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I speak, thus I belong?

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Chapter 6

General conclusions and discussion

6.1 General conclusions and discussion

The overarching aim of this dissertation was to provide new insights regarding the question: *How and to what extent is second language learning related to cultural integration and which factors facilitate or hinder this?*

More specifically, we addressed three questions: Firstly, which factors facilitate or hinder immigrants' second language proficiency? Secondly, to what extent does second language learning actually go together with an increasing cultural integration? And finally, are there other factors that are relevant in this relation between second language learning and cultural integration such as multicultural personality traits or interethnic friendships? By examining our questions among various groups of immigrants we aimed to provide insight into the extent to which findings from both earlier research and the current dissertation can be generalized to different groups of immigrants.

In the following sections we begin with summarizing the studies and main findings reported in the four empirical chapters of this dissertation. In these chapters our overarching research question was addressed from various angles for distinct groups of immigrants residing in the Netherlands. This is followed by a general discussion of the implications of our findings for theory, practice and future research.

6.2 Summary per chapter

Chapter 2. This chapter focused on the factors that may facilitate or hinder second language proficiency. Specifically it was examined whether immigrants who differ in terms of background characteristics also differ in the extent to which they acquire the second language. Notably, this question was addressed for a group of immigrants that is generally underrepresented in research: immigrants who hardly participate in the host society, and who have a relatively low level of second language proficiency (Groves & Couper, 1998; Stoop, 2005). In addition to the predictors reported in previous research (e.g. migration age, number of years since arrival: see for an overview Chiswick & Miller, 2007), other (new) predictors of second language proficiency (e.g. similarity in alphabet between mother tongue and second language) were examined, which were assumed to be of relevance given the specific immigrant group addressed.

In line with earlier research we found that the self-assessed second language proficiency was higher among immigrants who followed a language course, did voluntary work, had a high educational level, high mother-tongue proficiency, low migration age, and

who arrived in the host country many years ago. No associations, however, were found between self-assessed second language proficiency and having psychological problems, or gender or migration motive of the respondents. Newly identified predictors of self-assessed second language proficiency were similarity in alphabet between mother tongue and second language, daily interactions with natives in the public domain, and speaking the second language at home.

The study reported in chapter 2 uses a methodological innovation in this type of research. Not only the commonly used self-assessed proficiency was used as indicator of second language proficiency (Beenstock et al, 2001; Carliner, 2000; Chiswick & Miller, 1995; Chiswick & Miller, 2002; van Tubergen, 2010), but also (for a subsample) passive- and active lexicon test scores were applied as more objective measures of language proficiency. When using the lexicon test scores, only years since migration turned out to be a significant predictor.

Chapter 3. This chapter investigated longitudinally whether an increase in second language proficiency is associated with a higher extent of cultural integration. Moreover, elaborating 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 was tested whether the relationship between second language proficiency and cultural integration differs for immigrants with different personality traits. In doing so, we specifically focused on trainable multicultural personality traits (see van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013). Respondents of this longitudinal study were temporary immigrants residing in the Netherlands (so called sojourners, e.g. Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013).

Findings revealed that the increase in second language proficiency was positively associated with an increase in both indicators of cultural integration, being identification with the host society and attitudes towards the host culture. With respect to identification, this relation was found to be significant, irrespective of immigrants' personality traits. With respect to attitudes towards the host culture, however, we found that the increase of second language proficiency only went together with a positive change in attitudes towards the host culture for immigrants with a high degree of social initiative. Another notable finding was that, during the time period that this study was conducted, immigrants 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 second language proficiency.

Chapter 4. Unlike earlier research on the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration (e.g. Jiang, Green, Henley, & Masten, 2009; Kang, 2006), and unlike chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation, this chapter focused on immigrant (ethnic

minority) children instead of adult immigrants. These children grow up in the host society, go to school there, and (thus) learn to speak the language. However, these children are also exposed to the heritage culture of their parent(s) and its corresponding language. Therefore it is hard to predict the extent to which they actually become proficient in the second language and integrate culturally, let alone to predict the extent to which their second language proficiency is linked to their cultural integration.

Next to examining second language proficiency and cultural integration among minority children, this study also distinguishes itself from other research by (simultaneously) studying the role of interethnic friendships. Such friendships are, like second language proficiency, typically seen as a key factor in cultural integration (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Sabatier, 2008) and may interact with the effects of language proficiency on integration.

Findings indicated that in a longitudinal perspective second language proficiency and interethnic friendships were *not* related to both indicators of cultural integration (i.e., attitudes towards members of the host society and identification with the host society). Cross-sectionally, second language proficiency was positively associated with identification, and interethnic friendships were positively associated with attitudes towards members of the host society. Second language proficiency did not predict minority children's majority group friendships at a later point in time, nor vice versa. Finally, no mediation effects were found; interethnic friendships did not mediate the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration, and second language proficiency did not mediate the relation between interethnic friendships and cultural integration.

Chapter 5. In the last empirical chapter, we focused on an actual intervention which was aimed at enhancing immigrants' second language proficiency and integration. The intervention consisted of second language lessons taught by volunteers. Such lessons are currently widespread in the Netherlands and considered as complementary to the second language lessons facilitated by the government. Volunteers typically have not been professionally trained as language teachers, which raises the question whether and if so to what extent their lessons are actually beneficial in terms of language learning. Like in the previous chapters of this dissertation, we were also interested in the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration. In line with findings from research on the relation between interethnic contact (de Vroome, Verkuyten, & Martinovic, 2014; Nesdale, 2002) and second language proficiency (Rubinfeld, Clément, Lussier, Lebrun, & Auger, 2006) with cultural integration, we explored whether in the course of the intervention participating immigrants made significant progress in terms of (a) their Dutch language

proficiency, (b) their cultural integration, and (c) their ease of participating independently in the Dutch society.

This longitudinal study was conducted on a small sample of immigrants who voluntarily participated in Dutch language lessons (subsample of the respondents of chapter 2). At the moment they registered for the intervention they hardly participated in the Dutch host society and had a relatively low Dutch language proficiency.

The encouraging finding was that, overall small, but significant progress was found on all indicators of second language proficiency (self-assessed proficiency and lexicon scores) as well as on the perceived ease of independent participation in the host society. At the same time, however, participants showed no progress on the two indicators of cultural integration, namely attitudes towards the host culture and identification with the host society.

6.3 General discussion

6.3.1 Predictors of second language proficiency

The empirical part of this dissertation started by examining which factors facilitate or hinder the second language acquisition of a group of immigrants who is generally underrepresented in research, namely immigrants who hardly participate in the host society and have a relatively low level of second language proficiency (Groves & Couper, 1998; Stoop, 2005: 274). We found that for this group the earlier findings on the *predictors of self-assessed second language proficiency* could only partly be replicated. Replicated predictors were having followed a language course, doing voluntary work, educational level, mother-tongue proficiency, migration age and number of years since migration. No links, however, were found between having psychological problems, gender, and migration motive and self-assessed second language proficiency.

We also identified new predictors which appeared to be of relevance for the self-assessed second language proficiency of this group, namely similarity in alphabet between mother tongue and second language, daily interactions with natives in the public domain, and speaking the second language at home. However, our findings differed when we used *objective lexicon test scores* as indicators of second language proficiency instead of the commonly used subjective self-assessments. Now, only years since migration turned out to be a significant predictor. Plausibly the lexicon test scores, and thus findings on the predictors of this, give a more objective assessment of language proficiency. The self-assessments might be biased by, for example, cultural differences. This is in line with research that showed differences in self-assessment scores between immigrants from different cultures (Carliner,

2000). Also, the self-assessment method can also be biased by personal or ‘peer related’ factors, as suggested by Finnie and Meng (2005) who point out that self-esteem might bias self-assessment scores as well as the language proficiency of the people with whom the immigrant compares oneself.

Though tentative, these outcomes indicate that findings on the predictors of self-assessed second language proficiency should not too easily be generalized. Different predictors of language proficiency may apply, depending on the specific immigrant group that is taken into account and on the instrument used to measure second language proficiency (see also directions for future research, paragraph 6.5 of this dissertation).

6.3.2 Second language proficiency and cultural integration

At the heart of this dissertation is the question whether second language proficiency does indeed relate closely to cultural integration, and whether some variables can be identified that further affect this relation. It is surprising that earlier research on this topic is cross-sectional (with the exception of Hochman & Davidov, 2014), while in fact the theoretical claim that second language learning is a key factor or even a prerequisite for integration needs a longitudinal approach (Barker, 2015; Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Gordon, 1964; Hagendoorn, Veenman, & Vollebergh, 2003; Schumann, 1978).

In the same vein, the current dissertation takes earlier research one step further by studying the development of second language proficiency and cultural integration over time. Doing so we were able to study how the actual acquisition of a language relates to the extent of cultural integration, as indicated by attitudes towards the host society and identification with the host society.

Novel is also that in this dissertation we took additional factors into account that possibly mediate or moderate the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration, being multicultural personality (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002) and interethnic friendships (Agirdag et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Sabatier, 2008). Altogether we studied the topic of second language proficiency and cultural integration longitudinally, from different angles, and among differing groups of immigrants.

Notably we found only mixed evidence for the idea that second language acquisition goes together with more cultural integration. Only for one of the three immigrant groups examined (sojourners), we found that second language learning is positively associated with cultural integration over time. In this group, for one indicator of cultural integration (identification) we found an overall relation, while for the other indicator (attitudes) this

relation was moderated by the multicultural personality trait *social initiative*. Interestingly, we also found that sojourners who scored high on the multicultural personality trait *openness* showed a positive change in attitudes regardless of the progress they made in terms of second language proficiency.

One plausible explanation for the different findings between the studies among adult immigrants (chapter 3 and 5) compared to the study among immigrant (minority) children is the fact that at the first moment of measurement the difference in the second language proficiency of the children compared to natives of their age was much smaller than it was for adults. It is thus not surprising that the children did not make significant improvement in terms of second language proficiency while the adults did. However, only in the study among the adult *sojourners*, this improvement of second language proficiency was accompanied with an increasing cultural integration. Possibly, the reason for migration is a relevant factor in explaining this finding. The sojourners typically moved to the host country because of so-called 'pull factors'. Specifically they had the opportunity to pursue a higher level of study or to find work abroad. Out of the countries they could pick from, they chose the Netherlands. It is thus plausible that they had a relatively high interest in the Dutch culture, to begin with. In line with this, it can be assumed that the sojourners were especially willing to get acquainted with the Dutch culture and to adjust to it.

In contrast, the majority of the immigrants who participated in the language lessons provided by volunteers, were 'pushed' out of their country. Some of them were asylum seekers, who left their country because they were not safe there (20%). Hence, interest in the Dutch culture was not their guiding motivation, which might explain why the improvement in their second language proficiency was not (directly) accompanied by a higher extent of cultural integration.

Similarly, many of the immigrants, who followed language lessons provided by volunteers, came to the Netherlands for family unification or - formation (67%). Although this was not formally registered, we know from additional interviews with respondents and coordinators of the language lessons that typically the partners of these immigrants were former 'guest workers'. They were 'pushed' out of their country because of poverty during the period in which the Netherlands was actively recruiting uneducated immigrants for temporary unskilled labor. Apart from the fact that the partners of these former guest workers have not especially been stimulated by the Dutch government to integrate (on the contrary, see for example Arib, 2009), it can thus be assumed that unification with their partner rather than interest in the Dutch culture was their guiding motivation. Therefore, their willingness to learn the Dutch language at the time our study was conducted might not

have been driven by the wish to integrate. Rather, the guiding motivation was most probably the assumption that low Dutch language proficiency caused difficulties regarding the (functional) participation in the Dutch society, like going to the doctor or using public transportation. Judging from the aforementioned interviews, many of them did not want to rely on their (now adult) children anymore but instead wanted to participate independently. Interestingly, our data show that the aim to be better able to participate was indeed served by the intervention: we did find a significant improvement in ease of participating independently in the Dutch society. However, at the same time this explanation is not fully in line with the fact that we did not find a reliable relation between second language proficiency and ease of participation.

Alternatively, the different findings in the two studies among adult immigrants may be due to the 'stage' in which the participating immigrants were at the moment the research was conducted. The sojourners were newcomers in the Netherlands. They just arrived and were not yet acquainted with the Dutch host society. Many of the socially isolated immigrants who participated in the language lessons given by volunteers, however, arrived in the Netherlands many years ago and were (at least to some extent) already acquainted with the Dutch society. As a consequence, and different from the sojourners, they might already have firmly established their attitudes towards- and their extent of identification with the Dutch society.

This reasoning might also be applicable to the pre-adolescent children investigated in this dissertation. Many of them were raised in the Netherlands and went to school there. Yet, they were already immersed in and acquainted with the Dutch society. Therefore, the fact that their Dutch language proficiency is typically lower than the language proficiency of natives and, thus, offers room for improvement (CBS - Statistics Netherlands, 2014; CBS - Statistics Netherlands, 2016b), does not necessarily imply that there is also 'room' for a higher extent of cultural integration. Thus, for the socially isolated immigrants as well as the minority children, the cultural integration might have already reached its 'limit' before the studies were conducted. A caveat regarding this explanation, however, is that there is no benchmark which can be used to determine whether immigrants are sufficiently integrated in a cultural sense. Interestingly, such a norm might even differ per immigrant group.

By and large, this overall discussion does not provide an explanation which, without further empirical tests, can fully account for the differing findings on the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration in our different samples. However, it does give relevant leads which are relevant for practice as well as future research (see paragraph 6.4 and 6.5).

6.4 Practical implications

Altogether, this dissertation provided little support for the idea that second language proficiency in itself is a key factor or even a prerequisite for immigrants' integration in the host society. These findings place integration programs with a strong emphasis on fostering second language acquisition into a different perspective. Second language proficiency is undoubtedly essential for immigrants' ability to participate in the host society. However, it should not too easily be assumed that a high second language proficiency actually facilitates the language use and that it binds, through communication, those using it to a social and ethnic community (Clement, Noels, & Deneault, 2001).

The findings from this dissertation suggest that immigrants differ in (a) the extent to which they acquire the second language, and (b) the extent to which their increasing second language learning is actually related to more cultural integration. Thus, some groups seem to have more difficulty in integrating, and within these groups there are also differences between individuals, depending on factors like personality, age or reason of migration. All in all this suggests that policy on second language learning and integration should not assume that 'one size fits all.' Differentiation seems justified and necessary in what is expected from immigrants (the norm or benchmark), and in the way they are taught in order to eventually live up to this norm.

In line with the latter, our findings suggest that immigrants' multicultural personality traits are a possible facilitating or hampering factor in cultural integration. Given that these traits are considered as trainable, policy makers may be well-advised to not only pay attention to implementing language teaching programs, but to also consider a training of social perceptual personality traits (social initiative and openness) when trying to set up efficient integration programs for immigrants (see van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013).

Despite the fact that such integration programs might help improve the effectivity of integration programs, it should also be taken into account that these programs in themselves do not suffice to safeguard cultural integration. Cultural integration is a complex dynamic concept which involves both immigrants and members of the host society. Illustrative for this is also a recent publication of Statistics Netherlands (SCP - The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2016). Partly in line with findings from this dissertation, the results revealed that while the Dutch language proficiency of the four biggest non-western immigrant groups increased over the past few years, their connectedness with the host society (measured as 'feeling at home') actually decreased. Following from this, the question was raised how immigrants' increased human and cultural capital can contribute to a more inclusive society

in which (young) immigrants feel more connected. As partial answer to this question, in this report of Statistics Netherlands, it was suggested to focus more on the responsibility of members of the host society instead of the immigrants themselves. In fact, the report showed that over the past years, immigrants have the perception that natives became more negative towards them. Especially young immigrants feel that the Dutch apply double standards (see also Huijnk, Dagevos, Gijsberts, & Andriessen, 2015). Even though data of native Dutch did not confirm this, this is certainly the image that many politicians and (thus the) media shape. Illustrative is a recent open letter of the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte, written shortly before the elections of the Dutch parliament. Rutte urged immigrants (thus not natives) who act criminal and/or who do not adapt themselves to the Dutch values and/or who respond negative towards Dutch customs to leave the country. The letter was published online and in full-page newspaper advertisements and caused both national and international indignation (see Heijne, 2017; Rutte, 2017; Yeginsu, 2017).

However, despite the anti-immigrant attitude which is prominent in the societal debate and which is focused on immigrants' own responsibility in integrating, many natives do take their responsibility. Illustrative are the 11.000 Dutch volunteers who act weekly as language coaches for 21.000 immigrants (Het begint met taal, 2017). Findings from this dissertation, at least tentatively, indicate that on the whole such second language lessons provided by volunteers can be beneficial by enhancing immigrants' second language proficiency and their ease of independent participation in the host society. It is encouraging to see such concrete evidence for the difference that the efforts of members of the Dutch host society can make in the integration of immigrants.

The findings on second language lessons provided by volunteers are all the more relevant in the current era in which countries are faced with many asylum seekers, who often have to wait a very long time for a decision upon whether or not they will be granted a humanitarian status in the host country. Only after asylum seekers are appointed this status, they are entitled to follow official second language lessons by expert teachers. The OECD (2016b) has very recently warned that this time of waiting, which frequently takes months or even years, might be a time in which immigrants' ability and motivation to integrate might suffer long term damage. In this situation, or at least until this situation is improved, the help of volunteers who provide second language lessons might help to bridge the gap until immigrants' status allows them to follow formal language courses.

6.5 Directions for future research

Findings from this dissertation offer interesting leads for further research. One asset of the current dissertation is that it examined the relation between second language learning and cultural integration among immigrants with various characteristics. To get more insight into the plausible causes of the differing results of these studies, we encourage future studies to pursue this approach by further examining the influence of factors like reason of migration, the 'stage' of migration and the generation immigrants belong to.

While examining the relation between second language proficiency and integration among different groups of immigrants, we also took other key factors of integration into account, notably multicultural personality traits and interethnic friendships. Hopefully more research on such factors will give more insight into which interventions work for which immigrants under what conditions.

In this dissertation, identification with the host society as well as attitudes towards the host society were used as indicators of cultural integration. Many earlier studies either focused on only one of these indicators or used a broad instrument covering both (and more) without distinguishing between them. Given that our results indicate that identification and attitudes are related but distinct factors, future research is advised to also use this approach and distinguish between the two aspects of cultural integration, and to further refine the measurement in order to do justice to the complexity and multidimensionality of both attitudes and identification.

When comparing results of several studies, the scale items used to measure constructs should, obviously, be exactly the same. This was not consistently the case in the current dissertation for the measurement of attitudes and identification. In two of the studies (chapters 3 and 5), attitudes towards the host society were measured with identical items about attitudes towards specific aspects of the host *culture*, while in one study (chapter 4) this was measured with items about attitudes towards *members* of the host society. Also, in two of the studies (chapters 3 and 5) identification with the host society was measured with several comparable items about the identification with the host society *in itself* while in one study (chapter 4) this was measured with only one item on identification with the host society *in comparison* with the identification with the society of heritage. However, given that the studies using identical indicators of cultural integration also yielded dissimilar results, we assume that the different findings from the three studies (chapters 3-5) are not (or at least not completely) due to differences in instruments used measure cultural integration.

Another methodological implication for future research is concerned with the measurement of second language proficiency. In much research, the self-assessed second language proficiency is used as indicator of second language proficiency. In two studies from this dissertation we also used lexicon test scores. One of these studies (see chapter 2) shows that research findings can differ substantially when more objective measures of second language proficiency are used instead of the commonly used subjective way of measuring second language proficiency. Therefore, in future research it would be worthwhile to (also) use more objective measures of second language proficiency.

Importantly, the current dissertation is one of the first to study second language proficiency and cultural integration longitudinally. However, due to the limited number of respondents, no 'cross-lagged analysis' could be done to test causality. Accordingly, we cannot straightforwardly argue that progress in second language proficiency actually leads (or does not lead) to a higher extent of cultural integration, or that this is the other way around. Therefore, future research on this topic would benefit from performing longitudinal research with a considerably larger sample of immigrants, and in a context wherein change in language proficiency and integration can be expected. Also, by including more moments of measurement, various time lags can be taken into account to study whether the magnitude of the relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration is different over time.

To our knowledge, we are the first to explore the use of second language lessons given by volunteers. Our findings are encouraging regarding the potential of volunteers to enhance immigrants' second language proficiency. In order to further improve second language lessons given by volunteers it would be interesting for future research to make a distinction between types of lessons (e.g., individual or group lessons) as well as (again) types of immigrants (e.g. reason of migration, stage after migration) receiving these lessons. Also, it would be interesting to examine the influence of the characteristics of volunteers (e.g. background characteristics, multicultural personality traits) in the extent to which second language lessons are beneficial. More knowledge on these topics might also be beneficial for second language lessons from the certified organizations that governments refer to. This is especially relevant in the case of the Netherlands, where a recent national report indicated that requirements for certification of such organizations (mainly based on satisfactory rates of participants and satisfactory pass-rates of national exams as reported by the organization itself) need to be sharpened, and that the quality of at least some of the certified lessons needs considerable improvement (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2017: 35, 36).

6.6 Final conclusion

In this dissertation the topic of second language proficiency and cultural integration was studied longitudinally, from different angles, and among differing groups of immigrants. The findings suggest that immigrants differ in the extent to which they acquire the second language, as well as in the extent to which their increasing second language proficiency is accompanied by more cultural integration. This suggests that it should not too easily be assumed that second language learning and integration of immigrants can be approached with the assumption that 'one size fits all'. This suggestion offers interesting leads for future research as well as for future policy on this topic, which is, and will probably remain, of great societal relevance.

