An Analysis of the Learning Process of Hokkien Background Students in English Language Learning: Sociocultural Factors

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of sociocultural factors on the English language learning process of students from Hokkien-speaking backgrounds at SMP Swasta Methodist Tanjung Morawa. Using a qualitative method, the research investigates how language exposure, cultural identity, and social environment affect learners' experiences in acquiring English as a second language through structured questionnaires. Findings reveal that while students benefit from strong family and teacher support, they still face challenges such as pronunciation difficulties and limited vocabulary variation, mainly due to the dominant use of Hokkien at home and minimal engagement in English-related activities. The study highlights the importance of social interaction, community support, and cultural relevance in second language acquisition. The application of Sociocultural Theory, particularly concepts like the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding, is evident in the learners' development. The research suggests that incorporating interactive learning strategies, culturally responsive materials, and consistent language practice in both formal and informal settings can significantly enhance learners' motivation, confidence, and overall proficiency in English. The findings offer practical implications for educators aiming to support bilingual learners in multilingual environments.

Keywords: Hokkien, interactive, pronunciation, Second Language Acquisition, sociocultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has become a critical area of investigation in applied linguistics, especially in multilingual and multicultural societies. The learning process of students acquiring English as a second or third language is not only shaped by cognitive and linguistic factors but also heavily influenced by social and cultural dynamics. In particular, students with distinct ethnolinguistic backgrounds, such as Hokkien-speaking learners, navigate complex language environments that affect their language development in unique ways. The intersection between cultural identity, home language use, and formal education settings creates both opportunities and barriers for language acquisition, necessitating targeted research into these sociocultural interactions.

While past studies have extensively explored language acquisition from a psychological and linguistic perspective, relatively few have examined how students' cultural identities and home language practices influence their English learning outcomes in formal educational contexts.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT), rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), has gained prominence for its emphasis on interaction, cultural mediation, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as central to learning. Compared to purely cognitive models, SCT provides a more holistic lens for examining how learners acquire a second language through meaningful interaction and scaffolding within their sociocultural contexts (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000). Although the value of SCT is well-recognized, its specific application to Hokkien-speaking students remains underexplored (Norton, 2000).

Moreover, research on language learners from minority linguistic backgrounds in Indonesia is still limited. While general SLA findings highlight the benefits of language exposure and motivation, they often fail to address how dominant home languages such as Hokkien can either facilitate or hinder English acquisition (Spolsky, 1989). This lack of localized sociolinguistic insight creates a significant research gap. Additionally, prior studies often treat bilingual learners as a homogeneous group, overlooking how specific community language practices, such as using Hokkien exclusively at home, impact students' confidence, vocabulary range, and classroom participation (Gardner, 1985).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the English learning process of Hokkien-background students at SMP Swasta Methodist Tanjung Morawa. It seeks to examine how social and cultural factors—particularly home language use, peer interaction, community attitudes, and educational support—shape learners' motivation, fluency, and overall proficiency in English. By applying Sociocultural Theory as its theoretical framework, this study offers a critical perspective on how culturally embedded practices affect second language acquisition. The findings are expected to provide educators and policymakers with actionable insights for designing inclusive, culturally responsive English language instruction in multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, this research adds to the limited body of literature focusing on minority language speakers within Indonesian education, providing a much-needed understanding of their unique challenges and assets in SLA.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The process of learning a second language (SLA) is increasingly seen as socially and culturally mediated rather than purely cognitive. Traditional approaches to SLA emphasized internal psychological mechanisms, such as memory and transfer, yet these do not sufficiently account for learners' sociolinguistic environments or their cultural identities. Recent literature argues that language acquisition is deeply intertwined with interactional practices, peer support, familial involvement, and societal expectations (Spolsky, 1989). This broader perspective is particularly essential when examining learners from minority language backgrounds, such as Hokkien speakers in Indonesia, whose linguistic practices at home may diverge from those promoted in formal education settings. Reviewing this literature allows for a critical understanding of the challenges and affordances that these students face in acquiring English.

2.1 Social and Cultural Perspectives on SLA

Sociocultural contexts have a profound effect on learners' motivation, confidence, and exposure to the second language. Studies show that learners who actively engage in meaningful interactions in the target language, both within and outside the classroom, tend to demonstrate greater fluency and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Moreover, cultural identity plays a key role in how learners position themselves in relation to English. According to Norton (2000), language learning is not only about acquiring linguistic competence but also about negotiating identity, especially in multilingual environments.

Family language practices also influence SLA outcomes. Learners from Hokkien-speaking households may experience a language distance between their home and school environments. If English is rarely spoken or valued at home, learners may lack the authentic practice needed for oral fluency, leading to reduced confidence in academic settings (Gardner, 1985). On the other hand, when family members provide encouragement or language support, students are more likely to stay motivated and engaged (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, the challenge remains that many SLA studies treat bilingual learners as a monolithic group and fail to disaggregate by home language or ethnolinguistic identity, which limits the applicability of their findings.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory in SLA

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks in second language acquisition. At its core, SCT emphasizes the role of social interaction, mediation, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). It posits that learners achieve higher levels of competence when supported through scaffolding by more knowledgeable peers or instructors (Donato, 1994). In SLA, this implies that dialogic interaction and collaborative learning are central to language development.

Several scholars have further expanded SCT in the context of SLA. Swain (2000) highlights the importance of collaborative dialogue in pushing learners to produce language beyond their current competence. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) emphasize that language learning is a form of cultural participation, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction rather than individually absorbed. Compared to purely cognitive theories, SCT offers a more holistic approach by embedding learning within real-life social practices.

Despite its theoretical robustness, the application of SCT to minority language learners remains limited. Very few studies explore how learners from culturally distinct backgrounds like Hokkien navigate the tensions between home language practices and English acquisition in school. This gap presents an opportunity to apply SCT more deliberately to these contexts and explore how culturally relevant scaffolding and community-based interaction can support language learning in multilingual classrooms.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the methodological framework used to investigate the English language learning process of Hokkien-background students. The research design, participant selection, instruments used, and analytical techniques are explained to ensure replicability and transparency of the study.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow an in-depth exploration of the learners' sociocultural experiences in acquiring English as a second language. A case study method was deemed appropriate because it focuses on a bounded system—in this case, a student from a Hokkien-speaking background—and provides rich, contextual insights into their language learning process. Through detailed, descriptive data, the study aims to uncover how social and cultural factors influence motivation, proficiency, and interaction patterns in the language learning environment.

3.2 Participants

The participant in this study was a ninth-grade male student at SMP Swasta Methodist Tanjung Morawa. He comes from a Hokkien-speaking household, where Hokkien is the primary language used in daily life. The participant was selected through purposive sampling, based on specific criteria: (1) the student's home language is Hokkien, (2) the student is actively enrolled in English classes, and (3) the student demonstrates sufficient willingness to participate in a reflective study about his language learning experiences. This selection allowed the researcher to focus on a relevant and information-rich case.

3.3 Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to gather data about the student's language background, frequency of using Hokkien, Indonesian, and English, motivations for learning English, and perceived social and cultural influences. Additional data were collected through follow-up interviews and a writing task to assess the student's vocabulary usage and expression. These instruments were administered directly to the participant, and responses were documented for analysis. The triangulation of data collection techniques helped ensure the reliability and depth of the findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The researcher categorized participant responses into emerging themes related to language exposure, sociocultural influence, and motivational factors. The analytical process involved coding the responses, identifying recurring patterns, and interpreting their significance in the context of Sociocultural Theory. The student's writing task was also examined for vocabulary use, fluency, and sentence structure to assess how cultural and social influences manifested in written output. These findings were interpreted alongside the interview and questionnaire data to build a comprehensive understanding of the participant's language learning experience.

Table 1. Vocabulary Analysis

Word/Phrase	Category (Part of Speech)	Accuracy	Alternative Suggestions	Comments
In the past	Phrase	Accurate	Previously	Common phrase, can be varied for style.
didn't understand	Verb Phrase	Accurate	was unfamiliar with	Could be more precise depending on context.
especially tenses	Noun Phrase	Accurate	particularly verb tenses	More precise phrasing.
I only knew some vocabulary	Sentence	Accurate	I had limited vocabulary	More natural phrasing.

felt very bored	Verb Phrase	Accurate	found English quite dull	Alternative phrasing for variety.
started learning	Verb Phrase	Accurate	began studying	Alternative verb choice.
constructing sentences	Verb Phrase	Accurate	forming sentences	Could use a simpler alternative.
trying to have conversations	Verb Phrase	Accurate	attempting conversations	Could be more concise.
participated in a writing competition	Verb Phrase	Accurate	joined a writing contest	More natural phrasing.
was unlucky and didn't win	Verb Phrase	Accurate	wasn't fortunate enough to win	More natural and nuanced.
gained valuable experience	Verb Phrase	Accurate	obtained meaningful experience	Slightly more advanced vocabulary.

The student, who is learning English as a second language with a Hokkien background, demonstrates a fairly good understanding of vocabulary use in a recount text. Some phrase structures are still influenced by the thought patterns of the native language, particularly in word order and word choice. Overall, the vocabulary used is quite accurate, although some phrases could be restructured to sound more natural, such as "I only knew some vocabulary," which would be better as "I had limited vocabulary."

The vocabulary level falls within the A2–B1 range on the CEFR scale, reflecting a basic to intermediate understanding of English usage. However, there are some repetitions that could be improved by incorporating synonyms to enhance lexical variety. Writing fluency is also quite good, though certain expressions sound somewhat rigid and could be refined with more exposure to authentic texts. To improve writing skills, it is recommended that the student read more complex recount texts, practice using synonyms, and explore common English expressions to make their writing sound more natural and varied.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the data collected through a questionnaire, interview, and student writing sample. The findings are categorized into three primary areas: language use and exposure, social and cultural influences, and language learning challenges. Quantitative responses from the questionnaire are summarized in Table 1, while qualitative insights from interviews and writing samples are described thematically.

4.1 Language Use and Exposure

The participant reported that Hokkien is the dominant language used at home, while English is primarily used in classroom settings. The student had been learning English for over three years and stated that he frequently uses English at school but rarely in social settings outside of class.

Table 2. Summary of Language Use Questionnaire Results

An example of a heading	Column A (t)
Duration of English study	More than 3 years
Frequency of English use at school	Often
Comfort level speaking English with peers	Very comfortable
Participation in English-related activities (e.g., clubs, competitions)	Rarely
Family support in learning English	Strongly agree
Teacher encouragement in learning English	Strongly agree
Peer support in improving English	Agree
Use of external resources (e.g., YouTube, apps)	Agree
Preference for using native language at home	Agree
Influence of culture on English learning	Agree

Social and cultural factors also play a significant role in shaping the respondent's English learning experience. Since they primarily speak Hokkien at home, their native language influences their English usage and comprehension. This may explain the limited vocabulary variations observed in the recount text, which could also be linked to their rare participation in English-related activities like speech contests or English clubs. Nevertheless, strong support from family and teachers helps maintain their motivation to learn and practice English.

In formal education, instruction should emphasize pronunciation training and vocabulary expansion through phonetic exercises and contextual learning. Interactive methods like debates and storytelling can enhance engagement and fluency. Contrastive analysis can help address linguistic transfer errors, while culturally relevant materials make learning more meaningful. Strong teacher support, structured feedback, and exposure to authentic English media will further improve language proficiency

4.2 Social and Cultural Influences

The student acknowledged that strong support from family and teachers positively affected his motivation to learn English. However, limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom due to the predominance of Hokkien in the home environment posed challenges to language retention and confidence in informal use. The participant reported high comfort in school-based English activities but showed hesitation in joining extracurricular activities that require spoken English in public or competitive settings.

4.3 Language Learning Challenges

The primary challenge identified was pronunciation, particularly of multisyllabic and unfamiliar English words. The participant also cited a limited vocabulary range, which constrained his ability to express ideas fluently in writing. A writing task completed by the participant revealed correct sentence structures but a tendency to repeat basic vocabulary, lacking lexical variation.

Table 3. Vocabulary Patterns in Student Recount Writing

Word or Phrase	Accuracy	Suggested Improvement
didn't understand	Accurate	was unfamiliar with
I only knew some vocabulary	Accurate	I had limited vocabulary
felt very bored	Accurate	found English quite dull
trying to have conversations	Accurate	attempting conversations
was unlucky and didn't win	Accurate	wasn't fortunate enough to win

Overall, the student's writing falls within the CEFR A2–B1 level, indicating emerging fluency with consistent grammatical control but limited lexical diversity. The survey results and vocabulary analysis indicate that the respondent has a solid foundation in English, having studied the language for more than three years and frequently using it at school. However, they face challenges in pronunciation, which may influence their word choices in writing. For instance, the use of phrases like didn't understand instead of more precise alternatives such as was unfamiliar with suggests difficulties in grasping certain words orally before incorporating them into writing.

Despite these challenges, the respondent actively seeks to improve their English proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening. Their recount text demonstrates correct sentence structures, though their vocabulary could be further enriched. Suggestions from the Vocabulary Analysis, such as replacing felt very bored with found English quite dull, could enhance fluency and expression in writing. With more intensive practice and increased participation in English-related activities, they can significantly improve their language skills and produce more sophisticated written work.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the English language learning process of students from Hokkien-speaking backgrounds is significantly shaped by sociocultural factors, particularly home language use, access to social support, and cultural perceptions of English. While the participant demonstrates a high level of motivation and receives strong encouragement from both family and teachers, several challenges persist—most notably, the dominance of Hokkien in the home and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. These challenges manifest in specific language skill gaps, such as limited vocabulary variation and pronunciation difficulties.

Theoretically, these results affirm the applicability of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) to second language acquisition in multilingual settings. As proposed by Vygotsky (1978), learning is most effective when it occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), facilitated by scaffolding from more knowledgeable peers or instructors. The participant's improved classroom performance, bolstered by teacher and peer support, aligns with this principle. However, the absence of extended interaction in English within the student's social environment limits the effectiveness of this scaffolding beyond the formal learning space. This finding supports Swain's (2000) argument that meaningful language production requires dialogic interaction that goes beyond the classroom.

From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that educational interventions must extend beyond traditional instruction to include community-based exposure and culturally relevant engagement strategies. The participant's reluctance to join English clubs or competitions highlights a gap in creating low-stress, real-world opportunities for language use. Language learning programs that involve families, peer communities, and media exposure can provide additional contexts for practice, thereby reinforcing the learner's linguistic confidence and communicative competence.

Furthermore, the tendency to repeat basic vocabulary, as seen in the writing task, underscores the need for targeted vocabulary-building activities and exposure to authentic English texts. Teachers may consider incorporating contrastive analysis between Hokkien and English to address common transfer errors and support lexical development. Additionally, incorporating visual aids, multimedia, and interactive simulations may benefit learners from oral traditions who might struggle with abstract text-based instruction.

In the broader context of multilingual education in Indonesia, this study highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique needs of learners from minority language backgrounds. By focusing on a single case, the research provides deep insight into the interplay of cultural identity and language acquisition, which can inform more inclusive pedagogical approaches. These findings challenge the assumption that all bilingual learners share similar trajectories, emphasizing the need for differentiated instruction based on linguistic and cultural context.

Ultimately, this study confirms that while motivation and support are critical, they must be complemented by consistent, meaningful language exposure and culturally responsive teaching to achieve holistic second language development.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the English language learning process among Hokkien-background students is deeply influenced by sociocultural factors, including home language dominance, family and teacher support, and the learner's cultural identity. While classroom instruction and motivational support provide a strong foundation for language acquisition, limited opportunities for authentic English use outside the classroom pose significant challenges. The participant's consistent grammatical performance and motivation are promising, yet constrained by lexical limitations and reduced exposure to varied communicative contexts.

The application of Sociocultural Theory in this context proves valuable in highlighting how interaction, scaffolding, and cultural mediation support second language development. These findings underscore the necessity of incorporating culturally responsive strategies and extending learning beyond formal instruction into community and family environments. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to English language instruction for learners from minority linguistic backgrounds in multilingual societies.

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