that is a conglomeration of all the other micro- and macro-cultures they have been exposed to, and they share that fluid micro-culture in return as they interact with those around them. The agency they have in making value judgments about incoming epistemic traditions becomes the permeable barrier of their identity.

3 | HISTORICAL RESEARCH PARADIGMS—A COMPARISON

The concept of acculturation is timeless, whether or not it was named as such. Various ancient civilizations spoke of acculturative concepts, including Plato's description of those who don't engage in cross-culture contact, instead choosing to isolate themselves, as having disordered

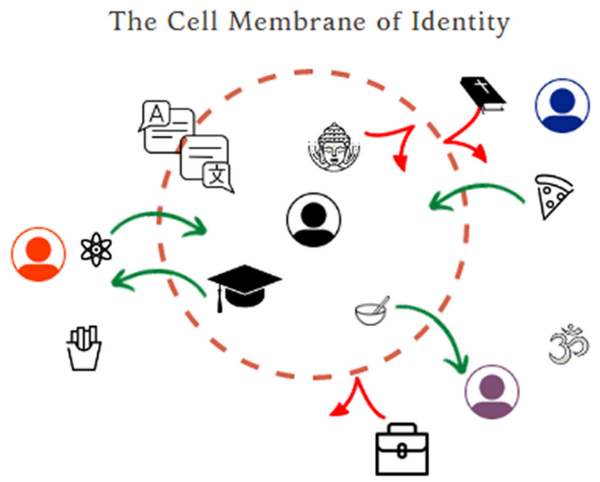

FIGURE 1 The cell membrane of identity.

personalities (Plato, 1969), which is an early instance of the deficit model being applied to an imposed category of acculturative behavior. Similarly, early Western European history was a story of acculturation as many tribes and early civilizations came into contact and began to share cultural norms as in-group and out-group identities were navigated, formed, and reformed. According to Hadley (1943), the present-day English language was the product of such cultural contact, combining various Celtic, Germanic, and French dialects with Latin to create the early version of the language we speak today. Language, culture, context, and contact are invariably intertwined when we look into the concept of acculturation and its historical research paradigms.

Despite being an essentially ageless concept, the term *acculturation* itself has its first documented use in 1880 by J. W. Powell in his report to the United States Bureau of American Ethnography that covered the shifts that had occurred in Native American languages through their contact with European influence (Powell, 1880). Given that the word itself was coined in a language context, we see the inextricable link between the patterns in our ability to communicate across cultures, and the shared meaning making that comes with acculturation. Shortly after Powell's coining of the term, researchers began to use it in a way that emphasized specific aspects, such as interchange and fertilization during idea transfer (McGee, 1898), majority cultures adopting minority traits of conquered cultures (Powell, 1900), and *antagonistic acculturation* where a majority culture may reject the goals and ideas of a culture they have dominated, but choose to adopt their technology (Devereux & Loeb, 1943).

From as early as 1904 the concept has been conflated explicitly with assimilatory pressures by researchers. G. Stanley Hall (1904) posited that acquiring experience with a second culture was much like acquiring it in a first culture, which is known as enculturation, and used this theory to infantilize the Native Americans he studied by likening them to adolescent settlers that were in the process of learning their own culture. This sort of paternalistic attitude can also be seen in language acquisition discourse, where learners of English are often spoken to as if they are children, without acknowledging their wealth of skill in their own native language. Despite the fact that the colonists were the minority culture, we see here the Western superiority lens being applied retroactively to the situation to make sense of their early efforts to assimilate the Native Americans through "Indian Colleges," casting Native Americans as having a deficit of European culture (Hall, 1904). This first psychological study of acculturation came only 6 years after the initial coining of the term in the aforementioned study of Native American languages and their

change after colonial contact, highlighting how assimilationist messaging was quickly embedded in the research paradigm in both fields.

According to Rudmin's 2003 historical critique of acculturation research, one of the earliest psychological studies of acculturation began the trend of splitting minority groups into generalized categories by their apparent attitude toward assimilatory pressures from the dominant culture. A study by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958; originally published in 1918) considered individual response to acculturative pressure to be personality traits, which they classified into a typology based on what they determined to be a balance of fear of modernity and curiosity (see Rudmin, 2003). Situating an immigrant's decision to retain their social culture as fear of modernity is yet another example of the standard acculturation research paradigm positioning the home culture of an individual as a deficit characteristic. Thomas and Znaniecki's study marked the early usage of bipolar scales to create a grid on which to position and compare the attitudes toward acculturation (operationalized as what we know to be assimilation) which later evolved into the fourfold method that has become the dominant way to study acculturation in present research.

This attitude of framing minority culture as something that can be kept or disposed of at will has plagued acculturation research since its inception. Rudmin's critical history of acculturation research points out 68 distinct studies using the flawed fourfold method that channels immigrants into predetermined categories—most commonly known to be *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization*—that are measured quantitatively with Likert scales. These scales are often bipolar and bilineal, assessed by stereotypes and proxies, and they treat culture as a zero-sum game where association with one culture means rejection of the other (Rudmin, 2003). This same zero-sum mindset can be seen in language acquisition research as well, with the early balance theory of language positing that there is only so much space for language dedicated in the brain, and that if an individual learns a second language, they are automatically losing space and resources for their first language. This goes hand in hand with the language-as-a-problem viewpoint that leads to a prohibition of first language usage in the process of second language learning, highlighted in the Los Angeles high school walkouts and Arizona's recent prohibition of bilingual education (Baker & Wright, 2021). In both cases, whether cultural contact or language contact, the minority is seen as having a pathology that must be corrected by assimilating into the dominant culture or language.

An early example of a more culturally inclusive definition of acculturation can be seen in Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits's (1936) assessment of the concept: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). This conceptualization of acculturation being able to affect both groups was an early acknowledgment of the bidirectional nature of acculturation that decades of research afterward proceeded to ignore in favor of taking the narrative of a minority culture assimilating into the dominant majority culture in which they are situated.

The conceptualization of acculturation as merely a group phenomenon has led to the incorrect generalization of a personal and contextually driven experience, most notably seen in the big-data–driven quantitative assessments of acculturation and the modern fourfold method by which groups are classified via typology. Due to the historical majority lens of study that is applied to acculturation research, this has tended to be aimed toward immigrant groups or other obviously "other" individuals, with the effect of pathologizing those minority individuals or groups that do not behave in the desired way (Rudmin, 2003).

The effects of acculturation's use as a predictor of pathology or well-being stem from its ill-conceived use as an intervening variable in studies about mental and physical health. The concept of acculturative stress, which is inconsistently measured and operationalized but generally understood to be stress that stems from the acculturation process, is often conflated with both acculturation and general mental health problems. The field's propensity to use ill-fitting data sets about health issues leads to the use of demographic variables such as nativity, language spoken, and years in the United States to make a facsimile of an acculturation measure which is then applied as an intervening variable to claim pathology in immigrant populations (Rudmin, 2003). An example of this phenomenon can be found in Steele et al. (2020), which used the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey to capture the data from over 14,000 participants and assessed the acculturation of respondents via the proxies of place of birth, language spoken at home, and proportion of life lived in the United States. The authors' stated reason for using these measures were that they were easy to collect. This study also operationalized acculturation as the process by which nonnative, immigrant individuals adopt the attitudes, values, customs, beliefs, and behaviors of another culture which precludes agency in the acculturative process, leaving out the ability for bidirectional acculturation to occur where, in this particular context, a minority culture could influence the dietary habits of a majority culture. Common sense and the existence of diverse ethnic takeout food tells us dietary acculturation is bidirectional, and an individual eating ultra-processed foods, when that is the predominantly available category of food in the United States in general, does not automatically determine a rejection of their original culture. Rudmin covers this very phenomenon in his arguments for cultural and individual levels of acculturation, making an example of Tostitos becoming an American snack and soft drinks becoming popular in Mexico. He proposes that the initial introduction of the theretofore unknown food was an acculturative transfer, but once it has become common in the new context it is simply part of the new culture (Rudmin, 2010). This is similar to the way languages show linguistic borrowing, where a word such as *croissant*, although non-English in origin and may have initially been an acculturative acquisition, is now part of the daily English language. Neither are possible without initial bidirectional acculturative transfer.

Unfortunately the use of convenient proxies, and language as a proxy in particular, for acculturation is neither rare nor condemned by the majority of scholars in the field. A 2014 study by Bharmal et al. pointed out that in many populations, specifically South Asians, there has been significant English language usage in education in their country of origin, so using language as a proxy post-immigration means very little in terms of assessing their inclination toward one culture or the other (Bharmal et al., 2014). Rudmin and others have published numerous critiques on the use of problematic measures (Rudmin, 2009), including Chirkov's scathing review of the dominant psychometric approach to studying acculturation, calling out the relegation of language to be used as a proxy specifically: “The role of language as an active, constructive, and meaning-producing means of organizing people's lives and experiences is ignored” (Chirkov, 2009, p. 3) It is clear that critics of the dominant acculturation research paradigm observe the failure of using language as a one-dimensional proxy rather than recognizing its cultural, social, and epistemological importance to the process of acculturation. Despite this pushback against simplistic and flawed measures and operationalizations of acculturation, the field continues to carry on with research that is methodologically convenient, sacrificing quality for content (Rudmin, 2010).

In the field of language acquisition, we see a similar flattening of the value of language in the meaning making process through the historical refusal to acknowledge skill transfer and cultural nuance that each language carries over into the language acquisition process. In his creation of the *common underlying proficiency* model, brought to life as a foil to the *separate*

underlying proficiency model, Cummins (1981) pushed back against the theretofore accepted idea that bilingualism was a zero-sum cognitive competition between the native language of a speaker and whatever other languages they sought to acquire. He laid the groundwork for future research on transfer theory with his conception of the language-relevant mind as an iceberg with two peaks and a shared basis of existence composed of the cognitive skills required to create a language that is outwardly expressed for assessment in each of the two visible peaks. Cummins also made adjustments to the threshold theory which asserted that in the process of language acquisition there are stages of proficiency that are passed through in order to reap the cognitive benefits of learning a second language. This threshold theory had mixed utility; on the one hand it had problematic ties to semilingualism and the assertion that a regular individual may lack language skills in either language, but on the other hand it was supportive of the use of dual-language education for student success (Baker & Wright, 2021). Grosjean continued in this line of work, advocating for bilingual speakers to be assessed through a bilingual lens, rather than as a deficient monolingual speaker (Grosjean, 1989).

Cummins (1981) also produced the quadrant method of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to evaluate levels of proficiency in academic and nonacademic language. This quadrant method echoes the acculturation fourfold quadrant method, as both of them can be fulfilled using ostensibly separate but parallel bipolar scales that leave the individual being evaluated at risk of being placed in the dual negative category. In acculturation research this would classify as a" marginalization"-oriented individua, which has been critiqued as not existing outside of antisocial mental illness; in language acquisition, this dual negative quadrant implies semilingualism or similar deficiency-oriented labels. In each case the bipolar quantitative method of measuring a nuanced and contextually driven phenomenon is an inappropriate generalization. As raciolinguistic critics of Cummins point out, the false dichotomy framing of "academic" vs "nonacademic" language has implications for minority students who are unfairly labeled as academically deficient, which ignores all of the culturally embedded knowledge they have that doesn't fit the dominant linguistic assessment narrative (Baker & Wright, 2021). Recent research has sought to reframe this false dichotomy through the lens of *language architecture* (Flores, 2020), which assumes that racialized students have the same complex linguistic skills needed to succeed academically, but that they are being misrecognized due to the raciolinguistic factors at play. This aligns with Rudmin's recommendations for future acculturation research that seeks to understand and recognize the emic experiences of minority groups, rather than quantitatively classifying them into a flawed grid system (Rudmin, 2003).

Research on language and culture intersect notably in the work of Masgoret and Ward in their work on the cultural learning approach to acculturation which centers communicative ability. Shared language is at the heart of their research, but the researchers expand communication beyond pure language knowledge to include knowledge of cultural nuance such as norms, conventions, and nonverbal cues that differ across cultures. They highlight specific factors that affect culture and language learning, including motivation, expectations, and personality and individual differences. These factors are key to understanding individual and group outcomes (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Due to the highly contextual nature of these factors, it is not surprising that the quantitative research paradigm in each field fails to capture nuance, understand, or explain the lived experiences and outcomes of those who undergo the acculturation process.

Aside from the parallels in historically problematic research paradigms and recent pushback, the general political climate affects the two fields similarly. Anti-immigrant sentiment filters into the funding and reception of research and education, as showcased by the laws prohibiting

bilingual education in favor of submersion or immersion methods in English-only education (Long & Adamson, 2012). This denial of home culture is not only an attempt to force linguistic assimilation upon a minority population, but also cultural assimilation as well, due to the inextricable link between language and culture. This erasure of minority right of expression and self-identification can be expressed through a range of everyday instances from well-meaning paternalism couched as helping "New Americans"' fit in, to outright hostility and demands that immigrants speak English in the United States or leave. Regardless of intent, the harm caused by racialized discrimination is well documented. At its heart, assimilation is the normative will of the dominant culture imposed through discriminatory pressure on minority groups or individuals.

4 | MOVING FORWARD

Despite the bleak-but-improving state of each field, I believe there is significant space for ethical research to be carried out in a way that centers the voice of the minority cultures. Rather than measuring proxies of acculturation and imposing overly rigid language tests on learners to quantify their cultural and linguistic position in society, we can make room for their emic narratives to emerge through qualitative study.

Moving away from the quantitative fourfold paradigm in acculturation research opens up opportunities for minority voices to emerge more holistically. Rather than focus on the quantitative acculturative stress model, I propose a push toward researching emic experiences of what I call *acculturative joy*. Acculturative joy is a lens of studying the phenomenon of acculturation with a holistic scholarly orientation. It is defined by the positive psychological experiences that occur during the process of cross-cultural contact and meaning making. Rather than being measured, it uses qualitative nuance to understand instances of minority culture agency in their daily interactions, including language learning experiences. It provides an epistemological foil to the concept of *acculturative stress*, which views students quantitatively through a lens of pathology and deficit. Acculturative joy emphasizes bidirectionality in acculturation along with student agency in the cultural meaning-making process. It is seen in instances of positively received student culture-sharing efforts, and is part of the mental and emotional well-being that follows.

As educators in multicultural domains we see these instances every day, yet rarely are they considered important to capture for the sake of research. I believe that methods of research including interviews, focus groups, diary studies, and other qualitative methods that specifically target the concept of acculturative joy will help us capture the nuance of what we are doing well, and will help us build upon that success. Discovering the specific characteristics of acculturative joy experiences can help us include them in our teaching to create better lessons, increase positive feelings toward language learning, and boost teacher and student morale and engagement. Research that revolves around finding flaws to improve upon certainly has its place, but we cannot understand why something works without delving into the qualitative nuance of the learner experience, and what specifically brings them joy in the process of acculturation and language learning.

Acculturative joy is best explored by giving students an unrestricted voice in the classroom, centering their current assets rather than what they still need to learn. Drawing from Godrej's (2011) work on narrative reclamation, which centers the linguistic decolonization process, we see the parallels between feminist reclamation of inner narrative and self-conception and the potential to expand that concept into other minority cultural discourses that have been colonized by paternalistic narratives. One of Godrej's main points is the process of dismantling the dominant culture lens inside

individuals that colors the way they tell their own story. In the acculturation and linguistic spheres this can be seen as internalized racism, colorism, and racialized conceptions of "correct" language use. Early instances of this in pedagogy can be seen in classrooms that center minority English language learner stories through careful selection of culturally inclusive texts, and by dual-language programs that are truly 50/50 in curriculum and administrative policy—though the latter is vanishingly rare. Godrej asserts that the cures for this internalized deficit narrative "are also often dialogical and narrative, focusing on the concept of identity repair through communities in which women learn to subvert the standards of oppressive narratives through the telling of stories" (Godrej, 2011, p. 7). This would point toward a qualitative approach from a research perspective, allowing these subversive narratives to emerge organically in the process of cultural and linguistic meaning making, rather than quantifying and neatly labeling the experience of minority groups. In practice this would look like participatory design or codesigned research projects, along with pedagogical and curricular changes that ensure that minority stakeholders have a say in the construction process of the classroom content. This could include a variety of modest options such as employing sensitivity readers for classroom materials, or go so far as rebuilding programs with community involvement at the forefront. Significant practitioner-driven research has emerged on storytelling in English language education as far back as the late 1990s (Colon-Vila, 1997; Fitzgibbon & Wilhelm, 1998) asserting the classroom practice as "a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time." It remains the focus of current research such as work by Azmi Zakaria & Aziz (2019) that blends new techniques with a focus on digital storytelling to increase narrative writing skill.

In addition to the cultural healing benefits of narrative reclamation through subversive storytelling, research has also pointed to significant benefits in language learning itself when taught through storytelling. Lucarevschi's 2016 study investigated empirical evidence of language learning through stories and concluded that storytelling not only boosts language learner motivation and engagement, but also encourages the growth of cross-language social skills such as listening and collaboration. Storytelling can also be used as a tool to provide comprehensible input to students by increasing active engagement in the content, which in turn leads to increased levels of content comprehension. The overall conclusion of the empirical literature review determined that storytelling was an effective pedagogical tool to increase second language acquisition (Lucarevschi, 2016). Narrative storytelling in classroom practice is certainly not a new suggestion, but that an intentional focus on incorporating bidirectionality of the acculturation process in doing so gives students even more agency in the process is new. Crafting prompts in such a way that students are encouraged to specifically share their cultures' epistemology and values without enforcing a Western lens of what "storytelling" means allows students to experience acculturative joy and a position as primary knowledge holder, rather than a knowledge receiver seeking feedback on their narrative. Furthermore, capturing the student's experience of acculturative joy will help educators understand how to harness the motivation of engaged and agency-driven students, and apply it to further lesson development.

This pedagogical method can be taken further still by harnessing the power of AI chatbot technologies (such as Chat GPT) to allow users to input their own story prompts and explore the coconstructed narrative output critically. This would allow for flexibility in lesson materials, opening up opportunities such as the technical grammatical dissection of texts that are created by, and interesting to, each student, or they could be used in flipped narrative exercises, where students create an AI prompt, diagram the story output, and then rewrite the story from a different perspective or in a different tense. Harnessing the power of AI in a creative way can combat the cynical view that it is a tool for plagiarism alone, enhance the digital literacy skills of students, and provide them with the opportunity to explore narrative crafting on topics that are tailored

to their interests without requiring significant extra labor for the teacher. In the same ways that learners have found innovative uses for Siri and Amazon Alexa to practice conversation, we can assist them in their creative writing skills with emergent technologies.

5 | CONCLUSION

Though decades of research in the fields of acculturation and language acquisition have been carried out quantitatively in the name of supposed rigor, it is clear that the generalizations and stereotyping that has followed have been detrimental to the communities of study. The shared deficit lens, centering the majority viewpoint in both culture and language, has "othered" and pathologized minority voices and experiences to the detriment of society at large. Seeking to understand emic experiences, rather than to assign neat labels, needs to be the priority of acculturation and language acquisition research going forward. The use of narrative reclamation through storytelling, tailored with the power of AI to enhance digital skills and open broader possibilities, can be used as a tool of minority agency in critical discourse. This will allow English learners to center their emic experiences and subvert the historical lens of deficit and pathology, while harnessing modern technological skills. Intentionality within this age-old practice can allow educators to critically dissect historical deficit narratives and empower their students to use English as a tool for epistemic justice, rather than merely receiving it as a vessel containing ideological payloads that devalue their own cultures and ways of creating meaning. Incorporating this critical lens in our curricula can increase learner engagement and morale, and help educators better understand their students. Similarly, if we shift the focus from acculturative stress to acculturative joy as a core concept of study, we move from the generalization and quantification of pathologized individuals to a nuanced exploration of learner motivations and opportunities for positive growth in our profession.

6 | THE AUTHOR

Connie Siebold is a doctoral student at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is a former public librarian with an interest in the intersection of identity and language, and served on the American Library Association subcommittee Serving Refugees, Immigrants, and Displaced Persons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge her advisor, Dr. Ana Ndumu, for her tireless support and for opening doors to acculturation research through her innovative grant project Libraries, Integration, and New Americans.

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How to cite this article: Siebold, C. (2023). English language education and acculturation research: Problematic historical parallels and the path ahead. *TESOL Journal*, *00*, e743. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.743