

Language Acquisition and Communication in Intercultural Relationships

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Language acquisition in intercultural relationships is an area of study with little to no research. Previous studies have looked at various different aspects of intercultural/interracial relationships including the roles of culture, identity, religion and race. However, how L2 acquisition and communication manifests within a relationship has, as far as I am aware, not been looked at.

Over the years I have witnessed many intercultural and interracial relationships between friends and acquaintances from all over the world. A recurring observation I made was that in many of these intercultural relationships, the partners chose to speak a language that was not their L1. For some couples, they used one of their native tongues as a lingua franca, however in others, both individuals would speak a common L2. I was interested in discovering how their choice of lingua franca came about and whether the stereotype of having a partner from a different country/culture improved your language acquisition was true. For some close family friends, this was not the case. They – a British male and a Ugandan female of Indian decent – had been in a relationship for more than a decade, were married with two children and lived in the UK. They spoke, with the exception of occasional common words and phrases, English to each other and their children. The husband made conscious efforts to learn his wife’s native language of Swahili; he held a barrage of words and phrases he had acquired which he used in context with his wife, her family and his children, but could only keep up with a basic conversation in his L2. Despite his efforts, he was never able to reach a native level. It could easily be assumed that this was because of his wife’s native level English proficiency and their living in an English-speaking country. However, while working in a Japanese eikaiwa (English conversation school) in Tokyo, I encountered countless foreign men married to or dating Japanese women who spoke little to no Japanese. Despite living in their partner’s homeland and being surrounded by their L1, they did not acquire Japanese. These instances were suggestive of more nuanced reasons for the phenomena and thus strengthened my resolve to explore L2 acquisition in intercultural relationships further.

Conceptual Framework:

The qualitative nature of this research and therefore its participants' narratives lends itself towards an ethnographic approach. This is owing to the importance of the participants backgrounds, histories and stories prior to meeting their partners, their relationship with language as well as the contexts in which they met their significant other. I would like to use ethnography as a scope to analyse my data, however a concrete conceptual framework has yet to be established. Therefore, this research will be analyzed as a grounded theory.

Identity and cultural studies have illustrated that not being able to share your native language with your partner may limit your perception of your identity and may not allow you to share your full being with them, as the languages we speak shape who we are and how we act. Other anecdotal evidence suggests the importance of cultural awareness between partners in intercultural relationships. Jones and Chao (1997) 'discussed the need for partners to have a conscious awareness of the role that culture plays in their unions, which is only possible when there is effective communication between partners'.¹⁾

Whereas Reiter and Gee (2008) argued about the importance of support in intercultural relationships. Their study discusses this in terms of *cultural support* and *religious support* which are strategies used to ensure that intercultural relationships are successful and flourish. In the same vein, I would like to propose the notion of language support as a means of the same maintenance. Language support as a concept entails the same strategies outlined by Reiter and Gee (2008) and others in that it 'is associated with satisfaction, commitment, and relationship longevity'.²⁾ I would argue that language support and cultural support are closely linked. Whereas cultural support looks to understand and communicate ideas of history, heritage and cultural identity on broader terms, language cannot be entirely separated from those concepts. Language heavily influences culture, as culture shapes language. Therefore, exploring the importance of the support needed in understanding and learning a partner's L1 plays a critical role.

Method:

A qualitative approach was employed in this research as the objective was to collect narrative data about the couples communication and language acquisition. Qualitative research allows a researcher to explore the situated or contextualised process of social practice and for data to be obtained through open-ended and conversational communication.

To collect my data, questionnaires and interviews (voice recordings) were employed.

The data was collected over a period of three months. The questions asked were written in English, as all the participants were adequately high English language speakers. For the Japanese participants interviewed, a verbal Japanese translation was provided during the interview to clarify any misperceptions.

Participant profiles:

After establishing my research questions, the process of selecting participants to interview began. I decided to begin this study by interviewing individuals that I had a personal connection to. Therefore, the participants of the study are friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and their partners. Five couples were interviewed in this study. However, data from three couples will be discussed and analysed in this paper. All three of the couples were in heterosexual relationships.

The couples' ages ranged from 23 to mid-40s, and were at differing stages in their relationships. The shortest relationship being 4 months at the time of interview, and the longest 11 years. The statuses and positions of the respective relationships also varied greatly, with some couples dating, one engaged, another newly married and the final couple married with children.

Below is an illustrated table explaining the different profiles of each of the couples in the study.

<p>JM</p> <p>Nationality : French Native language: French Age: 31 Location: Tokyo Status: full time employment</p>	<p>S</p> <p>Nationality: Japanese Native language: Japanese Age: 28 Location: Tokyo Status: full time employment</p>	<p>Status: married Relationship type: cohabiting Met: Iran Primary language: Persian (1st year) English</p>
<p>C</p> <p>Nationality: Romanian Native language: Romanian Age: 23 Location: Tokyo Status: student</p>	<p>K</p> <p>Nationality: Japanese Native language: Japanese Age: 23 Location: Tochigi Status: engineer</p>	<p>Status: boyfriend/girlfriend Relationship type: LDR Met: share house, Tokyo Primary language: English</p>
<p>A</p> <p>Nationality: American Native language: English Age: 28 Location: Tokyo Status: full time employment</p>	<p>JY</p> <p>Nationality: Korean Native language: Korean Age: 30 Location: Tokyo Status: full time employment</p>	<p>Status: engaged Relationship type: long term monogamy – living apart Met: Tokyo, japan (online) Primary language: English</p>

Despite the relatively small number of participants involved in this research, it was paramount to explore relationships at varying stages as it would better illustrate the significance the relationships play in language acquisition. The varying age ranges play a similarly important role as it may display whether age for some individuals/couples effected their acquisition of a partners' L2. Finally it also allows me to grasp whether the behaviours of L2 acquisition alter or adapt during the span of a relationship.

As previously stated all of the couples interviewed were in heterosexual relationships. Being able to research individuals of differing sexual orientations is an area I would like to explore further as this research continues, as it will provide insight into diverse relational contexts of L2 language acquisition. However, it should be noted that although, age, status and sexual orientation were elements that were explored when building the narratives of the participants of this study, they were not the focal point of this research. The cultural backgrounds of the participants was of more significance within this study.

Interview process:

Prior to the interviews, the couples were provided with copies of the questionnaire that would be used. They were instructed to read and familiarise themselves with the questions. However, they were prohibited from discussing their answers with their partner. Should either partner misunderstand a question, they were permitted to explain the meaning, but not the answer. This stipulation was important as the couples were all interracial couples, and in most cases with one possessing a higher grasp of English than the other. As the interview questions were written in English, I felt allowing the couples time to absorb and understand the questions was necessary to achieve their truest answers. Furthermore, prohibiting discussion of the answers meant that the answers of each partner were hopefully truer to their feelings and less likely to be framed as a dual view of the couple's collated thinking.

To the same end, the couples were addressed separately during one-on-one interviews to avoid any feelings of obligation that may have otherwise affected their answers were they to be interviewed together. As the questions related to the quality of their communication, individual interviews were conducted with each partner either in person or via online video. The interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed.

The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions – 21 from the initial interview questions and 11 later added as follow up questions. Initial interview length averaged between 25-30 minutes per participant, with some participants being questioned again in follow up interviews.

Research Questions:

When beginning this research I had some initial curiosities that I wanted to explore. As mentioned previously, I noticed that people I encountered in interracial relationships were more likely to adopt a second language, often the language of their partner or a common language used as a lingua franca.

I wanted to explore whether being in an intercultural relationships affected an individual's language acquisition. I therefore devised a set of questions that I wanted to explore in interviews with my participants. The questions were divided into 3 categories – Language History, Relational Effect and L2 Acquisition. Within the Language History category I asked the participants about their backgrounds and language experiences both in formal institutions and informally.

Language History:

1. Native language(s)?
2. Do you speak another language?
 - a. Did you learn this language formally?
 - b. If yes, for how long?
3. Desire to learn another language?
4. You live in Japan, were you learning Japanese?
 - a. If yes. Did learning Japanese make it easier for you to consider dating your partner?

Within the second category – Interpersonal – I wanted to uncover the role that language was playing within the relationships. The questions were aimed at understanding the importance that their L1 and L2s played in their relationships and whether they caused any relational conflict. I was very interested in discovering which language each couple used as their lingua franca and whether this placed any biases or pressures in their interactions and interpersonal development as a couple. I also wanted to explore whether their different relationship status' and/or styles affected their communication.

Relational Effect:

1. What language do you and your partner speak?
 - a. Why?
2. How has not sharing an L1 affected your communication?
3. Would you say you and your partner communicate effectively with each other?
4. Are there any communication issues in your relationship?

5. Would the communication in your relationship be improved by sharing an L1?
6. What, if any, issues have you encountered in your relationship that you attribute to differing L1s?
7. Of all the problems faced in your relationship, do you think having different L1s was the route cause?
8. Of all the problems faced in your relationship, do you think having the same L1 would have alleviated them?
9. Other than L2 communication issues, what other communication issues did you encounter in your relationship?
10. How does being in a LDR affect your communication?

The third category – Acquisition – focused on their L2 acquisition. I explored whether the couples were open to or actively learning their partner’s language and what effect that had on their acquisition. The purpose of this section of questions was to examine whether the relationship was a key factor in the L2 improvement and acquisition.

L2 Acquisition:

1. Did you have any desire to learn your partner’s language before you met?
 - a. Do you have any desire to learn it now?
2. Has having a partner who’s L1 is different from yours made you want to learn their language?
3. Does being in a relationship improve your L2 acquisition?
4. How competently do you speak your partner’s language?
5. Do you wish to learn their language more comprehensively?
 - a. Do you wish you spoke your partner’s L1 more fluently?
6. Do you wish your partner spoke your L1 more fluently?
7. Does living in your partner’s home country make it easier to learn their L1?

After conducting interviews with 4 participants, the answers were coded and I found that the essence of how they acquired their partners L2 was difficult to grasp. Therefore, I continued my reading into intercultural/interracial relationships and found the works of Reiter and Gee. They discussed the various support systems in place within these relationships including *cultural support* and *religious support*. I was inspired and felt that in the same manner these relationships required cultural and religious support, they must also employ some form of support in their language

acquisition. Forming a new category of questions, the notion of *language support* was formed.

Language support:

1. Which of the languages you speak with your partner is the most important and why?
2. Is it important to you that your partner speaks your L1? To what extent?
3. What is your perception of your partner's language?
4. Is your partner's language difficult to learn?
5. Does your partner offer you support in learning their L1?
6. How does this support affect you and your learning?
7. What could you partner do, if anything, that would help you in learning their L1 better?
8. How do you feel when you are with your partner's family?
9. Can you follow the conversation? Do you wish you could?
10. Does the experience make you eager to continue/start learning their L1 more?
11. If you and your partner were to have children, what language(s) would they speak? Why?

These 32 questions were a basis for my interviews and helped me in understanding the role their relationships played in their L2 acquisition. I employed a semi-structured interview approach to ensure that there was freedom in the interactions should an answer lead to a new train of thought. Participants were encouraged to expand and interpret the question as they saw best, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of their relationships, history and language backgrounds and futures.

Data Analysis:

Through the analysis of the interview data collected from all the couples, I found several themes that were present in all the relationships and were directly addressed by one, if not both, partners. Below I collate these themes into four factors (Time and Ease, Frustration and Miscommunication, Culture, Family and Future) which I believe influenced their primary language, language acquisition and communication.

1. Time and Ease

Time and ease were recurring ideas that came up in the interviews with the couples. The ability to communicate information in a timely manner and with relative ease

was important to all the couples. All the couples reported difficulty in this area in the beginnings of their relationships, and interestingly all couples stated that it was no longer an issue at the time of interviewing.

Take A and JY for instance. Being one of the couples whose primary language of communication is one of the partner's L1s (English) there is onus on A, as the native speaker, to be able to modify her speech to meet JYs. She states that not sharing the same L1 has affected their communication in that "*it just means we have to take our time more when we're speaking with each other*" (26 Oct, 2019). JY also recognizes the sacrifices that A makes in their communication, explaining that not sharing an L1 means that A "*needs to help [him], like speak slowly, or try to say the different, easier word*" (26 Oct, 2019). He also feels that for himself he just needs to "*try hard*" to understand and communicate.

However, they also clarify that this does not cause their relationship any real strain as using English is the language in which their communication is most at ease. JY adds that they speak English together because he prefers being able to speak his partner's L1 as it's more comfortable for her – "*when talking to someone, I don't want to use not their own language, like speaking English to Japanese or speaking Japanese to English...I prefer to speak their native language*" (26 Oct, 2019).

JM and S are the only couple whose primary language of communication shifted during their relationship; from Persian to English. This shift as previously explained was owing to S's desire to improve her English for personal and future prospects. When speaking Persian, they chose this language as their means primary language as they were both living in Iran and studying the language at the same school. Although S's level was somewhat higher than JM's they were both actively studying the language and could improve and learn together. They both state it was "*easy*" for them to speak Persian to each other. However, then their primary language changed to English the couple explained that they went through a period of difficulty where their interactions became more laboured due to the large gap in their English language skills. Although still an L2 for both, JM as a French European had studied English for many years and had actively used it in various business and personal contexts.

Similarly JY and S also talk of the necessity to "*simplify the communication*" (4 Nov, 2019) which led to it being slow.

For all the couples, finding a language that was comfortable for both individuals was the most important thing, even if this meant that both would be speaking an L2 as with C & K and JM and S. However, some of the couples when asked if communication would improve by sharing the same L1 were of the opinion that it may improve the rate at which they can share information – K: "*it might be a little bit smoother, there might be like some things that might be easier to communicate more quickly*" (19 Oct, 2019).

2. Frustration and Miscommunication

Miscommunication, as is to be expected, was a recurring theme within the interviews. All the participants expressed feelings of frustration at some point in their interaction with their partner that was a result of or led to miscommunication.

When asked how not sharing the same L1 affected their communication, A stated that due the uneven footing of their primary language (English), as for her it's a native language

During the interview with A she expressed her frustration at being unable at times in the beginning of their relationship to quickly relay information to her partner JY. This she said caused some "*frustration*" in their interactions.

A: "*there's a lot of considerations that I'll have to keep in mind when I'm speaking to him, like I might have to repeat myself or speak in a more simpler way if [she] can't understand*" (26 Oct, 2019).

She also talks about the frustration as being due to the circumstances surrounding their interaction and not simply language.

A: "*The only time we've ever had kind of issues with communicating because of language, is maybe because we're already in a stressful environment...for example, if one of us is upset...it's harder for me to modulate my speech and speak slower and at a lower level*" (26 Oct, 2019).

For JM the frustration in his communication with S occurred when they shifted languages from Persian to English.

JM: "*when speaking English...difficult of communication led to frustration, because it was very slow and difficult. There were some misunderstandings due to the language*" (4 Nov, 2019).

S's low English level meant that JM was required to make allowances in order to facilitate effective interactions, which in turn led to labored communication and thus frustration.

3. Culture

Managing cultural communication differences is crucial in any relationship, and it was no different for these couples.

A and JY spoke of both of them being very open, however, JY isn't "*the kind of person who naturally volunteers what he's feeling, per say, so I feel like I have to ask*

him that a lot, but he's always like quick to answer, very directly like how he's feeling, how he's thinking" (26 Oct, 2019). This meant that A had to learn to be understanding of JY personality and culture. To continue to communicate effectively, she would need to broach questions to JY as his natural tendencies were not inclined towards freely supplying them.

Humour was another area the couple mentioned could be problematic for their communication. A says "*sarcasm...or humour related things that might be smoother if we both spoke an L1 level*" (26 Oct, 2019). She goes on to explain that there were instances where misunderstanding may occur if one partner was not clear the other was joking when saying something. This is critical as if not effectively communicated, unintended offence may occur and feelings may be hurt.

Similarly, K and C struggled with cultural differences in communication in their relationship.

K: "I am not good at expressing my love to--to her, so will be this this way of communication of me it may cause her to think that is not enough for her, I guess" (19 Oct, 2019).

C, as A did, was the one to address this in their relationship. However, she prefers that K express himself without her prompts to tell her that he cares for and loves her.

In S and JM's relationship also understanding differences in humour was an aspect of communication they faced, although in an altered fashion. S and JM watched TV shows and movies together in English, which S sometimes struggles to understand. Therefore, JM translates not only the language she doesn't grasp, but more importantly the cultural context of TV shows and humour.

S: " I watch YouTube and I don't understand he explain to me and then... culture-cultural. Yeah he explains me a lot... When I can't understand jokes..." (4 Nov, 2019).

4. Family and Future

A desire to communicate with their partner's family was unanimously the most motivating factor for wanting to acquire a partner's L1. In all the interviews when participants were asked why they wanted to speak their partner's L1 more fluently, amongst other answers, all individuals stated a strong desire to be able to more effectively communicate with their significant other's family.

S: *[the children] speak Japanese, English, French...why...hmm because they will be half Japanese and half French and to talk with our family with our parents so they need to speak English and French of course English is the most important language in the world now, I think so...three languages.* (4 Nov, 2019).

JM: *they will speak French and she will speak Japanese and they by absorption they will speak English because we speak English* (4 Nov, 2019).

K: *my girlfriend Romanian she is from Romania so in case when I go there I think I will need to learn and speak Romanian enough to speak to other people* (19 Oct, 2019).

For almost all the couples their parents do not speak the L1 of their significant other, and often only speak their native language. This means that communication between the partner and parents is solely dependent of the other partner being present and acting as a translator. Meaning conversations are often short, strained and slow. All couples stated that they wanted to be able to communicate with their partner's family in more depth and that learning their L1 was the most effective way to do so. Furthermore, experiences where they visited their partner's family and/or home country made them more eager to more actively learn their partner's L1. For example, S and JM being recently married, travelled to France for a second wedding ceremony. While there, S met JM's extended family and travelled around France. She states that she had a wonderful time, but wishes she could have been able to follow their conversation in French. She explains that "*to respect [her]*" the family tried to speak in English.

Equally, A spent her last New Year with JY's family in Korea. Speaking no Korean, she found it very difficult to communicate with his family. JY's parents also do not speak English, so all conversation had to occur through JY. A expresses her desire to talk with her partner's parents and frustration at her inability to do so. She also expresses frustration at not being able to be away from JY while in Korea as having no language ability she was unable to communicate with anyone. She complained that it felt like when she had first moved to Japan, like "*starting from nothing again*" (26 Oct, 2019).

JY shares her sentiment as during his first trip to the US to meet her family, he felt overwhelmed by the English and unable to keep up with a lot of the conversation. He talked about wanting to talk to her brother in more depth as he knew that they shared common interests. JY laments his preference to not have people struggle with language on his behalf, saying he was mostly quiet because he didn't want A's

family to be responsible for his lack of language. He vows to try harder to improve his English to avoid the same situation occurring in the future.

C and K being long distance for the majority of their relationship have yet to meet each other's families. However this did not hinder K's planning for that eventuality. He states that he wants to learn Romanian in preparation for the day he meet her family and goes to Romania.

Within the Language Support questions, I asked the couples 'If you and your partner were to have children, what language(s) would they speak?'. The most common response was that the children would learn both parents' L1s. With the intention behind this being the ability to communicate with their grandparents and extended family. Interestingly, some of the patients stated it was not important to them that their children spoke *their* L1, as long as they could communicate with their parents and family. Where the family would be living was also another common consideration, with many couples stating that the children would need to know the language of the country they lived in first and foremost the L1s of the pair could be a choice to learn *if* the children wanted to later in life. One JY and S stated that it was important for their children to speak both of their L1s as a means of knowing their cultures.

Findings:

All couples interviewed prior to meeting their partner spoke or had the desire to speak a second language. However the language was not always their partner's L1. All individuals developed a desire to learn their partner's L1 after engaging in a romantic relationship with them, even if they had had no previous desire to do so. The proximity with their partner and their wish to know them and their families deeper being the overwhelming influence.

All couples despite not sharing an L1 believed they communicated effectively. When asked why many stated their knowledge of their partner's communication style allowed them to successfully communicate. They felt that even if they shared an L1 the issues they experienced in their relationships would not miraculously be eradicated.

K: "if we had the same language, same language I I would have the same problems that we have" (19 Oct, 2019).

Furthermore they spoke of skills they had gained such as patience and the ability to slow down/simplify their speech. Therefore it was unsurprising that they overwhelmingly felt the language they used was secondary in determining the effectiveness of their communication.

It was illustrated that interpersonal and cultural factors were of greater concern to the couples. Being able to understand their partner's cultural background, personality, beliefs and behaviour posed a greater threat in their relationship and communication than merely the language they chose to speak. However, the couples all thought that learning their partner's language was important and wished to be more fluent in their partner's L1. Despite this, many felt that their partner learning *their* L1 was not necessary if they did not wish to.

This sentiment was most common among couples who were both using L2s as their primary language of communication. With only S stating she wished JM could speak Japanese more fluently because she worried he was hindered in his everyday life in Tokyo – “*his freedom is limited by language*” (4 Nov, 2019). In spite of S's worries JM and other couples found that living in their partner's home country helped improve their L2 acquisition. They were better able to improve their listening skills and interact with local people. Yet, living in their partner's home country did not affect their personal communication as all couples stated they hardly ever (if at all) spoke in the L1s together. Hence for all couples, family was the greatest motivator for wanting to improve in their partner's L1.

For this improvement to be significant, it became apparent that a partner's active engagement was essential for L2 acquisition. For A and JM this meant learning to modulate their speech for their respective partners, but wished their partners were better at explaining rules of their L1s. S wanted more exposure to new vocabulary in their everyday encounters, and all agreed that talking together more in their L1s would impact their L2 acquisition.

To conclude, this study illustrated that language alone could not determine the value and successfulness of communication within intercultural relationships. Couples chose the language(s) they spoke based upon the ease in which they could talk and not depending upon the country they lived or what their L1s were. For all couples the difficulty in communication stemmed from their differing cultural backgrounds as A stated in her interview “*it's hard to draw a line between culture and language*” (26 Oct, 2019). However, as JY so clearly argued, and the findings in this study exemplify, “*I don't think language makes the communication problem*” (26 Oct, 2019). These findings stand as an interesting pilot for further research, in which more participants of varying sexual orientations, ages, and relationship styles/statuses will be interviewed. The hope is to gain deeper insight into L2 acquisition and communication in intercultural relationships in more diverse contexts.

Annotation

- 1) Reiter & Gee: Intercultural and interfaith romantic relationships, p.543
- 2) Reiter & Gee: Intercultural and interfaith romantic relationships, p.542p.

References

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