

Rehabilitative Secondary Language Acquisition: Examining Linguistic Distancing, Trauma, and PTSD in Afghan, Syrian, and Yemeni Refugee Children in South Korea

Yeonwoo Lee

Daewon Foreign Language High School

Abstract

With the increasing number of Afghan, Syrian, and Yemeni refugees entering South Korea, trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) play crucial roles in the intersection of integrative motivation and second language acquisition (SLA) in refugee children. Where traumatic memories are stored in primary language codes, this research paper studies the role of secondary languages (L2s) as rehabilitative for Afghan, Syrian, and Yemeni refugee children in South Korea. To examine the correlation between L2s, acculturation, and cognitive barriers, this study asks: 1) What role do memory and language play in reducing/exacerbating trauma-related PTSD amongst Syrian, Afghan, and Yemeni refugee children in South Korea? 2) Do older Afghan, Syrian, and Yemeni refugee children have more or less difficulty acquiring Korean than younger children? and 3) How do motivation and SLA contribute to the acculturation of refugee children? Utilizing qualitative survey data collected from a sample population of nine Syrian, Afghan, and Yemeni children in South Korea, ages 9-13, this study explores age, familial support, and SLA enjoyment as causal factors inhibiting or accelerating SLA. Findings of this study include L2 as contributive to the concept of 'linguistic distancing,' where SLA plays a defining role in decreasing PTSD symptoms and cognitive barriers. While SLA is assimilative, striking a balance between home and host cultures is crucial to the mental well-being of refugee children in South Korea. In the absence of a comprehensive mental health support system for refugee children in South Korea, this study examines SLA as a means of mitigating the traumas embedded in language, memory, and cultural displacement.

Keywords: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma, secondary language acquisition, refugee children, acculturation