

An Analysis of Second Language Acquisition Among Ethnic Minority Children from a Cultural Capital Perspective

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Abstract: This study investigates the second language acquisition processes of ethnic minority children in a specific region of Sichuan through the lens of cultural capital theory. The results indicate that a deficient accumulation of cultural capital within family settings—manifested by limited access to English reading materials and language learning resources—alongside the uneven distribution of cultural capital within educational institutions, has engendered multiple obstacles in the children's English language development. These obstacles encompass diminished learning motivation and fragile linguistic foundations. Furthermore, inequalities in sociocultural capital restrict children's chances to learn English and the quality of their learning environments. In response, the study advocates for targeted interventions: families should enhance their investment in cultural capital by cultivating English-rich environments; schools ought to optimize the allocation of resources and implement a variety of English language activities; and broader societal efforts should focus on providing supplementary English learning platforms to mitigate disparities in cultural capital. Collectively, these strategies aim to improve second language acquisition outcomes among minority children and advance educational equity.

Keywords: cultural capital; second language acquisition; ethnic minority children; educational equity

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1. Introduction

English functions as a crucial international lingua franca in the globalized and information-centric context, owing to its distinctive attributes. Within China's educational system, which prioritizes academic achievement and excellence, English education is integrated as an essential element, underscoring the importance of English as the predominant language in academia, commerce, and international diplomacy. Accordingly, English language courses are embedded within compulsory education and core curricula in China, with numerous educational institutions providing specialized English programs.

However, in the ethnic minority regions of China, a range of factors, including geographical and economic conditions, have contributed to disparities in the development of English education, leading to various outcomes in second language acquisition among ethnic minority children. Sichuan Province, characterized by its multi-ethnic population, serves as a representative case study reflecting the situation of English education in the Midwest of China. Conventional explanations tend to attribute these challenges to superficial issues such as insufficient teaching resources or inadequate student preparedness, thereby neglecting the underlying structural determinants.

The theoretical framework of cultural capital, as articulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1997), provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine educational inequality. This study investigates the English language acquisition process of an ethnic minority child from a designated area in Sichuan Province through longitudinal observation and comprehensive interviews. Under an analytical framework of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1997), the study explores the child's experiences in learning English, analyzes the obstacles encountered by ethnic minority children within mainland China's English education system, and considers the probabilities of implementing diverse pedagogical approaches to improve English education strategies in minority educational settings.

Accordingly, the study seeks to address the following central questions: What specific challenges do ethnic minority children in a particular region of Sichuan may encounter in second language learning at the familial, educational, and societal levels due to limited cultural capital? In what ways do these challenges interact with each other to produce systemic impediments to second language acquisition? Furthermore, how can multi-tiered, practical strategies be formulated from the perspective of cultural capital to effectively enhance second language learning outcomes? This research offers substantial practical implications by providing targeted recommendations for the advancement of foreign language education policies in ethnic minority areas, the innovation of teaching methodologies, and the promotion of supportive family and community environments.

2. An Overview of Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

This section briefly introduces Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, links this theory to ethnic minority

children's difficulties in second language acquisition, and states that this study fills the gaps in micro-level research on second language acquisition.

2.1 The three forms of cultural capital

Bourdieu conceptualizes capital as “accumulated labour” (1997, 189), which empowers individuals to appropriate social resources in tangible forms, thereby functioning as a significant structural force within society. “Capital extends beyond economic capital, represented by monetary assets, to include immaterial forms such as social capital and cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, 191), with the latter being particularly important. In his seminal work *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu delineates cultural capital into three distinct forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (1997).

Together, these three forms underpin an individual's status and influence within social and cultural domains. Embodied cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions acquired through education and personal development. This form necessitates an investment of time and other types of capital for its acquisition and is accumulated through processes of internalization and prolonged socialization, ultimately becoming an intrinsic aspect of the individual. Objectified cultural capital refers to the meaning in both material and symbolic dimensions: materially, it is represented by tangible cultural goods such as books or artworks, which can be physically owned and exchanged; symbolically, the possession of a prestigious artwork conveys not only its aesthetic value but also the owner's prestige, reflecting refined taste and elevated social status. Institutionalized cultural capital is formally recognized by social institutions, particularly educational systems, through official certifications such as university diplomas or degree certificates, thereby legitimizing an individual's cultural competence and social standing.

In the educational context, children who are endowed with mainstream cultural capital from the outset of their educational journey tend to adjust more readily to the established norms and expectations of the school environment. Their behavioral patterns correspond closely with the institutional culture, thereby facilitating their academic achievement. In contrast, children who do not possess this form of cultural capital frequently encounter feelings of alienation and frustration. Previous domestic and international studies have explored factors influencing minority students' education from multiple perspectives, such as language policies, bilingual education programs, and inadequate financial resources. The difficulties experienced by ethnic minority children in acquiring a second language largely arise from systemic deficiencies in the accumulation, acknowledgment, and transfer of cultural capital across different spheres, including familial and institutional.

2.2 The socioculturalturn in second language acquisition: from motivation to investment

Conventional theories of second language acquisition, exemplified by Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, underscore the pivotal role of motivation in achieving successful language learning. In contrast, Norton (1995) proposed the notion of investment, which more explicitly connects language learning to learners' social identities and the accrual of social capital. According to this framework, when learners perceive that their investment in language learning fails to generate the expected social capital, their willingness to continue investing diminishes markedly. This perspective resonates with cultural capital theory and provides an explanatory framework for the low levels of motivation and engagement among minority children, particularly when they



perceive limited tangible benefits of acquiring English for their future prospects.

Notably, a limited number of investigations have begun to consider issues related to cultural capital; however, these investigations tend to emphasize macro-level theoretical frameworks or focus predominantly on migratory children. There remains a deficiency in detailed, empirical studies that specifically examine second language acquisition among children in designated minority regions. This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting thorough fieldwork aimed at elucidating the micro-level processes through which cultural capital impacts second language acquisition among ethnic minority children.

3. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative methodology, the case study method, to examine second language acquisition among ethnic minority children in a designated area of Sichuan Province. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the precise location is not disclosed.

3.1 Research setting and subject

The study is situated in western Sichuan Province, a region noted for its multi-ethnic populations and unique minority cultural heritage. The investigation centers on a child from a local ethnic minority group.

3.2 Research methods and procedure

The study was carried out over a period of three months, employing three principal data collection techniques.

Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach with the child, incorporating a set of neutral questions designed to investigate their experiences, challenges, and attitudes toward learning English. Interviews were also held with the parents to gain insight into their educational philosophies and the academic support they provide to their child. Secondly, participant observation was undertaken, wherein the researcher observed English lessons to analyze teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, and the child's responses to teaching activities. Observations of language use during breaks were also conducted. Thirdly, artifact analysis involved the collection and examination of various materials, including the child's English assignments, examination papers, household book inventories, school timetables, and resource allocation records.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which entailed iterative reading, comparison, and induction to identify key themes pertaining to limitations on cultural capital.

4. Research Findings

This study explored cultural capital constraints on children's second language acquisition, finding interconnected challenges across the familial, educational, and societal spheres that form a vicious "cultural capital poverty" cycle.

4.1 The familial sphere: inherent deficiencies in cultural capital accumulation

Within the family—the fundamental and most significant context for the transmission of cultural capital—the respondent demonstrated a phenomenon characterized as “triple deprivation”.

First, there is a deficiency in embodied capital. Parents acknowledged their complete lack of English proficiency, stating that they “cannot understand English at all,” which impedes them to provide academic support to their children. More critically, they lack the awareness and ability to foster their children’s interest in language learning, thereby limiting the establishment of “family practices” conducive to second language acquisition. Second, there is an absence of objectified capital. The survey indicates that English reading materials are virtually nonexistent in this households, with the child relying almost only on school textbooks for English literacy. While smartphones and functional computers in this family are primarily utilized for adult communication and entertainment rather than for educational purposes. Third, expectations concerning institutionalized capital remain ambiguous. Parents’ perceptions of English learning are largely restricted to exam preparation, without recognition of its broader, long-term significance as a “passport” to future academic and professional opportunities. This limited understanding directly contributes to low expectations and minimal demands placed upon their child.

4.2 The educational sphere: a “central deficiency” in cultural capital distribution

Educational institutions are expected to overcome gaps in familial capital; nevertheless, within the scope of this study, schools themselves face challenges in the equitable distribution of cultural capital. This predicament largely stems from and a misalignment of the pedagogical approaches employed. For the objectified cultural capital, the computers accessible to students are outdated and remain underutilized in English language instruction, while the school’s English-language reading materials are antiquated and fail to engage students’ interest. Additionally, observations of interactions with the child indicate a disconnect between teaching strategies and student engagement. Classroom instruction tends to be monotonous and does not resonate with the cultural “habitus” of ethnic minority children, who demonstrate strengths in song, dance, and collective activities. The curriculum content is largely detached from the students’ experiences, rendering learning a tedious and obligatory task. This scenario exemplifies Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic violence”, wherein schools impose an alien educational model without adapting it into a form of capital that students can comprehend or embrace, thereby diminishing their motivation to learn English.

4.3 The societal sphere: the “external vacuum” of cultural capital environment

Beyond the family and school contexts, the broader social environment fails to provide adequate cultural capital support for English learning. The lack of authentic language environments restricts English learning to superficial engagement with textbooks. Virtually no opportunities for English communication are available in the residential regions of the surveyed families. Unlike ethnic minority regions with tourist areas, this region receives almost no foreign visitors. Within this context, English remains entirely confined to textbooks, functioning as “dead” knowledge rather than a “living” tool. The widening digital divide further exacerbates this linguistic “vacuum”. Although the internet can theoretically overcome geographical isolation, household financial



constraints and limited internet literacy among both parents and the child make it difficult for the child to access high-quality online English learning resources (e. g. , educational applications or original animated series).

The challenges across these three domains are not isolated; they connect with one another, forming a vicious cycle of “cultural capital poverty”: children from economically disadvantaged families enroll in under-resourced schools, receive an education that is misaligned with their cultural backgrounds, and have almost no opportunities in their social environment to apply or consolidate their second language learning. Their expectations of failure in this “investment” are continually reinforced, which ultimately results in persistently low levels of second language acquisition.

5. Discussion and Strategy Development: Systematic Efforts to Break Capital Barriers

5.1 The deep mechanism of the dilemma: a “capital poverty cycle” model

This study reveals that the predicament of second language acquisition among ethnic minority children presents a classic “capital poverty cycle.” As the initial source of cultural capital, families fail to supply the requisite cultural capital. Schools, ostensibly functioning as the primary institutions for capital redistribution, are unable to offset familial capital deficits—this is attributable to their inherent capital inadequacy and suboptimal capital transmission mechanisms. Meanwhile, society, as the macro environmental support, lacks platforms for the appreciation and application of such capital. Collectively, these factors trap children in a persistent state of “net outflow” of cultural capital across their growth trajectories. Neither the children nor their families perceive or attain tangible returns from English learning; this, in turn, leads to cautious, passive, and unsustainable investment patterns in second language acquisition.

5.2 Pathways to address core acquisition difficulties and collaborative strategies

Breaking this cycle requires systematic and targeted interventions, and demands designing corresponding solutions for each stage of children’s second language acquisition.

First, at the familial level, the effective activation of family cultural capital for children’s second language learning involves three key aspects: reshaping parental perceptions, providing tangible cultural capital, and facilitating parent-child interaction.

Reshape parental perceptions of second language acquisition. Through community lectures and the sharing of success cases, parents can be guided to recognize English as a critical “soft skill” and a key capital for their children’s future development. This helps counter misconceptions such as “English is useless.” or “English learning is solely for exams.”

Provide tangible cultural capital for children. Parents should strive to offer children English supplementary reading materials, including illustrated picture books, simple interactive touch-and-talk cards, and audio resources with trilingual explanations (Chinese, English, and minority languages). This lowers the threshold for children to access objectified cultural capital.

Facilitate parent-child interaction in second language learning. Even if parents lack English proficiency, they

can be encouraged to create supportive “family learning routines” through simple English games and daily conversation guides—for instance, by listening to English recordings or viewing English picture books together.

Second, at the educational level, reconstruction and innovation of second language teaching support systems involve three core dimensions: precise optimization of resource allocation, localized curriculum innovation, and strengthening of teacher development.

Precise optimization of school resource allocation serves as the foundation. This not only involves upgrading physical facilities but also procuring a sufficient quantity of graded English reading materials and multimedia resources. These resources should align with children’s cognitive levels, be engaging, and reflect cultural sensitivity.

Advancing localised curriculum innovation is critical. Teachers should be encouraged to develop school-based courses that integrate English learning with ethnic minority cultures. Examples include describing ethnic festival stories in English and creating English labels for local specialties. This allows students to gradually transition from familiar knowledge to the target language, making English learning accessible and meaningful.

Strengthening teacher development is paramount. Through initiatives like the the “National Cultivation Plan” and “Paired Assistance” projects, in-service teachers should receive systematic training in English proficiency and pedagogical methods. Meanwhile, exploring collaborations with higher education institutions to recruit English major interns can inject fresh perspectives into school English teaching.

Third, at the societal level, coordination and support for second language learning involve three key actions—establishing external support networks, activating public cultural resources, and bridging the digital gap.

Filling the “vacuum” requires establishing external support networks. By collaborating with universities and non-profit organisations, initiatives such as “online English teaching” and “summer English camps” can be launched. These programmes open windows to the broader world for ethnic minority children, enabling them to interact with native English speakers or advanced English users. This firsthand experience of English’s practical value helps stimulate their intrinsic motivation for second language learning.

Activating and utilising public cultural resources of second language acquisition entails organising regular learning activities. Local libraries and youth centres can regularly organise activities like “English corners” and “English animated film screenings”, creating low-cost, accessible micro-environments for English learning.

Bridging the digital gap demands building supervised “digital learning centers”. “Digital learning centers” can be built in community hubs or schools, where students can access resources under supervision. These centers can guide students to high-quality educational websites and materials, transforming digital devices from entertainment tools into learning aids.

6. Conclusion

Through in-depth research on the child in an ethnic minority region of Sichuan, this study reveals the underlying logic of their second language acquisition challenges: these challenges are not merely a pedagogical issue, but a societal problem rooted in structural deficiencies. Specifically, they stem from systemic deficiencies and mismatches of cultural capital across three domains—family, school, and society. As a result, some ethnic



minority children undergo their second language acquisition process with a heavy load.

The primary contribution of this study lies in integrating these fragmented manifestations of challenges into a coherent analytical model of the “capital poverty cycle” within the framework of cultural capital theory. Based on this model, a three-pronged intervention strategy is proposed, encompassing family activation, school reconstruction, and social mobilisation. The core principle of these strategies is not only to supplement objectified cultural capital, but also to cultivate embodied cultural capital and reshape a supportive “habitus.” Through integration with localization, this approach aims to achieve an innovative creative transformation of cultural capital.

Admittedly, this study has certain limitations. As an in-depth case study, its findings possess significant implications but are constrained by a highly limited sample size, and thus may only reflect context-specific conditions. Consequently, caution is warranted regarding the generalisability of its findings. Future research can build on this foundation by expanding the sample scope, conducting cross-regional comparative studies, or adopting longitudinal tracking designs to more dynamically reveal the long-term effects of cultural capital accumulation on second language acquisition.

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