The Relationship between Second language use and second language learning

Here, we look closely at the relationship between using (that is, performing in) an L2, and learning (that is, developing one's competence in) that same language. We should note first of all, of course, that 'performing' in a language not only involves speaking it. Making sense of the language data which we hear around us is an equally essential aspect of performance. It is also obviously necessary to interpret and to **process** (= analyse) incoming language data in some form for language development to take place. There is thus a consensus that language **input** of some kind is essential for normal language learning. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the view was argued by Stephen Krashen and others that input (at the right level of difficulty) was all that was necessary for L2 acquisition to take place. Input, and what learners do with it, has remained a central issue in L2 theorizing ever since. Krashen was unusual in not seeing any central role for language production in his theory of second language acquisition. Most other theoretical viewpoints support in some form the commonsense view that speaking a language is helpful for learning it, though they offer a wide variety of explanations as to why this should be the case. For example, behaviourist learning theory saw regular (oral) practice as helpful in forming correct language 'habits'. A directly contrasting view to Krashen's is the so-called **Comprehensible Output Hypothesis,** argued for by Merrill Swain and colleagues (for example, Izumi, 2003; Swain, 2005). Swain originally pointed out (1985) that much L2 input is comprehensible, without any need for a full grammatical analysis. If we don't need to pay attention to the grammar in order to understand the message, why should we be compelled to learn it? On the other hand, when we try to say something in our chosen second language, we are forced to try out our ideas about how the target grammar actually works. Other contemporary theorists continue to lay stress on the 'practice' function of language production, especially in building up **fluency** and control of an emergent L2 system (DeKeyser, 2007b). For example, information processing theorists commonly argue that language competence consists of both a knowledge component ('knowing that') and a skill component ('knowing how'). Researchers in this perspective agree in seeing a vital role for L2 use/L2 performance in developing the second, skill component. (See Chapter 5 for fuller discussion.) So far in this section, we have seen that theorists can hold different views on the contribution both of language input and language **output** to language learning. However, another way of distinguishing among current theories of L2 learning from a 'performance' perspective has to do with their view of L2 interaction – when the speaking and listening in which the learner gets

engaged are viewed as an integral and mutually influential whole, for example in everyday conversation. Two major perspectives on interaction are apparent, one psycholinguistic, one sociolinguistic. From a psycholinguistic point of view, L2 interaction is mainly interesting because of the opportunities it seems to offer to individual L2 learners to fine tune the language input they are receiving. This ensures that the input is well adapted to their own internal needs (that is, to the present state of development of their L2 knowledge). What this means is that learners need the chance to talk with native speakers in a fairly open-ended way, to ask questions, and to clarify meanings when they do not immediately understand. Conversational episodes involving the regular **negotiation of meaning** have been intensively studied by many of the interactionist researchers whose work is discussed in Chapter 6. Interaction is also interesting to linguistic theorists because of recent controversies over whether the provision of **negative evidence** is necessary or helpful for L2 development. By 'negative evidence' is meant some kind of input which lets the learner know that a particular form is *not* acceptable according to target language norms, such as, for example, a formal correction offered by a teacher.

Why is there a controversy about negative evidence in L2 learning? The problem is that correction often seems ineffective – and not only because L2 learners are lazy. It seems that learners often cannot benefit from correction, but continue to produce the same forms despite **feedback** being offered. For some current theorists, any natural language must therefore be learnable from **positive evidence** alone, and corrective feedback is largely irrelevant. Others continue to see value in corrections and negative evidence, though it may have to be accepted that these will be useful only when they relate to 'hot spots' currently being restructured in the learner's emerging L2 system. These different (psycho)linguistic views have one thing in common, however; they view the learner as operating and developing a relatively autonomous L2 system, and see interaction as a way of feeding that system with more or less fine-tuned input data. Sociolinguistic views of interaction are very different. Here, the language learning process is viewed as essentially social; both the identity of the learner, and his/her language knowledge, are collaboratively constructed and reconstructed in the course of interaction (Duff and Talmy, 2011; Duff, 2012). The details of how this is supposed to work vary from one theory to another, as we shall see in Chapters 8 and 9.5

Views of the language learner

Who is the second language learner, and how are they introduced to us, in current SLL research? We have already made it clear that the infant bilingual is not the subject of this book. Instead, 'second language' research generally deals with learners who embark on the learning of an additional language at least some years after they have started to acquire their first language. So, second language learners may be children, or they may be adults; they may be learning the target language formally in school or college, or 'picking it up' in the playground, the internet or the workplace. They may be learning a highly localized language, which will help them to become insiders in a local **speech community**; or the target language may be a language of wider communication relevant to their region, which gives access to economic development and public life. Indeed, in the first part of the twenty-first century, the target language is highly likely to be English; estimates suggest that while around 5 per cent of the world's population (approximately 350 million) speak English as their first language, between one and two billion are using it as a second language or a lingua franca, or learning to do so (Graddol, 2006, p. 98). Consequently, much research on second language learning, whether with children or adults, is concerned with the learning of English, or with a small number of other languages with global reach (French, German, Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish …). There are many multilingual communities today (for example, townships around fast-growing mega-cities) where L2 learning involves a much wider range of languages. However, these have been comparatively little studied.

The learner as language processor

Linguists and psycholinguists have typically been concerned primarily with analysing and modelling the inner mental mechanisms available to the individual learner, for processing, learning and storing new language knowledge. As far as language learning in particular is concerned, their aim is to document and explain the developmental route along which learners travel, and their degree of ultimate success. Researchers for whom this is the prime goal are less concerned withthe speed or rate of development. Thus they tend to minimize or disregard social and contextual differences among learners; their aim is to document universal mental processes available to all normal human beings.

As we shall see, however, there is some controversy among researchers in this psycholinguistic tradition on the question of age. Do child and adult L2 learners learn in essentially similar ways?

Or, is there a critical age which divides younger and older learners, a moment when early learning mechanisms atrophy and are replaced or at least supplemented by other compensatory ways of learning? Many second language researchers agree with some version of a view that 'younger better in the long run' (Singleton, 1995, p. 3), while others argue that this debate is far from resolved (for recent accessible overviews, see Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam, 2009; Herschensohn, 2007; Muñoz and Singleton, 2011).

However, explanations of why this should be are still debated: for example, see Chapter 3 below.

Differences between individual learners

Real-life observation quickly tells us, however, that even if L2 learners can be shown to be following a common developmental route, they differ greatly in their rate of learning and eventual success. Psychologists have argued consistently that these differences in learning outcomes must be due to **individual differences** among learners, and many proposals have been made concerning these. For full overviews of these proposals, and surveys of related research, we refer the reader to sources such as Robinson (2002), Dörnyei (2005), R. Ellis (2008, pp. 643–724) and Dewaele (2009). As Dewaele remarks, nobody has yet come up with any 'Grand Unified Theory of Individual Differences' (2009: p. 625). Here we introduce a selection of the most prominent cognitive and affective (emotional) factors which have been claimed to influence aspects of the second language learning process, and/or ultimate learning success. Is there really such a thing as a 'gift' for second language learning, distinct from general intelligence, as folk wisdom often holds? The most famous formal test of **language aptitude** was designed in the 1950s, by Carroll and Sapon (1957, in Skehan, 2012, p. 393). This 'Modern Language Aptitude Test' (MLAT) was grounded in a four-factor view of language learning aptitude developed by the social psychologist John B. Carroll. The aptitude factors proposed by Carroll were: (a) phonetic coding ability, (b) grammatical sensitivity, (c) inductive language learning ability and (d) associative memory abilities. The Carroll view of aptitude reflected the behaviourist language learning theory of the day, and its view of memory in particular has been replaced in current SLL theorizing by more current cognitive models of memory (see Chapters 4 and 5). However, the MLAT and similar tests have remained broadly robust predictors of second language learning success for learners instructed using varying methods, including **communicative approaches**, and also for informal language learners. The general claim that a distinctive language aptitude exists has gained further support from research investigating the relationship between L1 development, L2 proficiency and

L2 aptitude, in classroom contexts. An early **longitudinal** study by Skehan (1986) demonstrated a significant relationship between early L1 development measures and L2 aptitude measures for the same children when learning a foreign language ten years later. Research by Sparks and associates has also tracked a cohort of American children through early L1 literacy instruction and later foreign language learning. These scholars have shown through a series of repeated tests (including MLAT) that L1 literacy skills are strong predictors of both L2 aptitude and eventual L2 proficiency, at least in a classroom context, while factors such as general intelligence and classroom anxiety played a much more limited role. (See Sparks, 2012, for review.) Finally, new studies of classroom language learning by identical and non-identical twins have also suggested the existence of a specific L2 aptitude somewhat distinct from both L1 ability and from intelligence (Dale *et al.,* forthcoming). More recent theoretical work has set out to relate language aptitude more closely to the processes of second language learning, rather than to ultimate attainment. Thus, for example, Skehan (2002, 2012) has made proposals which show how greater working memory capacity should facilitate specific aspects of L2 processing, from **parsing** longer stretches of L2 input, to monitoring production and paying attention to feedback. Robinson (2002) has pursued the idea that learners may possess a number of different aptitude profiles (or 'aptitude complexes', p. 119) which make them more or less likely to learn effectively under different conditions (grammar study, oral communication, text based learning etc.). However, these attempts to re-theorize language aptitude are so far supported by only a limited amount of empirical research.

As indicated by Altenaichinger (2003) during the seminar about "The interface between theory and practice", the *Creative Construction Theory*, often referred to as the *Naturalistic Approach,* deals with the assumption that we are born with a special language system that we use to acquire a language. Altenaichinger explains that Stephen Krashen is among scholars that singled out the differences between acquisition and learning by explaining that acquisition supposedly is a subconscious process that results in fluency while learning is conscious process that involves learning rules and structures. Additionally, Altenaichinger cites Krashen's discussions and argues that there are three internal elements involved in second language acquisition. Those elements from Krashen's book include a "filter", an "organizer" and a "monitor". He mentions that the "filter" deals with how the learner is influenced in a social context and how he reacts in various social environments. The "organizer" determines the arrangement of the learners language system and "the usage of incorrect grammatical constructions as provisional precursors of grammatical

structures, the systematically occurrence of errors in the learner's utterances as well as a common order in which structures are learnt" (Krashen 1983, as cited in Altenaichinger, 2003). The "monitor" operates the conscious learning part where the learners correct their speech according to their age (Altenaichinger 2003). Those highly debatable SLA elements, which are often fuelled by criticism, are based on the following five hypotheses from Brown (2002) as cited in Altenaichinger: 1. *The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis:* An acquisition is a "subconscious and intuitive process of constructing the system of a language" (p. 278) while learning is a conscious process that students are aware of their learning process and what is expected of them

The Monitor Hypothesis: Is the learning process with the purpose to "monitor" the learning progress and propose improvements to what has already been learned.

3. *The Natural Order Hypothesis* claims that we acquire the rules of a language in a predictable order.

4. *The Input Hypothesis* bolsters the importance for the learner to understand the language a bit beyond his or her understanding with an influence such as motivation.

5. *The Affective Filter Hypothesis* suggests that language is acquired more easily if certain emotion factors are met, such as being mentally stable and not angry, anxious or bored. This means that positive attitude seems to be important in SLA (Brown 2002 as cited in Altenaichinger, 2003, p. 8-9).

The second theory discussed by Altenaichinger revolves around *Communicative Language Teaching* and is completely learner centred. *Communicative Language Teaching* has been highly favoured for the last 20 years and scholars agree that this theory is excellent because it focuses on communicative proficiency in language teaching. In fact, one of the most important aspects of *Communicative Language*

Teaching is a language competence, or in other words, the knowledge and ability to use the target language. As well, it is essential to incorporate activities that influence the learner to communicate in the target language. Through these activities, students need to be able to use the language in a meaningful way and they need to be motivated and aware of the importance of learning the language in order to benefit significantly from the learning process (Altenaichinger 2003).

The 3rd SLA theory from Altenaichinger's paper is the *Cognitive Approach*. Scientists claim that one of the main features of SLA is to build up a system of knowledge that can be unconsciously automatically recollected. Due to that fact, the learner has to be provided with knowledge and

exposure to the target language to understand and socially participate in a social context. Once the learner has experienced the language enough, he or she should be able recall the language automatically and focus on to improve other more complicated language skills. Indeed, the main function of the *Cognitive Approach* is the process of being able to construct and use the language automatically (Altenaichinger, 2003, p.10-11). Altenaichinger moves on to show the relationship between these three theories and how they inter-relate. Moreover, she mentions that manyteachers will apply teaching strategies that involve all of the three theories. Those teachers who are native speakers of the target language might prefer the *Natural Approach* to others. *Communicative Language Teaching* today is an extremely important element of language learning and can be found in almost every language classroom and nearly every language schoolbook. However, the *Cognitive Approach* is a relatively new theory of Second Language Acquisition and might not be so popular yet to apply inside the classroom (Altenaichinger 2003). Nevertheless, it is important for instructors to understand the three approaches and use them properly as a guide to aid their students towards successful second language acquisition

Young Learners and SLA

3.1 The Five Stages of Second Language Acquisition

The process of Second Language Acquisition occurs in stages. In order to examine SLA, it is important to look at the 5 stages of second language acquisition. According to Haynes (2007), the first stage is *Preproduction* and is also referred to as "the silent period" where learners gradually build up their vocabulary to about 500 words without speaking the language but more echoing the language. Then there is the second stage called *Early Production* and at this stage learners will have around 1000 word vocabulary with the capacity of constructing words in short phrases and memorize and use short language forms although not necessarily correctly (Haynes 2007). Haynes talks about the third stage, *Speech Emergence,* where learners have acquired around 3000 words and should be able to speak short sentences and simple phrases. By now, learners should be able to engage in conversation and ask simple questions. Also they can understand short stories if they are supported with pictures. The 4 th development stage, *Intermediate Fluency*, he explains that the learners have an active vocabulary of 6000 words. Also, he adds that students can now form longer and more complex phrases both spoken and written with grammatical errors but demonstrate excellent comprehension. The last developing stage is called *Advanced Fluency* and as he points out, it takes around 5- 10 years to achieve proficiency in second language acquisition

and by now the learners are considered near-native. Indeed, Haynes says that on the surface it might look quite effortless to learn a second language but there are various factors that can have impact on the learning process such as motivation and age.