

# A Review of Trilingual Acquisition Research

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**Abstract:** *With the continuous change of the world political and economic pattern, language and cultural exchanges are gradually expanding, and cross-ethnic, cross-regional, and even transnational exchanges are very frequent. At the same time, there are a large number of language learners with multilingual backgrounds. They have already mastered two or more languages, and on this basis, they learn one or several other languages. Second language learners and trilingual learners have similarities and differences in the learning process, and trilingual learners are more complicated than second language learners. Therefore, it is of great significance to review and summarize the research on trilingual acquisition.*

**Keywords:** *Second language acquisition, Trilingual acquisition, Review*

## 1. Introduction

In previous second language literature, all other languages after learners learn the first language are called "second language". With the in-depth research on second language acquisition, scholars believe that "third language" is not a simple literal meaning, not the number of languages learned. Rather, it refers to one or several languages that are being learned in addition to the mother tongue and the second language (which may not be fully mastered) [1]. Some scholars also believe that "trilingual acquisition" specifically refers to the process by which learners who have mastered two or more languages acquire one or more languages.

Most of the time, we think that in addition to the mother tongue, the process of learning another language is called "generalized second language acquisition". There seems to be no difference between second language acquisition and third language acquisition on the surface. Both are to learn another new language on the basis of already learned one language. The difference is that based on psycholinguistics, it is found that the language ability of third language learners is different from that of monolingual and second language learners.

The research on third language acquisition is more complicated than the research on second language acquisition, which is reflected in the following aspects: (1) The complexity of individual factors of learners; (2) The long-term of the research cycle of third language acquisition; (3) The diversity of factors affecting trilingual acquisition; (4) The difficulty of finding people with the same multilingual background. At present, as an extension of second language acquisition, trilingual acquisition is closely related and has individual characteristics, which has attracted more and more attention from language researchers.

## 2. Development Stages of Trilingual Acquisition Research

Jessner proposed in 1999 that the research on trilingual acquisition began with Vildomec's multilingual research in 1963. In fact, as early as 1937, the German linguist Maximilian Braun defined and discussed the phenomenon of multilingualism in his article "Observations on Multilingualism", and began to study multilingualism at the earliest. In the late 1980s, Ringbom published "The Role of the First Language in Foreign Language Learning", which systematically compared the performance of monolingual learners and multilingual learners in the process of English learning, marking the official start of trilingual acquisition research.

In the late 1980s, foreign scholars began to formally pay attention to and carry out formal research on trilingual acquisition. With the deepening of second language acquisition research, especially development of language transfer theory, the theoretical foundation for third language acquisition

research has been laid. Coupled with the rise of social cognitivism in the field of second language studies at the beginning of the 21st century, the research on trilingual acquisition also began to involve sociology and psychology knowledge. Foreign scholars have begun to explore the rules of trilingual acquisition from multiple angles and directions. From the end of the 1990s to the beginning of this century was the peak period of trilingual acquisition research, and the purpose of the research was to put forward suggestions for practical teaching[2].

At the beginning of this century, China's trilingual acquisition research officially began to appear in the research directions of "trilingual teaching", "trilingual education" and "minority foreign language teaching". At present, most scholars' research results focus on the learning process of students in minority areas and second-language learners.

### **3. Contents of Trilingual Acquisition Research**

Trilingual acquisition research focuses on the combination of theory and practice. Most of the research involves universal grammar theory, transfer theory, interlanguage theory and so on. From exploring the theory of trilingual acquisition to studying factors affecting trilingual acquisition, so as to improve and promote learners' trilingual learning ability in practice. This is a process from theoretical exploration to practical application, but the foothold is all on the issues of teaching and learning.

#### ***3.1. Language Transfer Perspective***

The phenomenon of language transfer in third language acquisition is more complex than that in second language acquisition. Odlin proposed from a cognitive perspective that there are both positive and negative transfers in trilingual acquisition[3]. Due to the effect of positive transfer, trilingual learners have an advantage in language learning, and this advantage is mainly reflected in their confidence[4]. Bialystok believes that through trilingual or multilingual learning, learners' metalinguistic awareness will be developed. On the contrary, Schachter believed that the phenomenon of language transfer will produce restrictive factors in the language learning process, and the previously acquired knowledge will hinder the learners' acquisition of the target language [5].

#### ***3.2. Universal Grammar Perspective***

Late 1960s, the transfer theory of behaviorist linguistics was criticized by Chomsky's universal grammar theory. Chomsky believes that language acquisition is not an isolated learning of individual grammars of a language, but a process of assigning values to language parameters under the constraints of universal grammar. The acquisition of each natural language grammar is a process of assigning various parameters. Odlin comprehensively discussed the nature and impact of the phenomenon of language transfer, and discussed the relationship between language transfer and Universal Grammar in the process of second language acquisition.

#### ***3.3. The Development Perspective of Metalinguistic Awareness***

In the process of trilingual or multilingual learning, the language system of multilingual learners will undergo qualitative changes, and new skills will be developed, which is conducive to enhancing metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness is not only the identification and monitoring of language knowledge, but also the thinking of language itself. Trilingual acquisition can not only improve language learners' ability to solve problems and control attention, but also help to promote metalinguistic awareness of language elements. Jessner believed that in the process of trilingual acquisition, bilingual learners exhibit higher pragmatic awareness than monolingual learners. Many studies have shown that the more languages learners master or learn, the stronger their metalinguistic awareness and the easier it is to acquire new languages.

#### ***3.4. Pragmatic Perspective***

The pragmatic perspective on promoting trilingual acquisition mainly includes the following two aspects. First, the interaction between context and trilingual acquisition. Cenoz pointed out that social and cultural factors such as language contact, language policy, and language planning will also restrict trilingual acquisition[6]. Second, research on the phenomenon of code-switching in the classroom. The mechanism of trilingual acquisition is more complex than second language acquisition. De Angelic

proposed that when three languages interact with each other, code-switching will occur, and language users will use different languages according to the current context and expression needs. Strategies to convert different languages to meet the needs of communication[7].

### ***3.5. Research on Trilingual Acquisition Based on Certain Theories***

Most of the research in this area is based on theoretical basis, and studies the theory of trilingual acquisition. According to the theory of language transfer, some scholars expounded the interaction between the first language, the second language and the third language in the learning process, effectively promoted students' understanding and mastery of basic knowledge, and put forward suggestions for dual foreign language teaching[8]. Xu Shuling based on the theory of cross-lingual similarity, studied the cross-lingual effects of Chinese Uyghur learners on English as a third language acquisition[9]. Wu Hongqin based on the theoretical perspective of language input and output, pointed out that the first language and the second language play different roles in the process of input and output of third language acquisition. This suggests that the first two languages have some influence on the use of the third language[10]. This kind of research mainly sorts out and summarizes the overall situation of trilingual acquisition, and provides effective reference and reference for trilingual acquisition research and minority foreign language education[11].

### ***3.6. Applied Research Perspective and Discipline Construction***

Trilingual acquisition research originates from second language acquisition research, focusing on the language acquisition of multilingual learners. By comparing the characteristics of second language acquisition and third language acquisition, pointing out the differences between the two, and thinking that third language acquisition should be regarded as an independent research field. On this basis, Zeng Li believes that we should give full play to the multilingual advantages of ethnic minorities, focus on maintaining the development of language ability, carry out research on interlingual transfer, and optimize foreign language education in the region[12].

## **4. Characteristics of Trilingual Acquisition Research**

### ***4.1. There are Many Research Perspectives, but the Research Object is Single***

Research on trilingual acquisition started earlier, starting in the 1930s, with fruitful results. Most of the research objects focused on multilingual learners in developed regions such as Europe and the United States. There were fewer studies on multilingual learners in underdeveloped regions, such as China. The content of research on trilingual acquisition is complex. Research papers on trilingual acquisition were first published in 2004. Most of the authors are graduate students or doctoral students. There are few core papers and related monographs. There is a lack of leading figures and professional research teams, and has not yet formed. And the research objects are mainly trilingual learners of ethnic minorities in China and multilingual learners in colleges and universities.

### ***4.2. Although it Pays Attention to the Combination of Theory and Practice, its Practicality is Limited***

Most of the research involves universal grammar theory, transfer theory, interlanguage theory and so on. From exploring the theory of trilingual acquisition to studying the factors affecting trilingual acquisition, so as to improve and promote the learners' trilingual learning ability in practice, this is a process from theoretical discussion to practical application. Trilingual acquisition studies in developed regions of Europe and the United States focus on empirical research and prove with facts. Research in underdeveloped regions is mostly an introduction to foreign theories, and there are few empirical research results. Most of the published research results are based on foreign literature. There are very few applied researches on the teaching of trilingual acquisition, and the practicability is limited.

### ***4.3. It Fully Embodies the Characteristics of Interdisciplinarity***

Herdina&Jessner proposed a theoretical model of psycholinguistics, that is, a dynamic model of multilingualism. Based on the perspective of social psychology, Cenoz explained the difference between trilingual acquisition and second language acquisition and the importance of trilingual acquisition.

#### 4.4. *There are Few Studies on Chinese as a Trilingual acquisition*

Most of the research on trilingual acquisition by European and American experts is based on the native language as the mother tongue, the official language as the second language, and other languages as the third language. Most of the studies on trilingual acquisition in China use minority languages as the mother tongue and Chinese as the second language, other languages as trilinguals. At the same time, in the overseas Chinese language teaching environment, scholars also pay more attention to the research on the acquisition of Chinese as a second language, and seldom involve the research on the acquisition of Chinese as a third language.

#### 5. Conclusions

This paper summarizes the research on trilingual acquisition, analyzes the current research perspective and characteristics of trilingual acquisition, and puts forward the following suggestions. First of all, trilingual acquisition should be regarded as an independent research field, and in addition to using transfer theory, it should also be closely linked with other related fields. Secondly, a group of strong, scientific and reasonable research teams should be formed, and the synergy formed by teamwork should be emphasized, which is conducive to achieving breakthroughs in the field of trilingual acquisition. Finally, the scope of the study should be expanded. At present, large numbers of multilingual learners have not been included in the study, so it is extremely necessary to give priority to the development of this research. The author hopes that the above suggestions can provide reference and help for researchers.

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