

# Analysis of the Influence of Schema Theory on Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** Scratch from the definition of “Schema” and “Schema Theory”, to further analyze its positive impact and insightful guidance schema theory has exerted over cross-cultural communication samples. And that sort of similar conclusions or patterns could be applied and greatly referred into second language learning process, providing certain new angles about foreign language studying.

**Keywords:** Schema Theory, Second Language Acquisition

## 1. Introduction

As mentioned in the Encyclopedia of Social Psychology, a schema refers to a cognitive structure that represents an individual’s knowledge of things, people, or the environment around. It includes the knowledge concerning characteristics of the objects that are already known and the relationship between these characteristics. The schema is an abstract description of a whole item with a focus on the similarities between many cases inside. Schemas can be used to help people simplify reality under certain circumstance. More importantly, schemas provide necessary guidance to people about dealing with new information coming in. Schemas would establish expectations for information yet to get involved in, and help to undercover several details of how the external stimulus are related to a strange and general concept, while inconsistent information would be technically filtered out <sup>[1]</sup>.

Schema theory overwhelmingly covers three major braches as language schema, content schema and formal schema. According to the schema theory, if a second language learner wants to master the second language well, he or she should at least have the language and content schema of the second language in his mind <sup>[2]</sup>. Language schema is the basic knowledge of language, which can be considered as the knowledge of language grammar, phonetics, vocabulary and so on. The content schema includes two parts: background knowledge and common knowledge. And common knowledge refers to the knowledge both shared by the learner and target language or culture to be learned, or to call them some common sense <sup>[3]</sup>. It can be found that those schemas have commonality to some extent in the fields of idioms or ritual habits.

## 2. Influence of existing schema theory on intercultural communication

When it comes to cross-cultural communication, according to the schema theory, the social communication schemas appeared in individual’s mind will could be widely divergent since the participants are from different cultures background and there may be great differences in their personal experiences under different cultural backgrounds. That is the reason why their choice, understanding and behavior, and processing of information may sometimes bring unexpected conflicts.

According to the summary of existing data, these situations that cultural schema could exert impacts on cross-cultural communication can be divided into the following three ones: cultural schema overlapping, cultural schema conflict, and cultural schema default.

### 2.1 Cultural schema overlapping

The American translation theorist Nida once pointed out in a lecture report that “languages and cultures all over the world are amazing similar”, and mentioned that the similarities accounted for 90%, while the differences took up for only 10%. Take an example, there is a description like “as busy as bee” in English, and exactly a same expression in Chinese called “像蜜蜂一样忙碌”. It can be seen that there are corresponding schemas in transcendental cultural schemas with different backgrounds, which demonstrates that the overlap of cultural schemas plays a positive role in the realization of cross-cultural communication. Namely, two parties participating in can communicate smoothly as long as they activate the corresponding schema shared in respectively prior cultural schema.

### 2.2 Cultural schema conflict

Cross-cultural involvers may also experience different or even conflicting cultural schemas in transcendental stage due to diverse cultural backgrounds, which might accumulate opposite understandings or bring unnecessary communication barriers. Although this chance estimated is to be around 10% within communicating fact, still it might cause misunderstandings on both sides or lead to an

interruption of communication. The classic example is “Dragon”, a ethnic symbol of China. When quoted from Western “Bible”, “Dragon”, a derogatory term, standing for “devil” and “satanic” to describe a monster that “confuses the world” by fierce and violent people. It is a symbol of evil and violence. Therefore, if cross-cultural communicators merely produce a priori cultural schema from the Western cultural background, they cannot understand the expectations of “Looking for a child to become a dragon” from Chinese parents.

When encountering a communication that may contain conflicts among cultural schemas, ensure that communication can be continued, communicators must proactively adjust their corresponding information when decoding the source cultural schemas to.

### **2.3 Default of cultural schema**

If intercultural communicators do not master cultural background knowledge needed and fail to form a priori cultural schema, it will be hard to understand the speaker’s true intentions. Like the expression “Carry coals to Newcastle”, you must have a British city schema in mind before understanding the term refers to effort in vain (Newcastle is the country where coal is produced in the UK). Cultural schema default caused by cultural background difference in cross-cultural communication do bring certain obstacles to the situation when both sides can not get clear about the others’ intention.

## **3. Reference significance of schema theory for second language acquisition**

*Difficulties in the process of second language acquisition.* With reference to several scenarios in which schema theory plays a role in cross-cultural communication, some unsatisfactory situations can be comparably concluded that may occur in the process of second language acquisition. After sorting and summarizing, it is aim to lay a solid basis for follow-up summary and reflection, and seek corresponding solutions.

First of all, in the process of learning a second language, for no doubts there would be few corresponding language defaults due to the lack of appropriate schemas for the specific environment. At this moment, it is difficult for people to effectively recognize the language environment and situation, let alone to respond effectively. As a result, not only the learning process is more laborious, the increasing pressure may even lead to a high degree of uncertainty and psychological anxiety. When talking about students preparing for studying abroad, a heated problem widely facing is target language learning. As little contact has been established with the content of language background in the past learning experience, learning from scratch often dampens the enthusiasm of planned goals.

Secondly, in a cross-cultural environment, besides the lack of schemas for acquiring new knowledge, the inaccuracy of old schemas affects more in the process of learning a second knowledge, namely, the existing schema conflicts. For example, many Chinese students studying abroad used to be smart and self-confident at home, quite familiar with English in textbooks. But when first arrived in the stage land, he or she is not even sure about how to answer the easiest question “how are you?” This is due to the lack of application scenarios of local language and training of localized teaching methods, rather than intellectual factors.

### **3.1 The connection between schema theory and second language acquisition**

To most extent, socialized people their responses to the environment are often “schema-driven” rather than “data-driven”, or reactive type rather than learning type. The higher degree of socialization in the original culture is linked to worse cross-cultural adaptability and greater the difficulty in adapting. Therefore, it is always found that adults are slower to adapt than children and have weaker language skills; people who have less knowledge of local culture have better language skills and adapt sooner than those who know more about authentic culture. Studies have shown that children under the age of 9 have basically no difficulty in “cross-cultural adaptation” after immigrating abroad, while people over 15 will feel more “cultural conflicts” in cross-cultural adaptation.

Therefore, when learning a second language, besides meticulous language content learning, more attention should be paid on language environment, language background, and actual language application scenarios. Those relevant standpoints, content and characteristics concerning are the so-called “cultural schema.” Only by truly mastering cultural schema in multi aspects can better carry out language learning and conduct social activities in the context of cross-cultural communication.

### **3.2 Positive effect of schema theory on second language acquisition**

In simple terms, the process of second language acquisition is a period of constructing language and linguistic thinking that greatly differs from the native language thinking, or to compare the native language schema with the target language schema for reference, to derive respective solutions towards target language.

As long as the existing schema overlaps with the target one, the concept of “cultural schema” can be appropriately quoted to learn through and find common points which concerns about language environment, language background, and actual language application scenarios with an overall angle of information grasping and usage. That is to say, once in the same language background, methods like training different expression response in multiple languages at the same time could be efficient where learners can be more familiar with and proficient in answering methods and content from two aspects, which facilitates the long-term accumulation of the background content of the target language, and ensures a better adaptation to parts consistent in both cultural content.

When certain difference occurs between existing and target schema, influence of schema theory on cross-cultural communication could offer great insights. According to characteristics, the overlap, difference and conflict of cultural schema, voice, vocabulary, grammar and other similarities and differences should be considered first. According to different language learning stages within a long-term accumulating, proactively activate similar schemas, analyze different schemas, and accumulate various schemas on a long time basis, to promote the reference and analogical learning from the native language to the target language.

To promote the transfer process of language, the formation and refinement of schemas, and to discover as many points of the universality of language as possible, a certain amount of practice is indispensable. Practically apply the knowledge of the second language learned through practice to promote various variables in the second language acquisition mechanism, such as the dynamic interaction between the environment, learners, and languages, so as to consolidate and sublimate the understanding of the second

language learned. And on this basis, through a certain period of accumulation and precipitation, summarizing and condensing and refining, it can be surely formed into a special language schema for its own use, which can definitely lay a solid foundation to subsequent systemization of the cognitive content, and to the expansion of the knowledge structure in the category of second language acquisition.

In any case, the ultimate goal of learning any foreign language is practical application. The application results at a certain stage, or after accumulating more academic achievements, will naturally stimulate a stronger attitude towards knowledge acquiring and transform the goal of familiarity with schemas into mastering schemas. That is to say, in the second foreign language learning, we should fully mobilize the initiative of individuals, and sublimate the learning and understanding of the second language step by step from practice under the guidance of the schema theory. And finally form an independent second language schema and an independent cognitive thinking system.

## Conclusion

In cross-cultural adaptation, people need to recognize different scenarios and learn the corresponding social schema to ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness of behavior. Under the influence of the mother tongue schema, the second language acquisition is finally formed through the role of schema transfer. Second language acquisition is a complex cognitive process involving many factors, and the learning method guided by schema theory is only one of them. This further enhances the operability of cross-cultural adaptation training, such as strengthening situational teaching in foreign language teaching. In academic research, the differences of behavior and thoughts in the same situation caused by different social schemas from diverse cultural background can be further investigated, or the differences in situations in different cultures, so as to further improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. In short, as a new theoretical model, schema theory has shown new prospects for the study of second language acquisition.

## References

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