

The Significance of Language and Cultural Education on Secondary Achievement: A Survey of Chinese-American and Korean-American Students

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Abstract

This study attempted to answer the question: What is the significance of language and cultural orientation on academic achievement? This study examined the relationship between the students' level of interest in maintaining their heritage language and culture and their achievement in school. The subjects for this study were 105 U.S.-born, Chinese-American and Korean-American students attending public high schools in Southern California. The study found that those who valued the acculturation process, adapting to the mainstream culture while preserving their language and culture, had superior academic achievement levels to those who were most interested in the assimilation process and who adopted the values and lifestyles of the dominant culture. In light of the implementation of the "English Only" policy in California's public schools, this study has important implications in public education—that curriculum and instruction should focus on helping language and cultural minority students to develop and maintain their heritage while exposing them to new ideas.

There is a prevalent stereotype in the American society that Asian-American students are high achievers; hence, the term "model minority" is often used in reference to Asian-Americans. Such use emerged during the 1960s in the midst of the civil rights movement (Osajima, 1988; Sue & Kitano, 1973). It was coined as a hegemonic device, attempting to divert attention away from the racial and ethnic tension of the period and laud the economic success of Asian-Americans outside of the movement. Thus, the term was not really used to recognize the important contribution of Asian-Americans to American society. On the contrary, the model minority stereotype was propagated by the media to subdue growing demands from

the African-American and other minority groups for equal rights. The media often cited Asian-Americans as an example of a model group that achieved educational and social prosperity in the absence of government assistance or intervention in schools and in employment, and who were able to seek educational and employment opportunities—thereby delegitimizing the issue of racial inequality and suppressing public outcry for rectification and improvements in educational and social systems of the United States.

According to many scholars (e.g., Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Hsu, 1971; Kitano, 1969; Mordkowitz & Ginsberg, 1987; Sung, 1987) Asian-Americans are more successful in school because their culture emphasizes the value of education. In addition, the family-oriented nature of Asian cultures, in which academic success is equated with upholding the family honor, is seen as facilitating conditions for educational success. Suzuki (1980), one of the first to examine educational achievement from a historical cultural perspective, posited that academic success of Asian-Americans was a reaction to social stratification that existed in the United States: Exclusion of Asian-Americans from social participation forced parents to push for education for their children to overcome the social and political barriers. More recent studies (e.g., Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Mark & Chih, 1982; Sue & Okazaki, 1990) seem to support Suzuki's theory that perception of education as a key to social mobility is a contributing factor in academic achievement of Asian-Americans. Stacey Lee (1996) found that among the different Asian-American student groups, the group that held the highest regard for education as the most essential for social mobility had superior academic achievement than those groups who did not see school as the key to upward mobility in the society. Whereas the former group felt obligated to do their best in school, the latter group placed little interest in education.

In explaining the different academic achievement among minority groups, Ogbu (1989) distinguished between voluntary and involuntary minorities. According to this theory, voluntary immigrants do better in school because they accept the host culture. This theory also posits that voluntary immigrants believe that their future is determined by their ability to overcome social and economic hurdles through academic success. Studies by Mark and Chih (1982) and Lee (1996) seem to support this theory: They found that parents of Asian-American students often reminded their children to excel in school to overcome racial prejudice and discrimination. In other words, Asian-Americans perceived education as the most important form of empowerment for social mobility. Considering that a relatively high percentage (5.3%) of Asian-Americans enter colleges and universities, Asian-American parents seem to have a great influence on their children's educational interests. Involuntary immigrants are thought to reject the dominant culture because they perceive the mainstream culture to be a threat to their own identity. Thus,

according to this theory, involuntary immigrants may regard school success as giving up their culture at the expense of assimilating to the dominant culture, with which school is associated.

Although it is true that Asian-Americans are generally more successful in education than other minority groups—measured in terms of SAT scores and the percentage of Asian-Americans who have completed or are currently enrolled in higher education—there is growing evidence to suggest that not all Asian-American students are doing well in school. Rumbaut and Ima (1988) found that among the Southeast Asian students, the Khmer and the Lao had a grade point average (GPA) below that of the majority (white) students, whereas the GPA of the Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese students was well above the average of the majority students. More recent studies (e.g., Trueba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993) seem to point in the direction that there is a need to clarify conceptual findings by examining intra-group differences within the Asian-American population. That is, academic achievement of Asian-Americans can no longer be predicted based simply on the notion that all Asian-Americans share a common culture. The implicit message is that socio- and psycho-cultural dynamics of Asian-American students are as complex as any other ethnic groups. As such, studies related to educational achievement of Asian-American students must go beyond the rudimentary task of developing conceptual framework based on collective descriptions.

In explaining inter-group differences in academic achievement, Ogbu classifies all Asian-Americans as belonging to one group. That is, according to Ogbu's framework, fifth-generation Asian-Americans are no different from the recent immigrants—both belong to the voluntary immigrant group. Although this framework provides an interesting and dichotomous view of the relationship between culture and academic achievement, it fails to consider intra-group and individual differences. That is, why are some groups within the Asian-American population, presumably who came to the United States voluntarily to seek improved livelihood, doing better than others? And, why do some Asian-American students excel while others barely make it through high school?

Caudill and De Vox (1956) were among the first to examine educational achievement of Asian-Americans from a cultural perspective. Based on their research on Japanese-Americans, they reported that Japanese-Americans are more successful because their cultural characteristics are those highly regarded by the mainstream society. Kitano (1969) and Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1991) all concluded that Asian-Americans are more successful in the schools because of compatibility of their culture with the middle-class American culture. Although these postulations provide interesting perspectives, they seem to reinforce the “model minority” stereotype by assuming that all Asian-Americans share similar cultural backgrounds. For example, what does Hmong culture have in common with Korean or Japanese

culture? Or, do middle-class Americans really hold high regard for Cambodian culture? Studies based on the stereotypical treatment of Asian-Americans as a homogeneous group ignore the importance of adaptive strategies and other psychological and social variables that may influence the learning experiences of Asian-American students.

Gibson (1988) observed that among Punjabi students, there was a positive correlation between their arrival in the United States and school success: The longer the students have been in the United States, the better the performance. Gibson's studies clearly suggest that appropriate behavior cannot be the most important determinant factor of academic achievement. That is, assimilation is more likely for those students who have been exposed longer to the dominant culture than for those who have recently arrived in the United States, so that there may be more cultural similarities between mainstream students and those students who have been in the United States longer than with the newcomers. Considering this, theories based on behavior and cultural compatibility do not adequately explain the educational achievement of Asian-American students. For example, if we were to accept the notion that Asian-American students do better in school than other minority students because there is "cultural match" with the mainstream culture, it predicates not only that Asian-American students share the same culture, but also that there is no heuristic process within the Asian and Asian-American culture.

The purpose of this study was to examine the significance of language and cultural identity on academic achievement of Chinese-American and Korean-American students in secondary schools. This study was motivated by the emergence of studies that indicate that there is variation in academic achievement among Asian-American students. This study attempted to answer the question: Is there a correlation between the students' level of interest in, and awareness for cultural heritage and the level of academic achievement? This study investigated the possibility that educational achievement may be related to the students' involvement, interest, and awareness of their ancestral culture.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 105 male and female students of Chinese ($n = 57$) and Korean ($n = 48$) heritage enrolled in two high schools in an upper middle-class community of Orange County, California. All the subjects, between the ages of 15 and 17, were enrolled in regular classes. Both schools offered courses in Chinese and Korean as foreign language classes. The two groups represented the largest minority group (approximately 20%) in the community. All subjects were born in the United States.

Instrument

The questionnaire, consisting of 10 closed-ended questions, was pre-tested on 23 high school students for clarification and appropriateness of the questions contained in the survey. The randomly selected students each received a questionnaire to be completed prior to beginning their class. Questions surveyed the subjects' background, interest, awareness, and views on cultural identity. They included:

1. Have you attended a Chinese or Korean language/culture school for more than one year while you were in middle or high school?
2. Do you know much about the history/culture of China or Korea?
3. Have you studied Chinese or Korean for more than one year at your high school?
4. Do you regularly attend (at least once a month) Chinese- or Korean-related cultural events/activities, including religious functions?
5. Do you speak Chinese or Korean in the home and/or with relatives/friends?
6. Are you interested in learning more about your cultural heritage?
7. Do you feel it is important for you to maintain your cultural identity?
8. Do you feel your culture/heritage contributes to the American culture/heritage?
9. Do you feel there should be diverse cultures represented in the United States?
10. Do you feel people should have a greater interest in their own ethnic culture/heritage than in the mainstream culture?

In addition to the questionnaire, Asian-American students were observed and interviewed during lunchtime for a total of approximately 20 hours.

Procedures

A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaires. The research assistant also provided instructions prior to administering the questionnaire. The investigator personally observed and interviewed the students. Interviews were recorded on a cassette tape with the subjects' permission.

Results

Responding “yes” to the questions on the survey indicated orientation toward acculturation, an additive process of adapting to the mainstream culture while preserving the heritage culture. Conversely, responding “no” on the survey suggested orientation toward assimilation, toward adopting the values, behaviors, beliefs, and lifestyles of the dominant culture.

The subjects’ GPAs in relation to the number of affirmative responses were used to establish a correlation.

Table 1

GPA in Relation to Number of Affirmative Responses

Subjects (N = 105)	No. of "Yes" Responses	GPA (M = 3.54)
2	0	3.17
2	3	2.98
6	4	3.19
10	5	3.25
17	6	3.27
23	7	3.58
19	8	3.76
17	9	3.78
9	10	3.81

Although there was a wide range, 0 to 10, the majority of the subjects (about two-thirds) responded affirmatively to six to nine questions. The grade point average (GPA) ranged from 2.98 to 3.81 with a mean of 3.54. With the exception of two subjects who responded affirmatively to three questions, and who had a GPA of 2.98, there was a pattern in the relationship between the number of affirmative responses and the subjects’ GPA; the subjects’ GPA increased as the number of affirmative responses increased. Using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) to find the strength of the relationship, at the critical value of .05 level, at 96 degrees of freedom (df), the correlation (r) was .94. Thus, the statistical analysis indicated that there was a strong correlation between the students’ GPA and the extent to which the

subjects showed an interest in their cultural heritage. The level of significance for a two-tailed test at this level for a sample size of 105 is .201. Hence, the results revealed that students who had a greater awareness for, and interest in developing biculturalism had superior grade point average than their counterparts who had less interest in their heritage. The correlation was very significant, statistically.

It is interesting to note that among the questions included in the study, only 38% indicated that they knew much about the history/culture of China or Korea. This is in sharp contrast to the 86% who responded that they were interested in learning more about their cultural heritage. This strongly suggests that Asian-American students were not receiving adequate amount of exposure to Asian history and culture in and outside the home. Also, while 81% of the subjects indicated that they have attended a Chinese or Korean language/culture school for at least a year, only 25% responded that they have studied Chinese or Korean at a high school. Thus, it seems most Chinese-American and Korean-American students are receiving educational language and cultural lessons at community-based private schools rather than at the public high schools. Considering the fact that both schools offered instructions in Chinese and Korean, the disparity between the two seems to suggest that the schools may not be offering the kinds of instruction and experience students expect from the language classes.

Also worth noting is the great disparity between the percentage of subjects who indicated the importance of maintaining cultural identity (90%) and the percentage who thought their heritage contributed to the American culture (41%). It seems the majority of the subjects perceived cultural heritage to be more important for personal identification than for actual contribution to the United States culture. When subjects were asked this question during interviews, many thought that most Americans of different racial, ethnic, and/or cultural backgrounds did not recognize Chinese or Korean culture as part of U.S. culture. Therefore, it appears that, for many, cultural contribution is based on their perception of the level of acceptance by other Americans. This was supported by 93% of the respondents, who indicated that cultural diversity should exist in the United States (see Table 2).

Table 2

Percentage of Affirmative Responses

Question	Percentage
1. Attended Chinese or Korean community school	81%
2. Knowledge about Chinese or Korean history/culture	38%
3. Studied Chinese or Korean at high school	25%
4. Attended Chinese or Korean-related cultural activity	90%
5. Speak Chinese or Korean at home/with relatives/friends	78%
6. Interested in learning more about cultural heritage	86%
7. Important to maintain cultural identity	90%
8. Cultural heritage contributes to American culture	41%
9. Cultural diversity should exist in the United States	93%
10. Greater interest for own culture than mainstream culture	60%

Discussion

As one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States, Asian-Americans are expected to account for 10% of the total population of the United States by 2040 (González, 1990). In California, Asian-American students already outnumber African-American students. Yet, the model minority stereotype seems to have desensitized the need for inclusion of Asian-Americans on discussions of race and education; Asian-Americans are often treated as outsiders needing no special consideration. The results of this study seem to suggest that there are indeed intra-group and individual differences in academic achievement within the Chinese-American and Korean-American student populations. The study found that there was a strong correlation between the students' cultural interest/identity and their academic achievement.

Suzuki (1980) stated that Asian-American students receive favorable evaluation from their teachers due to compatibility between the Asian culture and the teachers' expectations. That is, certain Asian cultural characteristics, such as obedience, conformity, and respect for authority were viewed favorably by teachers. In fact, Suzuki claimed that teachers may assign good grades to Asian-American students based on behavior rather than on academic performance. Both Goldstein (1985) and Lee (1996) reported that teachers'

evaluation of Asian-American students was often based on observable characteristics and not on actual academic achievement. According to E. Lee and M. Lee (1980), acculturation vis-à-vis assimilation plays an important factor in academic achievement of Asian-American students because it allows them to exhibit those behaviors favored by teachers. Although these studies are helpful in understanding how behavior can influence teachers' assessment of students, they seem to discredit the achievement of Asian-American students by generating yet another overly simplified proposition—that behavior is what sets Asian-American students apart from other students. These findings do not substantiate (a) why some Asian-Americans fail while other Asian-Americans are successful, (b) why Asian-Americans generally score higher than other minority students on standardized tests in which observable behavior has no influence on the outcome, and (c) why grades based on behavior are Asian-American-specific.

The results of this study have revealed that there are indeed intra-group differences among U.S.-born Chinese-American and Korean-American students. Those students who had had greater experience and interest in developing bilingualism and biculturalism enjoyed higher academic achievement than those who were less interested in their cultural heritage. Thus, this study not only invalidated the deeply rooted stereotype that Asian-Americans belong to a group that adheres to common cultural values and practices but also that personal interest in bilingualism and biculturalism is related to academic achievement. The results revealed a positive correlation between the students' language and cultural identity and their academic achievement.

This study was an attempt to examine educational achievement of Chinese-Americans and Korean-Americans from an intra-cultural perspective. That is, rather than attempting to devise an overly simplified concept based on collective treatment of Asian-Americans as a group, this study examined the issue of educational attainment from a psycho-cultural perspective of Chinese-Americans and Korean-Americans as individuals. This study has found that among Chinese-American and Korean-American students, the cultural interests and experiences of Asian-American students vary, and that these differences may influence their academic performance. Thus, the implication from this study is that the educational community must recognize the significant contribution of education programs that promote heritage language and culture for language- and cultural-minority students.

There is no doubt that inclusion of Asian and Asian-American experiences, as well as the recognition of the importance of their presence in schools, will empower Asian-American students' participation in the learning process. It is hypothesized that those students who had greater interest in their language and cultural identity had superior academic achievement than their counterparts because they had greater motivation

for diversified learning experience and interest. That is, these students had superior cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies to help them do better in school. Hence, rather than emulating their peers to conform to the norm of the dominant culture (cultural compensatory strategy), these students were interested in empowering themselves by developing awareness and pride in their heritage while undergoing personal experiences in the mainstream culture (cultural enrichment strategy). Thus, in this dichotomy, students who utilize the cultural enrichment strategy draw upon the positive qualities of at least two cultures from which to adapt to the learning needs of the classroom. On the contrary, students applying the cultural compensatory strategy are at a disadvantaged position because their primary interest is to assimilate to the mainstream culture at the expense of losing their heritage. Thus, cultural compensatory strategy tends to devalue one's ancestral culture while placing a high priority in adopting the mainstream culture.

As diversity within the Asian-American community increases, so is the likelihood that students will come to school with varying interests in their cultural heritage. In 1992, approximately 41% of Asian-Americans were foreign born (Wong, 1992). By year 2000, this percentage is projected to increase to about 50%. The increasing presence of Asian-American students in our schools will inevitably demand that institutions of learning prepare themselves to be able to provide facilitative instruction in which bilingualism and biculturalism are encouraged and promoted for all students, including Asian-American students. This study has shown that the issue of language and culture in academic achievement is more than a collective interpretation of similarities and differences between two cultures: It is about accepting and supporting the students' language and culture while allowing them the opportunity to experience diversity in thinking and practice. To this end, bilingual education programs in which the students' first language and culture are valued, respected, and encouraged—while students are exposed to a new language and culture—are invaluable to students' eventual success in school.

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