

Sociodemographic Conditions of the German Language Acquisition in Germany: Asian vs. Non-Asian Immigrant Children

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Abstract

Introduction. The pace of the language acquisition depends not only on children's cognitive skills and medical issues but also, among other things, on numerous sociodemographic conditions such as immigrant background. For instance, children of Turkish origin lag behind in the German language acquisition in Germany because they acquire German under comparatively unfavourable sociodemographic conditions in terms of quality and quantity of the German language input. In the current study, German language skills of Asian children (predominantly from Japan, Thailand, Iran, and India) were compared to those of non-Asian immigrant children under consideration of sociodemographic conditions. **Methods.** A sample of 984 four-year-old bi-/multilingual children (112 Asians, 872 non-Asians) was tested with the language screening "Kindersprachscreening" (KiSS.2): speech comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and phonological short-term memory. Sociodemographic conditions of the German language acquisition were assessed by the KiSS.2 questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers and compared for Asian and non-Asian children. **Results.** Asian children showed comparatively weak German language skills because, among other things, German was spoken less often in their families than in the families of other immigrants. However, there were also indirect positive factors such as a higher educational level of fathers of Asian children. **Discussion.** Asian children lag behind in the German language acquisition in comparison with other immigrant children. However, German statistics on the academic success show that Asian children are overrepresented in the prestigious grammar schools and universities. This demonstrates that Asian children catch up with their peers in the German language skills, probably in primary schools.

Keywords: language acquisition, German language, language assessment, language screening, Asian children

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Introduction

The pace of the language acquisition usually depends on (a) children's cognitive skills such as attention, memory (including phonological short-term memory), and processing speed (Asadi et al., 2025; Kormos & Safar, 2008; Larson et al., 2023), (b) children's medical issues such as hearing disorders, risk or early birth, Developmental Language Disorder or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Zaretsky & Lange, 2017), (c) familial predisposition for language disorders (Zaretsky & Lange, 2017), (d) numerous sociodemographic conditions such as immigrant background (Author Group Educational Reporting, 2016). For instance, in Germany, Russian-speaking children acquire German more quickly than Turkish-speaking children because the former attend more often nursery schools, associations, and study groups, begin earlier to acquire German, speak less often their non-German first language in kindergartens, and play more often with German-speaking children (Zaretsky et al., 2013). Italian-speaking children in Germany have somewhat better German language skills than other bi-/multilinguals because they attend more often nursery schools and play more often, both in kindergartens and beyond, with German-speaking children (Zaretsky & Lange, 2015). Usually such sociodemographic (or sociolinguistic) factors are directly or indirectly associated with the quality and quantity of the German language input. Also, some geographical factors were identified that are associated with better German language skills. For instance, children with weak vocabulary skills in German live in districts/regions with a high percentage of foreigners, immigrants, recipients of the financial aid from the state, underemployed, unemployed, families with many children (usually non-Germans), lone parents, kindergarten children speaking other languages than German, kindergarten children who attend kindergartens for half a day (not full day) or for a short period of time, families with a low income, inhabitants with a low living area per person (in m²), and inhabitants with a low educational level (Zaretsky, 2019). Again, such factors are associated with sociodemographic or socioeconomic variables that can influence the pace of the language acquisition through access to speech-language therapies, parents' educational level, and many other factors.

The current study focuses on Asian children acquiring German. There are 2.5 million Asians out of 83.5 million inhabitants in Germany (Werner, 2023). Asians are very different from other immigrants in Germany. For instance, all Asians aged 19+ years come to Germany to study, whereas other subgroups of immigrants come for asylum, work, or family re-union in most cases (Baas, 2021). Among Asians aged 0–18 years, the percentage of those coming for asylum is lower than in other subgroups of immigrants from non-European countries. Whereas all immigrants (age 0–18 years) from typical refugee countries such as Afghanistan come for asylum or family re-union (not to work or study), Asians of the same age usually come for the family re-union or to study. Thus, one can expect certain sociodemographic differences between Asians and non-Asians that can also find their reflection in the German language competence of children. It should also be mentioned that typologically Asian languages are much more distant from German than languages of immigrants from European countries, which makes the German language acquisition for Asians more difficult.

In the current study, Asian and non-Asian kindergarten children were compared regarding their German language skills, sociodemographic and medical characteristics. Differences between these two large subgroups of children in the German language competence were explained in terms of the quality and quantity of the German language input.

Methods

The study re-analysed retrospectively a sample of 984 four-year-old children (540/54.9% males, 444/45.1% females, age $M = 51.8$ months). Originally, these children were recruited for a prospective study on the development of two language tests. The inclusion criteria were age (4;0–4;11 years) and a written consent signed by parents. All children were either bilingual (935/95.0%) or multilingual (49/5.0%).

All immigrant children were categorized as Asians (112/11.4%) or non-Asians (872/88.6%). Asians originated predominantly from Japan, Thailand, Iran, and India. Non-Asian children (or their parents) came predominantly from Turkey, Arabic- and Russian-speaking countries as well as Italy. There were no significant differences between Asians and non-Asians in age and biological sex ($ps > .05$).

For some statistical calculations, a sample of four-year-old monolingual German children from the same study was used: $n = 1,657$ (880/53.1% males, 777/46.9% females, age $M = 52.7$ months). However, their results can be found only in descriptive comparisons.

All children were tested with the well-known, validated, standardized German language test for four-year-old children “Kindersprachscreening” in the second version (KiSS.2, “Language screening for children”; Holler-Zittlau et al., 2011). It contains (a) subtests on speech comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, phonological short-term memory (repetition of non-words and sentences), (b) questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers to assess sociodemographic and medical characteristics of children and their families. All children were classified as bi-/multilinguals or monolingual Germans on the basis of KiSS.2 questionnaires for parents (item “Languages spoken at home”). KiSS.2 results can be dichotomized as follows:

- need of additional educational assistance in acquiring German (German language courses),
- need of additional medical assistance in acquiring German (language-related therapies, e.g., speech-language therapy),
- age-appropriate (“pass”) vs. not age-appropriate (“fail”) German language skills, with “fail” meaning need of additional educational and/or medical assistance in acquiring German.

KiSS.2 is used in a large-scale language assessment program in the German state of Hesse (Weiland et al., 2019).

In the statistical analyses, first, German language skills of Asian and non-Asian children were compared by means of Chi-Square tests (dichotomized KiSS.2 results) and Mann-Whitney *U*-tests (total scores of correct answers in KiSS.2). Also, subjective estimations of German language skills by kindergarten teachers and parents were compared for Asians and non-Asians by means of Chi-Square tests and linear-by-linear associations (lbl). Next, differences in the German language competence between Asians and non-Asians were explained in terms of their sociodemographic and medical characteristics. For this purpose, these characteristics were compared by means of Mann-Whitney *U*-tests (metrical variables), linear-by-linear associations (dichotomous vs. ordinal variables), and Chi-Square tests (dichotomous variables).

Results

According to Chi-Square tests, Asians needed more often educational help in acquiring German than non-Asians and therefore failed more often in KiSS.2 (Table 1). Due to test aborts, dichotomized results were not available for some children.

Table 1

Dichotomized Results of the Language Test KiSS.2 in the Subgroups of Asians vs. Non-Asians: Chi-Square Test

KiSS.2 results	Asian	Non-Asian	$\chi^2_{(1)}$
Need of educational assistance in acquiring German	72/94 (76.6%)	400/665 (60.2%)	9.47**
Need of medical assistance in acquiring German	20/94 (21.3%)	116/665 (17.4%)	0.82
“Fail” in KiSS.2	72/94 (76.6%)	407/665 (61.2%)	8.38**

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For a comparison: out of 1,657 monolingual German children, 301 (18.2%) needed educational assistance in acquiring German, 263 (15.9%) needed medical assistance, and 349 (21.1%) failed in KiSS.2.

Table 2 shows that non-Asian children outperformed Asian children in KiSS.2 subtests on speech comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and repetition of sentences.

Table 2

Language Test Results of Asian vs. Non-Asian Children: Mann-Whitney U-Test

KiSS.2 subtests	Asian $M \pm SD$	Non-Asian $M \pm SD$	Mann-Whitney U- test (Z)
Speech comprehension	3.8 $\pm$ 2.8	4.5 $\pm$ 2.7	-2.36*
Vocabulary	9.0 $\pm$ 6.3	11.3 $\pm$ 6.6	-3.45**
Grammar	7.3 $\pm$ 8.4	10.5 $\pm$ 8.6	-3.79***
Pronunciation	12.6 $\pm$ 3.3	13.1 $\pm$ 3.3	-1.39
Repetition of non-words	6.1 $\pm$ 3.7	6.5 $\pm$ 3.8	-1.06
Repetition of sentences	6.5 $\pm$ 4.7	7.9 $\pm$ 4.8	-2.66**

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Monolingual German children showed much higher mean values in all KiSS.2 subtests: speech comprehension ($M = 6.5 \pm 2.2$), vocabulary ($M = 17.9 \pm 4.3$), pronunciation ($M = 13.7 \pm 3.2$), grammar ($M = 20.8 \pm 7.1$), repetition of non-words ($M = 7.1 \pm 3.6$) and sentences ($M = 12.1 \pm 3.8$).

In the KiSS.2 questionnaire for kindergarten teachers some additional items on children's German language competence were available. In most of them, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians:

- “The child understands complex handling instructions”,
- “The child's vocabulary is age-appropriate”,
- “Everybody can understand the child”,
- “The child's pronunciation appears age-appropriate”,
- “The child speaks in complete sentences”,
- “School grade for the child's German language skills at the beginning of the kindergarten attendance”,
- “School grade for the child's German language skills now [at the time point of KiSS.2]”.

However, Asians had weaker language skills than non-Asians according to items “The child uses articles (*der, die, das*) correctly” ($|b| = 7.51, p = .006$) and “The child speaks German age-appropriately” ($|b| = 6.95, p = .008$). Both variables were ordinal, from 1 “never” to 5 “always”. In the questionnaire for parents, there was a comparable item, “Does the child speak German age-appropriately?” However, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians according to this item.

Thus, German language skills of Asians were somewhat weaker than those of non-Asians. In the next statistical analyses, sociodemographic and medical conditions of the German language acquisition were compared for these two subgroups. There were very few statically significant results. First, Asians had more often peers in the kindergarten group who spoke the same non-German language: $\chi^2_{(1)} = 16.55, p < .001$. Second, in the families of Asian children, other languages than German were spoken more often than in the families of non-Asians: $|b| = 7.87, p < .001$. Third, fathers of Asians had a higher educational level than fathers of non-Asians: $|b| = 8.70, p < .001$. Fourth, mothers of Asians began later to acquire or to learn German than mothers on non-Asians: $Z = -2.18, p = .029$. However, in most available questionnaire items, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians:

- “The child likes to attend the kindergarten”,
- “The child attends kindergarten for a full day or half a day”,
- “The child attends kindergarten regularly”,
- “Length of kindergarten attendance in months”,
- “The child attended a nursery school in the first two years of life”,
- “The child attends an association or a study group”,
- “The child speaks out when playing in groups”,
- “The child likes to play with other children”,
- “The child plays with German-speaking children [in the kindergarten]”,
- “The child plays with German-speaking children [after kindergarten time]”,
- “The child attends a German language course”,
- “The child does not hear well”,
- “The child speaks his/her first language age-appropriately”,
- “The child has some disorder or impairment that is related to language”,
- “The child undergoes a speech-language therapy”,
- “The child has to attend a paediatrician more often than other children”,
- “The child has a permanent hearing disorder”,
- “The child has a permanent sight disorder”,
- “The child often has otitis media”,
- “The child has a motor disorder”,

- “The child had a risk or early birth”,
- Familial predisposition:
- “cases of problems with reading and writing (dyslexia) in the family”,
- “cases of language disorders in the family”,
- “Mother’s educational level”,
- “Age of the German language acquisition: father”.

Discussion

Asian children showed weaker German language skills than non-Asians. According to the validated, standardized German language test KiSS.2, they needed more often additional educational assistance in acquiring German. Their speech comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar skills were comparatively weak. Repetition of sentences reflects the same findings because, apart from memory, all these skills are necessary to repeat sentences (Klem et al., 2014; Riches, 2012). According to the subjective estimation of the German language competence by kindergarten teachers, only grammar skills of Asian children were weaker. Parents did not notice differences between Asian and non-Asian children.

The sociodemographic explanation for the comparatively weak results of Asian children was found in questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers. Asian children spoke less often German both in kindergartens and at home. Also, their mothers began later to learn or to acquire German. In numerous other characteristics Asians and non-Asians did not show any differences. Interestingly, this is also valid for children’s participation in German language courses. Although kindergarten teachers were aware of the fact that Asian children lagged behind in the German language acquisition, they did not choose these children for the participation in German language courses (offered by most kindergartens in Germany). Unfortunately, it is a frequent finding that children are chosen for such courses in a chaotic way and the motivation behind such decisions is often unclear (Zaretsky & Lange, 2016).

Usually, children who lag behind in the German language acquisition also show poor results in German schools. Here, Asian children represent an exception. According to the German statistics on the academic success, Asian children are overrepresented in the prestigious grammar schools and in universities in Germany (Baas, 2021). For instance, 47% of non-immigrant German children and 64% of Vietnamese children attend grammar schools (Werner, 2023). It can mean that Asian children catch up with their peers in German language skills not in kindergartens (where the current study was conducted) but in primary schools, two or three years later. When children are chosen for grammar schools after the fourth grade, Asian children already speak age-appropriate German and show above-average performance in school subjects. It may well be that the fathers’ higher educational level of Asians contributes to this development (according to Results, fathers of Asians have a higher educational level than fathers of non-Asians). It can be directly or indirectly associated with a number of other variables, from children’s higher IQ and better cognitive skills to a better access to children and adults with a higher educational level (and, thus, speaking better German). Higher educational level is associated with a higher income, and the latter can also mean better access to the German healthcare system, better equipped kindergartens attended by more monolingual Germans, better German language courses offered by such kindergartens etc.

It should be noted that the subgroup of Asians was heterogeneous. There is hardly a common denominator between Japanese and Indian children in terms of sociodemographic and

socioeconomic variables. But the same is valid for the non-Asians who came from all over the world, from North America to Africa.

Conclusion

Asian children acquire German more slowly in the first years of life due to less favourable sociodemographic conditions. However, this difference is minimal and can be found only in a couple of variables. Also, these factors do not prevent Asian children from attending prestigious grammar schools several years later, which means that Asians catch up with non-Asians in the German language in the first years of school.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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