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## Sojourners' second language learning and integration. The moderating effect of multicultural personality traits

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of trainable intercultural personality traits in the widely assumed link between immigrants' second language (L2) learning and their cultural integration in the host country. The research was based on data of temporary immigrants (sojourners), being international students who reside in the Netherlands and participants of a Dutch language course (total  $N = 163$ ). Questionnaires were used to collect data at two time points (time lag: 3 months). Findings from multiple regression analyses reveal that an increase in L2 proficiency is related to a positive change in two indicators of cultural integration: identification with the host society and attitudes towards the host culture. An increase in L2 proficiency appears to be related to a positive change in terms of identification, regardless of sojourners' personality traits. With respect to attitudes towards the host culture, however, we find that increasing L2 proficiency only goes together with a positive change in attitudes towards the host culture for sojourners with a high degree of social initiative. Another notable finding is that, in the time period that this study was conducted, sojourners with a high degree of openness became more positive in their attitudes towards the host culture, regardless of the progress they made in terms of L2 proficiency. Results from this study cautiously suggest the importance of social perceptual personality traits in the cultural integration of sojourners. In line with this, institutional policies on the L2 learning of sojourners, including the training of social perceptual personality traits, could be recommendable.

## Introduction

Migration is an old phenomenon. Nowadays, on a yearly basis millions of people migrate permanently to other countries (OECD, 2016). This immense migration asks for effective policy which is directed at integrating these immigrants in the host society. In this context, throughout decades, many researchers have suggested that being proficient in the language of the host country is a key factor – or even a prerequisite – for immigrants' integration in the host society (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Giles & Byrne, 1982; Gordon, 1964). To date, many politicians and policymakers embrace this claim; integration programs directed at permanent immigrants generally have a strong emphasis on fostering second language (L2) acquisition.

However, in recent decades not only permanent but also temporary migration numbers have grown (Bochner, 2006; OECD, 2016). Specifically this concerns 'people who travel internationally to achieve a particular goal or objective with the expectation that they will return to their country of origin after the purpose of their travel has been achieved' (Safdar & Berno, 2016). Many of these so called

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sojourners are either expatriates (expats) who left their home country for reasons of work or international students.<sup>1</sup> Attracting expats is seen as beneficial to institutions and countries as a whole because they can introduce technologies and knowledge (Linton, 2017). Similarly, international students are attracted because they are an important source of income and (cultural) knowledge (Chakma, 2012; Gardner, 2014; Kunin, 2012). However, the gains of these sojourners are not self-evident. Adjustment problems of expats can lead to failure which inflicts costs instead (Tung, 1987). Likewise, the socio economic benefits of international students for their host societies are dependent on the extent to which they are able to positively adjust in their new environment (Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015).

An important assumption of this study is that successful adjustment of sojourners can be facilitated by L2 proficiency. In the case of students, for example, a language barrier is associated with few interactions with native students (Mori, 2000). This low contact with host students in turn, is associated with lack of belongingness and connectedness with the host culture (Scott et al., 2015), aka cultural integration. Presumably, similar processes occur in expats.

It thus seems that L2 learning is of similar importance to the cultural integration sojourners as it is to permanent immigrants. Earlier research stresses the importance of cultural integration in the concerning group. It shows that low adjustment in terms of connectedness to the host society predicts low psychological adjustment (e.g. Playford & Safdar, 2007). Thus, despite the fact that sojourners can be thought of as living in an international bubble with many co-sojourners to which they can relate, it also seems of importance that they relate to members of the host society and culturally integrate.

All in all, institutional policies on L2 learning of sojourners seem recommendable. However, before actually giving such recommendation, several questions need to be answered. Firstly, is an increase in L2 proficiency actually associated with a higher extent of cultural integration? Earlier research on international students and expats already found an association between L2 proficiency and indicators of cultural integration (e.g. Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; Kang, 2006). These studies thus show evidence that enhancing L2 proficiency fosters sojourners' cultural integration in the host society. However, it is interesting to note that these studies only focused on one point in time.

Secondly, would increasing the cultural integration by means of L2 courses work for *all* sojourners? Is a focus on improving language proficiency really the most important tool for cultural integration? Or does this only benefit a few? It seems plausible to doubt that "one size fits all". Rather, based on earlier research revealing the importance of personality in integration (e.g. Leong, 2007; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002), it can be assumed that the degree to which L2 proficiency is associated with cultural integration will differ between sojourners with different personality traits. A plausible reason for such an assumption is that some personality traits may facilitate the actual *use* of the L2 and (thus) the extent to which sojourners are receptive for integration. An example is the 'Big Five' dimension openness-to-experience which reflects proactive seeking and appreciation of experience (Costa & McCrae, 1985; Dewaele, 2012). The degree of openness-to-experience is positively related to actual L2 use (Ożańska-Ponikwia & Dewaele, 2012), and might thus be essential for cultural integration. In this context, especially trainable personality traits are of interest, because these, if they indeed appear to be relevant, could be targeted in L2 courses.

The current study aimed to test the relevance of L2 learning for the cultural integration of sojourners. We did so by using data from sojourners, whose L2 proficiency could be expected to have changed over the time interval between our two measurements (three months). Specifically the present research concerned Dutch language course participants and international psychology students who just arrived in the Netherlands ( $N = 167$ ). Firstly, we studied whether, as correlational research suggests, in our sample an *increase* in Dutch language proficiency is indeed associated with an *increase* in cultural integration. In line with previous work (e.g. Hagendoorn, Veenman, & Vollebergh, 2003), we used attitudes towards the host culture and identification with the host society as indicators of cultural integration. Secondly, we investigated whether the positive relation between L2 proficiency and cultural integration was stronger for sojourners who score high on certain trainable personality traits.

## Language and integration

Gordon (1964) was one of the first scientists who identified L2 proficiency as a key factor in immigrants' integration in the host-society. According to his 'classical assimilation theory', L2 proficiency is a form of integration which stimulates all other forms of integration. In a similar vein, the assumption of much contemporary integration policy directed at permanent immigrants is that learning a L2 will facilitate further orientation towards the host society. Although not all researchers agree about the exact causality between the factors involved, many indeed found support for a relation between L2 proficiency and indicators of cultural integration. In the concerning studies, of which majority is conducted among sojourners, high L2 proficiency has for example been found to be associated with a strong overall orientation towards the host society (Jiang, Green, Henley, & Masten, 2009; Kang, 2006), more favorable attitudes towards (members of) the host society (Rubinfeld, Clément, Lussier, Lebrun, & Auger, 2006) and stronger identification with the host society (Chen et al., 2008; Rubinfeld et al., 2006). Putting these correlational findings in a longer time frame, it can be expected that an increase in sojourners L2 proficiency is associated with a higher extent of cultural integration. Specifically, in the present study, the first hypothesis is:

**H1.** Among sojourners, an increase in L2 proficiency is associated with a positive change in (a) *attitudes* towards the host culture, and (b) *identification* with the host society.

<sup>1</sup> Tourists are also sojourners (Safdar & Berno, 2016). They are a large but quite distinct group. In the current study the term 'sojourners' is used to refer to international students and expats.

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