

4-1994

What About Second-Language Study? A Literature Review of Many Facets of Second Language Study

Philip E. Mitchell

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Philip E., "What About Second-Language Study? A Literature Review of Many Facets of Second Language Study" (1994). *Senior Research Projects*. 123.

https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research/123

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Scholars at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Research Projects by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

WHAT ABOUT SECOND-LANGUAGE STUDY?

A Literature Review of Many Facets of Second Language Study

By Philip E. Mitchell

Directed Study 495

Instructor: Ruth Williams-Morris

April 18, 1994

Introduction

Language is a word with many meanings. A college freshman may say that his professors do not even speak his language. A teenager be disciplined by his parents for using foul language. Language for a fifth-grader may mean a class where one has to do worksheets on verbs and adjectives and diagram sentences. Even communication through facial expressions and hand motions is called body language. Nevertheless, the overall concept of language embraces all of the meanings for language. Language is a process, a means, of communication.

All normal human beings exercise language as a process of communication; no matter what the culture or race may be, a system of language exists. Some languages are simpler than others, lacking, for example, a past tense verb form. Some languages have an enormous number of borrowed words creating a vocabulary larger than the vocabulary of several other languages combined. As would be expected, for one language speaking group to communicate well with another, at least one person from the group must know both languages.

How does one learn a second language? Is it learned in the same way as the mother tongue? Who learns a second language best? Do children have a greater facility with the second language? Is gender a factor in learning a foreign language? Does one sex possess an advantage over the other sex? Is all second-language learning the same? Does knowing another language interfere in

one's use of his/her native language? Is there some chronological point beyond which language learning becomes more difficult? Why do Americans not learn other language to the extent that foreigners learn English? What role does motivation and anxiety play in second-language study? What strategies are most effective? Are there benefits in knowing another language? These are the questions targeted in this literature review on many facets of second-language study.

Terminology

Gradisnik (1980) give several terms which are distinct but related in second-language study. Bilingual education usually refers to a school system which teaches in two languages because some of the students' first language is different. For example, bilingual education classes in the U. S. are usually for students whose first language is Spanish. Consequently, these students have some classes in English and some classes in Spanish.

Foreign language education, or foreign language learning (FLL) usually refers to courses that are specifically designed for teaching one to speak another language. Such courses include, for example, the Spanish, German, and French classes offered at the American high school level. English as a second language (ESL) students are the typical foreign language learners in other countries. Canada is a good example of a place where students learn a second language (French or English) in both institutional classes as well in the natural environmental setting. This type of

learning Dornyei (1990) refers to as second-language acquisition (SLA). These terms are used interchangeably in this review since each still refers to second-language learning.

U.S. Interest

The public interest in learning a second language in the U.S., according to Chastain (1980), is very low. Chastain gives four trends in U.S. history that may provide some explanation: 1) Second language study has never been central to American educator priorities; 2) Americans have no close knit pride of any particular ethnicity, nor for a "pure" American English; 3) Americans see no use for a second language; 4) consequently there is little support or promotion of second-language study. Dornyei (1990) supports Chastain, stating that English is the international language in academic fields and professions as well as in tourism. Chastain says there is no motivation and no impetus from requirements, which Jarvis (1909) further attributes to second-language study being only an elective in the U.S.

Benefits

While learning a second language is seen as unnecessary in the U. S., research shows (Padilla, Fairchild, and Valadez, 1990) that bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility and early development of metalinguistic skills, i.e., thinking abstractly about language. Jarvis (1980) also emphasizes that second-language study improves critical thinking skills because it is very rich in various types

of cognition and encourages divergent thinking.

These higher level thinking skills benefits are not language specific, declares Jarvis (1980), i.e., any foreign-language study (be it French, German or Hebrew) will have these benefits. A 1986 study by Lindholm and Fairchild (1990) found that second-language students did better on tests than did monolingual students on the same test. In short, Collier (1989) suggests that "children who have reached full cognitive development in two languages enjoy cognitive advantages over monolinguals" (p. 517). Of course these advantages would carry over into adulthood.

Motivation as a Factor

As is the case with Americans, many people do not capitalize on learning a second language and gaining the cognitive benefits due to lack of motivation. Actually, motivation is quite a complex concept in second-language study. Dornyei (1990) studied motivation extensively in FLL and postulated a motivational component construct: 1) Instrumental motivational subsystem, 2) Integrative motivational subsystem consisting of four dimensions, 3) Need for achievement, 4) attributions about past failures.

Instrumental motivation is linked to very practical reasons for learning a second language, for example increased pay or better opportunity. This type of motivation, along with the need for achievement, plays a strong role in gaining intermediate proficiency in a second language. The need for achievement usually determines the intensity of the learning, though not necessarily.

Gaining higher proficiency is associated with the integrative subsystem. This type of motivation is linked with the desire to be part of a new community, an interest in foreign language, culture, and people, a desire to broaden one's view and not be isolative, and a desire for stimulating new challenges. Jarvis (1980) found that second language students see themselves as a dependent part of an interdependent humanity--not in isolation. Ryder (1980) asserts:

It is virtually self-evident that such an appreciation of language as a vehicle of human perception, understanding, and control cannot be gained from contemplation of one's own language. (p. 142,143)

If learning a second language is due to an international (integrative) motivation, Ryder feels that learning a second language actually increases that international attitude.

Interestingly, Dornyei (1990) proposes that, because English is internationally used, the desire to avoid isolationism may not be so strong among native English speakers and may explain the lack of motivation for FLL among British and among Americans as mentioned earlier.

Language provides the interconnections of our world. Concepts are expressed differently in each language so that the reality in one language is different from the reality in another language (Ryder 1980). While Dornyei's motivational component construct discussed above is very comprehensive, Neu (1991) says more theoretical and empirical work is necessary to determine the true relationship between attitudes, motivation, and input and interaction on FLL.

Anxiety as a Negative Stimulus

Motivation is a positive stimulus in FLL. But anxiety, Young (1990) states, is a debilitating negative stimulus that can have profound consequences in second-language learning. Young's study suggests that speaking in a foreign language is not necessarily anxiety producing, but that speaking up front in class is. Rivers (1980) also asserts that the anxiety may be caused from being uncomfortable with the teacher. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) affirm a distinct and discriminable language anxiety which may hinder second-language learning. Horwitz (1988) suggests that language anxiety may come from the belief stressing the importance of accuracy in the second-language study. Young (1990) declares such anxiety can be reduced by teachers with a supportive, friendly and relaxed attitude.

Interference as Performance Loss

Anxiety is not the only cause for avoidance. In fact, proficient second language speakers exhibit some avoidance in the second language (L2). The uniqueness of this stems from the fact that these are advanced (i.e., fluent) L2 speakers. There is no anxiety present from fear of error or uncomfortableness with a teacher. Eliasson and Laufer (1993) found in a study of Swedish learners of English that these students avoided the use of certain English phrasal verbs that did not exist in their language (L1). In other words, some L2 avoidance is not because of a lack of motivation or because of anxiety, but is merely because of

differences between L1 and L2.

The case above is an example of how the native language interfered with the fluency of the second language. The reverse is also possible. Segalowitz (1991) addresses this issue of performance loss, or interference, in one's first language because of the possession of a second language. The study found that advanced skill in L2 somehow affected the controlled processing of words. A possible explanation for this was the reduced exposure to print and thus less cognitive "mapping" between the concept and its printed representation.

Age differences

Actually the interference is only a problem at a certain age, but this can be answered in a positive way by asking: What is the optimal age for L2 learning? Collier's study (1987) confirmed the hypothesis that the optimal age to begin learning a second language is between 8-11. Students ages 5-7 learned faster than those from 12-15 but slower than those 8-11. Collier (1987) suggests that there must be a minimal two years of L1 schooling first before L2 learning begins. Later work by Collier (1989) indicates that L2 learning any time before puberty is fine as long as L1 is continued through age 12 when L1 acquisition is basically completed (i.e., minimal L1 interference). Proponents of bilingual education see the value of teaching a second language while at the same time maintaining and developing the richness of the native language (Gradisnik, 1980). The 12-15 year-olds were the slowest attainers

in the Collier's study (1987) and is attributed to the combination of L2 learning and high emphasis on content area development in school classes. The students in this study received all classes in the L2. The results may or may not have a definite link in settings where L2 learning is only in one class per day.

Collier's study (1987) dealt with children of various ages. Penfield and Roberts (1959, cited in Kennedy, 1988) proposed the idea of a critical period of brain plasticity beyond which (i.e., adulthood) L2 learning becomes more difficult. Though this hypothesis has perhaps never fully been confirmed, Kennedy (1988) among many others, assumes this to be the case:

If the beginning learner is beyond the early teen years, a foreign accent will most likely be retained in the L2, as demonstrated in phonological studies (Fathman 1975, Oyama, 1976). (p.483)

Kennedy feels that older L2 learners have a complete and permanent L1 phonological system, whereas the younger L2 learners do not. Thus, younger L2 learners often have native-like pronunciation in the L2. Collier (1989) has found that teenagers can be as equally efficient acquirers as their younger counterparts except retain an accent. Collier's 1987 study and Kennedy (1988) thus are in agreement. In general terms, Pinker (1994) sees the difference between the adult and the child explained by the fact that children have 50% more nerve connections in the brain and burn 50% more energy in the brain than adults do. (Fresh Air)

Obviously, this does not indicate that adults can't learn a second language; adults just may experience more difficulty in the learning process. In actuality, Collier (1989) notes that older

children (post-puberty) and adults proceed faster in initial stages, but after two to three years children who began before puberty achieve higher proficiency levels.

Sex differences

If there are differences between child and adult L2 learning, might there also be such differences between male and female learners? Ehrman and Oxford (1988) found very strong support in their study that strategy use among female L2 learners is much greater than among male L2 learners. This is in support of the 1982 findings of Gilligan (cited in Ehrman, 1988) that females have a "web" social orientation and males a "hierarchy" social image, and of Politzer's (1983) findings that females tend to engage in more second-language social interactions (cited in Ehrman, 1988).

These general differences between the sexes may not hold true at the individual level. Some men may use social interaction strategies more than some women, especially if they recognize it as a strategy to learning the foreign language.

Strategies in L2 Learning

The use of strategies in L2 learning may perhaps challenge even optimal age as the most significant factor in L2 attainment. Some strategies are more effective than others. Some may actually be impeding to the language learner. Students often develop L2 learning strategies based on their beliefs--some true, some false (Horwitz, 1988). Horwitz found that many students expect to be

fluent in L2 in two years, which most L2 teachers feel is a big underestimate of the difficulty of the L2 task. Collier (1987) contends that there is no strategy that acts as a shortcut to L2 learning; the process takes a long time.

Horwitz (1988) says that most students feel there are those with aptitude or special ability for L2 learning, and that children learn better than adults. Whether or not these assumptions are true is irrelevant to the fact that students who rely on these assumptions as an excuse when encountering difficulties are possibly setting themselves up to underachieve in L2 learning.

Horwitz again states that many students stress the importance of proper accent, but this may impede their participation in the classroom or in out-of-class discussion/practice. Another impeding strategy Horwitz notes is approaching the L2 learning as a process of translating from the L1 instead of addressing it as a separate language.

In 1978, Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco (cited in Horwitz, 1988) proposed five strategies of good language learners: 1) they actively involve themselves in the process of language learning, 2) they conceptualize language as a system, 3) they view language as a means of communication and interaction 4) they address the affective demands of L2, 5) they broaden and revise the L2 system through monitoring and inferencing.

Goldin (1987) says to combat the fear mentioned earlier of speaking up front, students should approach the L2 communication in class not as public speaking but as discussion with peers pursuing

a common objective (Goldin, 1987).

Another important strategy is based on the interactional relationship between oral and written language (Abramson, 1990). Goldin (1987) declares, therefore, that dialogue journals are excellent for maintaining and recording awareness of L2 learning.

As mentioned earlier, the solid attainment of L1 enhances L2 acquisition. Similarly, Royer and Carlo (1991) assert that L1 reading skills can be effectively transferred to L2. Gradman and Hanania (1991) conducted a study to determine those factors with the most observable effects on language proficiency. Their most striking finding was outside reading (and those things that promote it). They confirm that extensive comprehensible input is crucial to language acquisition--input which reading provides.

Hammond (1988) contends that comprehensible input does not mean that grammatical accuracy must be stressed. As Naiman suggested above, L2 learning is communication, and Hammond found that such a communicative methodology will teach the grammar inductively. Krashinsky (1987) also emphasizes the need for "socialization into and literacy in a foreign language and culture" (p.243). Goldin (1987) even supports the idea creating a fictitious character for the learner with L2 name, profession, and biography.

Teacher's Role

Some of the above strategies involve the teacher and his/her role in the L2 class. Ramirez (1986) suggests that teachers can learn from the students' perspective and strategies as they

recognize, cultivate and reinforce effective learning strategies. Lafayette (1980) adds that present innovative instructional approaches (e.g., individualized and small group instruction), once well proven, should be incorporated into L2 instruction, too. To help with student adjustments and to understand the language and culture clearly, Alatis (1980) hardly needs to say that the L2 teacher must have the experience of learning the second language (Alatis, 1980). A final suggestion for teachers by Yule and Macdonald (1990) regards classroom interaction. Typically there will be students of different proficiency levels in the same classroom. The teacher must ensure that the less proficient student interacts in an active sender role and not just in a passive receiver role so that the discussion is not dominated by the more proficient student.

Conclusion

No matter what the culture or race may be, a system of language exists; all normal human beings exercise language as a process of communication. For communication between two language speaking groups, a second language must be learned. While second-language study is seen as unnecessary in the U.S., those persons who attain full cognitive development in two languages have cognitive advantages over monolinguals. Motivation is key to L2 attainment. Instrumental motivation refers to practical reasons for second-language study. A more integrative motivation, which includes a desire to broaden one's view of language, culture, and

peoples, and a desire for stimulating new challenges, is the type of motivation associated with advanced second-language study. The international use of English may decrease both types of motivation for native English speakers and may explain the American lack of interest in second-language study.

Foreign language anxiety, which interferes with L2 acquisition, often stems from fears of speaking public. Other interferences may also be present, depending in part on the age of the learner. The optimal age to begin learning a second language is before puberty, provided that care be taken to fully develop the native language. A general gender difference which may affect L2 acquisition is that females tend to use more strategies, including L2 social interaction. Strategies of good second-language learners enhance L2 attainment. These include active L2 involvement and interaction and extensive outside reading in L2. Teachers can encourage good strategy use and positive L2 interaction by providing a supportive, friendly and relaxed attitude in the classroom.

Many questions in second-language study remain to be answered or at least need further exploration. For example, what contrasts arise when comparing L2 acquisition within the same language family to L2 acquisition from a different language family? What is known about learning a second dialect? Are facets of second-language study similar in second-dialect study?

Yet another area in language learning that needs perhaps even initial exploration is third-language study. How does one learn a

third language? Is L3 acquisition easier than L2? Who learns a third language best? Do children have a greater facility with the third language? What role does gender play in third-language study? What types of language interference are involved in L3 learning? What roles do motivation and anxiety play in L3 learning? Does L3 attainment further the cognitive advantages possessed by the bilingual? Researchers may find that L3 acquisition may or may not build on L2 and L1 in a direct way. Interference may be more complex. Third-language attainment may actually be easier than L2 attainment.

Clearly, there is much in second-language study that is not fully understood. But as research in second-language learning continues, the results will likely prove useful in exploring related issues such as third-language study.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, S., Seda, I., & Johnson, C. (1990). Literacy development in a multilingual kindergarten classroom. Childhood Education, 68-72.
- Alatis, J. E. (1980). TESOL: Teaching English to speakers of other languages. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language (pp. 88-103). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Chastain, K. D. (1980). Second-language study: background and current status. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language (pp. 1-25). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Collier, V. P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. TESOL Quarterly, 21, 617-641.
- Collier, V. P. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. TESOL Quarterly, 23, 509-531.
- Dornyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualizing motivation in foreign language learning. Language Learning, 40, 45-78.
- Ehrman, M. & Oxford, R. (1988). Effects of sex differences, career choice, and psychological type on adult language learning strategies. The Modern Language Journal, 72, 253-265.
- Eliasson, S. & Laufer, B. (1993). What causes avoidance in L2 learning: L1-L2 difference, L1-L2 similarity, or L2 complexity? Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 15, 35-48.
- Goldin, M. G. (1987, September). Why Johnny can't acquire Spanish. Hispania, 70, 650-654.

- Gradisnik, A. (1980). Bilingual Education. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language, (pp. 104-127). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Gradman, H. L. & Hanania, E. (1991). Language learning background factors and ESL Proficiency. The Modern Language Journal, 75, 39-51.
- Hammond, R. M. (1988). Accuracy versus communicative competency: The acquisition of grammar in the second language classroom. Hispania, 71, 408-417.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. The Modern Language Journal, 72, 283-294.
- Jarvis, G. A. (1980). The value of second-language learning. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language, (pp. 26-43). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Kennedy, B. L. (1988). Adult versus child L2 acquisition: An information processing approach. Language Learning, 38, 477-495.
- Kramsch, C. J. (1987). Socialization and literacy in a foreign language: Learning through interaction. Theory into Practice, 27, 243-250.
- Lafayette, R. C. (1980). Differentiation of language instruction. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language, (pp. 67-87). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Lindholm, K. J., & Fairchild, H. H. (1990). Evaluation of an elementary school bilingual immersion program. A. M. Padilla, H. H. Fairchild, C. M. Valadez (Eds.), Bilingual education: Issues and strategies. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- MacIntyre, P. C. & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Language anxiety: Its relationship to other anxieties and to processing in native and second languages. Language Learning, 41, 513-534.
- Neu, J. (1991). In search of input: The case study of a learner of Polish as a foreign and second language. Language Annals, 24, 427-442.
- Padilla, A. M., Fairchild, H. H., & Valadez, C. M. (Eds.). (1990). Bilingual education: Issues and strategies. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pinker, S. (1994). Guest on Fresh Air, WHYY, Philadelphia.

- Ramirez, A. G. (1986). Language learning strategies used by adolescents studying French in New York schools. Foreign Language annals, 19, 136-138.
- Rivers, W. M. (1980). Psychology and linguistics as basis for language pedagogy. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language, (pp. 44-66). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Royer, J. M., & Carlo, M. S. (1991). Transfer of comprehension skills from native language to second language. Journal of Reading, 34, 450-455.
- Ryder, F. G. (1980). Foreign language study at the postsecondary level. F. M. Grittner (Ed.), Learning a second language, (pp. 128-149). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Segalowitz, N. (1991). Does advanced skill in a second language reduce automaticity in the first language? Language Learning, 41, 59-83.
- Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. Foreign Language Annals, 23, 539-553.
- Yule, G., & Macdonald, D. (1990). Resolving referential conflicts in L2 interaction: The effect of proficiency and interactive role. Language Learning, 40, 539-556.