Cultural Assimilation & Attitude of Non-Native Middle School Students and Adults in Dhaka: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT
This research aims to identify and examine the key factors that play a vital role in the cultural assimilation and attitudes of non-native speakers of Bangla at an International school in Dhaka where English is the medium of instruction, and seek out differences in attitude between the non-native adults residing in Dhaka. The identification of the key factors which facilitate cultural assimilation has been uncovered through triangulating personal interviews, semi-structured questionnaires, and focus group discussions. The results indicate that gradual cultural assimilation is taking place in the non-native speakers of Bangla in both the adult and student population, but with striking differences in their attitudes towards certain well-established elements that foster cultural assimilation.

Keyword: Cultural assimilation, Attitude, Cultural relativism, Diffusion, Integration

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context
Cultural assimilation is a gradual process, and the chief factor which all non-natives must take into consideration is linguistic assimilation. They must learn how to effectively communicate with the natives to perform well at their work place, school, shopping malls, or even at social gatherings. Some countries such as the United States of America and Australia have well-established policies which the migrants must satisfy in order to be considered as a prospective applicant. They must go through a series of naturalization process which in essence prepares them to familiarize themselves with the culture of the respective nation and integrate into the society. This study is concerned about the degree of cultural assimilation of non-native adults and students in Dhaka; and it will help identify the key factors which are responsible for facilitating as well as causing hindrance to cultural assimilation of the two groups on non-native Bangla speakers residing in the host country. Cultural assimilation is one of the major components of acculturation. In order to comprehend the true meaning of assimilation, it is imperative to define the acculturation as assimilation is an integral part of acculturation. As defined by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits [1936, p.149] “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original country patterns of either or both groups”. Therefore it may be concluded that assimilation is not the sole component of acculturation, although the term assimilation had been coined as a synonym for acculturation as per Vasquez [1984]. According to Berry [1997], in his article titled Lead Article Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation elaborates upon acculturation. According to him there are four strategies of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Berry explains assimilation occurs then the non-natives or migrant communities is not determined to hold on
to their original cultural identity, and are focused on interacting with other cultures. Separation on the contrary occurs when the migrant community or non-natives strictly adhere to their own cultural identity and limits interaction with the host community to the bare minimum. Thirdly integration is defined by Berry [1997] “When there is an interest in both maintaining one’s original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups, Integration is the option; here, there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.”[p.8]. Marginalization occurs when the migrant community or non-natives ceases to maintain their cultural heritage and beliefs mainly because of the enforcement or prompting by others to, similar to the Assimilation strategy, though there is a certain twist. The non-native also resents interacting with locals or natives of the country due to language barriers and basically forced discrimination which is one of the points of the Separation strategy. So in the end, Marginalization is basically the exact opposite of Integration.

1.2 Aim of Research

This research aims to identify and examine the key factors that play the vital role in the cultural assimilation and attitudes of non-native Bangla-speaking adults residing in Dhaka, and at an International school in Dhaka where English is the medium of instruction, and seek out differences in attitude between the non-native adults residing in Dhaka.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This type of research has not been conducted in Bangladesh on middle school level non-native children and adults as per my knowledge, and it will lead to significant improvements in the understanding of the attitudes of non-natives in Bangladesh which shall provide a positive insight into the factors which promote and dissuade cultural assimilation of the two groups.

1.4 Research Questions

1. To what extent have the non-natives assimilated with the local culture of the host country?
2. What are the individual factors that both the groups have in common in relation to the facilitation of cultural assimilation?
3. What are the differences that both groups have in relation to the facilitation of cultural assimilation?

2 Methodology

A mixed method of qualitative and quantitative approach was applied to conduct this research. Data was collected from 20 participants (10 non native adults and 10 non-natives residing in Bangladesh. This research employed 3 types of instruments to collect and triangulate data. Firstly, separate semi-structured questionnaires were created and used for the student and adult participants. Furthermore, personal interviews were conducted on both the groups. Finally, focus group discussions were held with both the students and adults to achieve a greater degree of precision during data analysis. Questionnaires were distributed by the school authorities. Personal interviews and a Focus Group Discussion were done in the presence of a school faculty/staff member on school days with permission from the parents as
well as the school authority since the participants were less than 18 years of age. Data from adults were collected via telephone, e-mail, and in person at their workplace or informal meetings.

3 Major findings

3.1 Length of stay in Bangladesh and proficiency level of Bangla in non-native adults and students of various nationalities

Two main factors are length of stay and nationality of the non-natives as regards level of proficiency in Bangla. Participants in both groups with a longer length of stay tend to amass more knowledge of Bangla than their co-participants. This is likely due to the fact that a higher rate of interaction with the locals equal a better understanding of Bangla while they may be exposed to the syntax of the Bangla language by their co-workers, friends, or even their spouse’s relatives, given that they are Bangladeshis. Participants with similar socio-economic conditions and cultures to Bangladesh, such as India or Pakistan have an easier time grasping the language since their languages share similarities with Bangla. The Pakistanis that have lived for 2-3 years seem more fluent in the local language than the American listed. This lends support that cultural and linguistic phrase similarities play a part in the learning of a new language.

3.2 Languages used by non-native adults and students for different purposes with reasons for the usage of a particular language

In a nutshell, immediate family members and relatives are spoken with a person’s first language, but that person may speak in another language depending on the occasion or surrounding. This applies to people of different genders and age. Adults in their work environment may speak the local language to communicate effectively with their local colleagues. The status of English as an international tool for communication is causing people in their work environment to adopt English as the tool to read, write, and obviously speak. The same scenario applies to the students too whose parents want them to have a mastery of the English language, so they send them to English curriculum based as it being able to use English is a sign of superior social status. Based on the data shown above, unless someone is
CULTURAL ASSIMILATION & ATTITUDE OF NON-NATIVE MIDDLE

in a social gathering where everyone is speaking their native language, they most likely choose English since it is commonly known and it is considered intelligent in some countries to have a high fluency in the English language. This concept is also applied to public places.

3.3 Factors for the usage of a particular language by non-native adults and students

Based on the data displayed, most of the participants replied by stating that the reason they chose a particular language was to feel comfortable followed by being part of a social group or class. This applies to the responses of both foreign adults and students. The several other reasons that may apply to the usage of a particular language include being superior, being forced to, or even to appear with an individual strength or skill which of course applies to the language. Reasons not discussed are covered in other factors. However, in the non-native student’s table, they is an alarming rate of being forced by others e.g. at school.

3.4 Aspects of Bangladesh favored by non-native adults and students

Both groups chose food which implies that foreigners greatly appreciate the Bengali cuisine, so it is the most appealing factor of the country. Another important aspect involved is the people and their close ties to their families. Adults appreciate the family-oriented structure of the local culture. Due to the rich culture of the Bangladeshi people, it is no wonder that the people are enamored with the festivals, the different tourist locations, and even the beautifully designed fabrics or cloth. Based on the data it seems that most of the non-native adults appreciate the cultural and societal norms of country, including its daily ways of life.
### 3.5 Aspects of Bangladesh disfavored by non-native adults and students

Both groups have listed corruption and governmental disorganization as one of the worst occurrences in the country including violent strikes and protests. That shows that most of the participants prefer a stable government, are in favor of the rule of law & order. Both groups expressed a strong dislike of the poor road conditions and the resulting traffic. Pollution and smog were also aspects disfavored by both groups of participants.

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### 3.6 Personal attitude towards the life and culture of Bangladesh

The attitudes of most of the adults are seen clashing with the perspective of the students. Most of the non-native adults commented on their experience in Bangladesh being positive and cheerful while others are trying to accept some of the elements of the local culture and
society. However the exact opposite results appear in the students’ responses. Most of the students commented on their experience being largely depressing and challenging.

### 3.7 Purpose of stay in Bangladesh

The data reveals that 100% of the non-native Bangla speaking student participants reside in the host country because their parents are posted here due to their respective employment. Data reflects that 50% of the adult non-native Bangla speaking participants reside in the host country for employment, 10% for family related issues, while 40% reside due to intermarriage to Bangladeshi nationals.

### 4 Conclusion

The attitudes of most of the adults are seen clashing with the perspective of the students. Most of the non-native adults commented on their experience in Bangladesh being positive and cheerful while others are trying to accept some of the elements of the local culture and society. However the exact opposite results appear in the students’ responses. Most of the students commented on their experience being largely depressing and challenging. That is no surprise since most of them were probably forced to come to Bangladesh or has no part in deciding what the family wanted. Only 30% of the students held a positive attitude about how natives perceived foreigners, with a majority of 60% held the view that they were disliked by the host community. In contrast, 70% of adults held a positive view about how natives perceived foreigners, with only a 10% displaying a negative view.

The participants from other countries speak their mother tongue with their family members as expected from other language groups. However in their workplace or in social events, all the adult participants seem to use English, probably as a way to effectively communicate in the global world. In some cultures, knowing English is a matter of pride and knowledge, so people tend to use it when speaking outside to appear sophisticated. As for the reason for using a specific language, most of the adult participants responded by stating that they chose it to feel comfortable.

As for the student participants, the same theory applies. Most of them speak their native tongue or occasionally the local language with their family members, relatives, and even friends. As all of them study at an English-based school, all of them speak English with their teachers and may speak Bangla with staff members if they do not know English. Social
gatherings may prompt them to speak the language used while most of them use a variety of languages in shopping malls depending on who they go out with. As regards the attitude towards learning Bangla as a second language, as it is the prime indicator of cultural assimilation, the adult participants stated a positive response of 60% while 40% were neutral. On the contrary, 10% of student participants held a negative view, while 60% were in favor of learning Bangla as a second language. Of all the things to choose from as one of the remarkable factors of the country, people chose food. That implies that foreigners greatly appreciate the Bengali cuisine, so it is the most appealing factor of the country. Another important aspect involved is the people and their close ties to their families. Due to the fact that most Westerners end up separated from their parents when they become older, it is no wonder that some adults appreciate the family-oriented structure of the local culture. However the reason adult participants praised the people probably has to do with their own experience with them. Due to the rich culture of the Bangladeshi people, it is no wonder that the people are enamored with the festivals, the different tourist locations, and even the beautifully designed fabrics or cloth. Based on the data it seems that most of the non-native adults appreciate the cultural and societal norms of country, including its daily way of living.

Most of the participants (including the students) have listed corruption and governmental disorganization as one of the worst occurrences in the country including violent strikes and protests. That shows that most of the participants come from countries with a stable government, including law & order. In both the student’s and adult’s data was found a strong dislike of poor road conditions and the resulting traffic. Another critical crisis is the unhygienic atmosphere around Dhaka City which has contributed to its reputation as the most unlivable city. That has caused the female participants to consider pollution and smog one of the biggest problems in Bangladesh’s list of dilemmas.

In essence, cultural assimilation is taking place gradually both in the non-native Bangla speaking adult and student community residing in the host country. Both groups have identified specific factors which may help justify the positive and negative effects on their attitude towards the host culture and society.

**Recommendations**

A few additional elements might add to the quality of this research. Firstly, the number of participants should preferably originate from diverse nations rather than the limited numbers found in this particular research. In addition, the total number of participants might have contributed to an isolated sample area. The socio-economic status of the participants was all from the affluent section of the society. The motivations to reside in the host country were not so diverse. A greater diversity of ethnic groups would make the research more interesting, in my humble opinion. If awarded the opportunity, a similar research involving the cultural assimilation of the indigenous people of Bangladesh could be conducted.

**References**


