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Second
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Acquisition

Portraits of the L2 User

Edited by

Vivian Cook

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 1
Series Editor: David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

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Chapter 1

Background to the L2 User

VIVIAN COOK

Introduction

Portraits of the L2 User treats a wide range of topics from the perspective of the second language (L2) user as an independent speaker of language. They range from vocabulary to phonology, Universal Grammar to language teaching, brain functions to personal identity, treated by writers from a variety of backgrounds. The book thus provides a unique overview of second language acquisition (SLA) theories, results and methods, related to a common theme. It is intended for students and researchers working with second language use and acquisition in psychology, SLA research, bilingualism, linguistics and language teaching. It serves both as an introduction to current SLA research and as an account of the L2 user. Each chapter has a brief introduction relating it to the broader themes and issues of SLA research.

The purpose of the present chapter is to introduce some of the background, themes and consequences of the L2 user perspective. It should not, however, be assumed that all the contributors are necessarily in complete agreement with all of this chapter, or indeed with each other, as will be seen from their own contributions.

L2 Users and L2 Learners

An L2 user is any person who uses another language than his or her first language (L1), that is to say, the one learnt first as a child. He or she may be an English schoolchild staying with a family in Germany on an exchange, Luc Vandevelde the Belgian head of Marks and Spencer in England, the tennis-player Martina Hingis with Czech L1 being interviewed in English, a London newsagent using Bengali and English to his customers, a Canadian trucker with L1 English driving through French-speaking Montreal, a street trader in Singapore switching between English and two Chinese dialects, Kirsten Flagstad the Norwegian opera singer singing Wagner in German in New York, a Greek student using Italian to study in Perugia,

Billy Wilder code-switching from English to German to explain how he directed *Some Like it Hot*, a child in Vancouver speaking Chinese at home and English at school, an Arabic businessman switching to English for e-mails.

In other words an L2 user can be almost anyone anywhere. Using a second language is a commonplace activity. There are few places in the world where only one language is used. In London people speak over 300 languages and 32% of the children live in homes where English is not the main language (Baker & Eversley, 2000). In Australia 15.5% of the population speak a language other than English at home, amounting to 200 languages (Australian Government Census, 1996). In the Congo people speak 212 African languages, with French as the official language. In Pakistan they speak 66 languages, chiefly Punjabi, Sindhi, Siraiki, Pashtu and Urdu.

A country with many languages does not necessarily have many inhabitants who use more than one language, as seen in the distinct geographical regions for the various languages in Switzerland, Belgium and Canada. So it is almost impossible to estimate how many L2 users there are in the world. Though only 8% of the inhabitants of Pakistan speak Urdu as a first language, most of them use it as the official language, change to Arabic for religious purposes, and probably know English as well. In Singapore 56% of the population are literate in more than one language; in Europe 53% of people say that they can speak at least one European language in addition to their mother tongue, 23% speak two other languages (European Commission, 2001). One 12-year-old London child uses Lingala, French and English at home, Kiluba and Limongo with relatives and others outside the home; another speaks Aku at home, English, Spanish and Wolof outside (Baker & Eversley, 2000). Supposedly monolingual societies conceal a large number of L2 users; Japan for example, often cited as the most monolingual country, has 900,000 speakers of Okinawan and 670,000 speakers of Korean (Ethnologue, 1996); all Japanese children learn English in the senior secondary school. Arguably the majority of people in the world are multi-competent users of two or more languages rather than mono-competent speakers of one language, and there are as many children brought up with two languages as with one (Tucker, 1998).

L2 users are not necessarily the same as L2 learners. Language *users* are exploiting whatever linguistic resources they have for real-life purposes: they are reporting their symptoms to a doctor, negotiating a contract, reading a poem. Language *learners* are acquiring a system for later use: they are memorising a list of vocabulary, pretending to be customers in a shop, repeating a dialogue on a tape. The difference is that between decoding a

message when the code is already known and codebreaking a message in order to find out an unknown code. Sometimes using and learning come to the same thing: an asylum-seeker in a new country learns by using the language for everyday survival, as does a child whose parents speak two languages.

Some L2 learners study the language in the classroom or on their own for diverse reasons set by themselves or by their educational systems. Vast numbers of students are involved; 83% of young people in the European Union have studied a second language (Commission of the European Communities, 1987); the British Council (1999) estimates that over one billion people are studying English. Some of these L2 learners become L2 users as soon as they step outside the classroom: the Indonesian child acquiring Dutch in Amsterdam, for example. Others use the second language to talk to their friends with different first languages inside the classroom: for example a Swedish student talking to a French student in English at a summer school in Dublin.

But many L2 learners are studying a second language as an academic subject alongside other school subjects such as geography or physics; it has no current purpose in their lives as a language for immediate use, and marginal relevance for their futures. Children learning English in China have little reason to use it while at school; few of them will find it useful in their future careers. The goal of using the second language is only one of the reasons for studying it; the UK National Criteria for GCSE in Modern Languages, for instance, stress the insight into other cultures and the promotion of general learning skills, not just the ability to use the language for communication (DES, 1990). Hence there are L2 learners who have no intention of becoming L2 users. Most obviously this is the case for teaching Latin and Classical Greek as 'dead' languages; less obviously it applies to any 'living' language taught for educational reasons other than possible use.

In a sense L2 users have no more in common than L1 users; the whole diversity of mankind is there. Some of them use the second language as skilfully as a monolingual native speaker, like Nabokov writing whole novels in a second language; some of them can barely ask for a coffee in a restaurant. The concept of the L2 user is similar to Haugen's minimal definition of bilingualism as 'the point where a speaker can first produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language' (Haugen, 1953: 7) and to Bloomfield's comment 'To the extent that the learner can communicate, he may be ranked as a foreign speaker of a language' (Bloomfield, 1933: 54). Any use counts, however small or ineffective. People use language, whether their first or second language, for their own purposes. L2 use succeeds or fails in the same ways as L1 use does. Some people write

epic poems, some write e-mails; one businessman may win a contract, another may not. Inevitably there is a gap between people's intentions and their achievements. A person who tries to hit a particular language target may miss it for one reason or another: my attempts to write a sonnet never succeeded, even in my first language. In a second language, speakers are perhaps more aware of the gap between plan and execution.

The term *L2 user* can then refer to a person who knows and uses a second language at any level. One motivation for this usage is the feeling that it is demeaning to call someone who has functioned in an L2 environment for years a 'learner' rather than a 'user'. A person who has been using a second language for twenty-five years is no more an L2 learner than a fifty-year-old monolingual native speaker is an L1 learner. The term *L2 learner* implies that the task of acquisition is never finished, and it concentrates attention on how people acquire second languages rather than on their knowledge and use of the second language. Hence SLA research is a far broader discipline than first language acquisition research since it includes, not just the developmental aspects of first language acquisition, but all the aspects of the L2 user's language covered in other areas of linguistics and psychology. The first international organisation for second languages, EUROSLA, carefully made this point by having the 'A' in its name stand for *association*, not *acquisition* – European Second Language Association – to show that it was concerned with all aspects of second languages, not only with acquisition. The term *bilingual* in turn has so many contradictory definitions and associations in popular and academic usage that it seems best to avoid it whenever possible.

Characteristics of L2 users

The main aim of this book is to look at the nature of L2 users. The assumption here is that the L2 user is a different kind of person, not just a monolingual with added extras. What then are the characteristics of L2 users? Here we can summarise some of these; the other chapters explore them at length.

The L2 user has other uses for language than the monolingual

Do L2 users use language differently from monolinguals? The most obvious difference is that, as well as uses of language that can be carried out in either language, L2 users can perform specific activities that L1 users cannot. When they are aware that the other person knows both languages, L2 users often code-switch from one language to another. Take, for example, one Japanese student talking to another in England:

Reading sureba suruhodo, confuse suro yo. Demo, computer lab ni itte, article o print out shinakya.

(The more reading I have, the more I get confused, but I have to go to the computer lab and need to print out some articles.)

L2 users can also take something said in one language and translate it into another. An interpreter at the European Parliament, for instance, may listen to a speech in his or her L2 Danish and translate it into L1 Spanish at the same time.

Some see these uses as essentially extensions to the way monolinguals switch dialects and paraphrase (Paradis, 1997). Nevertheless there seems a qualitative as well as a quantitative jump from L1 paraphrase to the L2 ability to translate; L1 paraphrase for example seldom leads to distinct social roles such as acting as an intermediary between two other people, whether as a professional or an amateur. Nor does L1 dialect switching often occur within the production of single utterances or within the same conversation (except perhaps for purposes of humour), as is typical of code-switching between languages.

Some L2 users use these abilities directly for their jobs whether as professional translators, journalists, bilingual secretaries or other jobs: the skills they employ need specialist training. 'Natural' L2 translators are often children acting as mediators for their elders (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1991), say during a medical consultation for a mother who does not speak the doctor's language. So L2 users are capable not just of uses that overlap those of monolinguals, but also of uses that go beyond them.

The rest of the L2 user's language use is also in a sense invisibly different from that of a monolingual. When speaking their first language, L2 users are still affected by their knowledge of another language – its rules, concepts and cultural patterns. The L2 user stands between two languages, even when apparently using only one, having the resources of both languages on tap whenever needed, as we see below.

The L2 user's knowledge of the second language is typically not identical to that of a native speaker

Is the second language of L2 users different from that of native speakers of the language as a first language? In one sense the answer to this is obviously yes: few L2 users can pass for native speakers; their grammar, their accent, their vocabulary give away that they are non-native speakers, even after many years of learning the language or many decades of living in a country. A German student's spelling of *live* as *life*, of *England* as *Englan* or of *institute* as *institude* shows the carryover of the L1 voicing system to English

spelling. There is little dispute that L2 users have different knowledge of the second language. The controversial issues have usually been whether this applies inevitably to all L2 users, and what its causes might be.

Some SLA research has concentrated on 'ultimate attainment' in L2 acquisition: can L2 users *ever* speak like natives? Those who think they cannot cite research that showed that Americans living in France for many years still had a different awareness of grammaticality in French from that of native speakers (Coppetiers, 1987). Those who think that it is possible for L2 users to speak like natives point to a handful of L2 learners who indeed pass for native speakers, whether in pronunciation (Bongaerts *et al.*, 1995) or in syntax (White & Genesee, 1996). Both sides of the debate judge the L2 user against the native speaker; ultimate attainment is a monolingual standard rather than an L2 standard. Differences from native speakers represent failure; 'Very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are' (Towell & Hawkins, 1994: 14).

While the question of what ultimate attainment means in a second language is not yet resolved, there is no intrinsic reason why it should be the same as that of a monolingual native speaker. We should not be paying too much attention to the select handful of specially gifted individuals who can arguably pass for natives, but should take heed of the vast majority of people who are distinctive L2 users; we would not make the mistake of basing the study of human speech on a specially talented group such as opera-singers or mimics.

The L2 user's knowledge of their first language is in some respects not the same as that of a monolingual

Does the first language of L2 users also differ from that of monolinguals who speak the same language natively? This question has so far barely been broached in the SLA research field, except in the context of language loss, to be discussed in De Bot's chapter. Evidence for the effects of the second language on the first includes:

- *Phonology.* The L2 users' pronunciation of their first language moves towards that of the second language in respects such as Voice Onset Time for plosives such as /t/ and /d/ (Nathan, 1987) (discussed in Major's chapter).
- *Vocabulary.* The L2 users' understanding of L1 words is affected by their knowledge of the meanings and forms of the second language; a French person who knows English has the English meaning of the word *coin* (money) activated even when reading *coin* (corner) in French (Beauvillain & Grainger, 1987); loan-words have different L1

meanings for people who know the second language from which they are derived, for example Japanese *bosu* (gang-leader) has a more general meaning for Japanese who know English *boss* (Tokumaru, in progress).

- *Syntax.* Grammaticality judgements of French middle verb construction are affected by the second language (Balcom, 1995); cues for assigning subjects in the sentence are affected in Japanese by knowing English (Cook *et al.*, in preparation); Hungarian children who know English write more complex Hungarian sentences than those who do not (Kecskes & Papp, 2000).
- *Reading.* L2 users in some respects read their first language differently from monolingual natives: Greeks who know English read Greek differently from those who don't (Chitiri *et al.*, 1992).

Though the differences may not be great or even noticeable in everyday situations, the L1 knowledge of the majority of L2 users is not identical to that of monolinguals, as detailed in the volume *Effects of the L2 on the L1* (Cook, in preparation).

L2 users have different minds from monolinguals

Do L2 users think in different ways from monolinguals? Acquiring another language alters the L2 user's mind in ways that go beyond the actual knowledge of language itself, as we see in the chapters by Bialystok and Genesee. For example L2 users:

- *Think more flexibly.* Bilingual English/French children score better than monolingual children on an 'unusual uses' test (Lambert *et al.*, *1973).*
- *Have increased language awareness.* Spanish/English bilingual children go through the early stages of grammatical awareness more rapidly than monolingual children (Galambos & Goldin-Meadow, 1990).
- *Learn to read more rapidly in their L1.* English children who learn Italian for an hour a week for five months learn to recognise words better than monolinguals do (Yelland *et al.*, 1993).
- *Have better communication skills in their L1.* For example English-speaking 6–7-year-olds who knew French were better able to communicate the rules of a game to blindfolded children than those who spoke only English (Genesee *et al.*, 1975).

The mind of an L2 user therefore differs from that of a monolingual native speaker in several ways other than the possession of the second language; multi-competence is not just the imperfect cloning of mono-

competence, but a different state. The cogent title of Grosjean (1985) is 'The bilingual as a competent but specific speaker–hearer'. While the positive side of difference has been emphasised here, some aspects may of course be negative. Magiste (1986) and Ransdell and Fischler (1987) found L2 users had slight cognitive deficits on certain tasks compared with monolingual native speakers; Makarec and Persinger (1993) found that male L2 users, but not women, had some memory deficiencies compared with monolinguals. Nevertheless earlier research that showed ill-effects of bilingualism has mostly been refuted.

Completeness and Interlanguage

A commonsense approach to first language acquisition is to start from the adult and work backwards: the language of children is a defective version of the language of adults. A child who says *Help jelly* actually intends to say the adult sentence *Could you help me to some jelly?* The aspect of Chomsky's early thinking that can be called the independent grammars assumption (Cook, 1993) recognised that the child's language is a complete system in its own right, rather than an imperfect adult system. A child's sentence such as *Help jelly* relates to the child's grammar which has, say, rules that Verbs (help) are followed by Objects (jelly) and that sentences do not have to have subjects, rather than to the adult English rules of question formation, compulsory subjects and use of prepositions. In other words children are real children, not imitation adults; each stage of their development of language forms a complete system. The grammar of the two-year-old is as much a grammar as the grammar of the twenty-year-old, the language of the two-year-old as genuine as that of the adult. While the final adult state of competence provides a convenient yardstick that is historically related to the interim stages that children go through, it does not invalidate the existence of complete language systems at each stage of development. The independent grammars assumption meant that children's grammars should be evaluated in their own terms, not in terms of adult grammars, thus severing the child's grammar from the adult's. Linguistic competence is whatever it is at the particular moment that it is being studied, not a partial imitation of what it might become one day.

When applied to L2 learning, the independent grammars assumption meant treating L2 learners too as having language systems of their own. It was adapted to SLA (second language acquisition) research by several people at roughly the same period as 'transitional idiosyncratic dialect' (Corder, 1971), 'approximative system' (Nemser, 1971) and 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972), leading to the wave of SLA research of the 1960s and 1970s.

The grammars of L2 learners were seen to have their own characteristics rather than being pale reflections of the second language or transfer from the first language.

Take a sentence such as *Is policeman on the road* produced by a Punjabi-speaking user of English. Its characteristic is, not the distortion of either English or Punjabi, but the omission of non-lexical subjects such as *there*, common in early L2 grammars, as seen in other sentences spoken by the same user such as *Eating* and *After it's going from there try to go to back jail.* The L2 grammar is neither a defective version of the monolingual native grammar nor a partial transfer from the second, even if there are elements of both within it, but a creation of its own. In L1 acquisition the independent grammars assumption meant decoupling the child's grammar from the adult's. In L2 acquisition it means decoupling the L2 user's grammar from that of the monolingual native speaker. The L2 learner's grammar is to be judged as an L2 system in its own right, not against that of the native speaker.

This consequence was not in fact fully heeded by SLA research, which continued to assume that L2 users are failures compared with native speakers. This is seen in remarks such as 'Relative to native speaker's linguistic competence, learners' interlanguage is deficient by definition' (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997: 5), a sentiment echoed in almost every book on SLA. Labov (1969) trenchantly argued that members of one group should not be criticised for not meeting the standards of another group to which they can never belong, leading to this approach being outlawed in linguistics, though not in popular discussions. In academic discourse, women are not said to speak worse than men, nor Black English people worse than white, nor New Yorkers worse than Bostonians, however large the differences may be between these groups. While we can learn something by comparing apples with pears, apples inevitably make rather poor pears, however delicious.

As we have seen above and shall see throughout this book, the minds, languages and lives of L2 users are different from those of monolinguals. L2 users are not failures because they are different. To demonstrate a similar point in a different context, Williams (1975) found white American children scored 51% on the BITCH-100 test (Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity) compared to their black contemporaries' 87%. Using the logic of deficit, the English of white Americans is extremely deficient. Monolingual native speakers are also incompetent at speaking second languages, tautologous as this may be to point out. Some people continue to insist that L2 users are a special case where the goal of one group is genuinely to be like another group: the ultimate state of L2 learning is indeed to

pass as native. This argument of specialness seems a last defence, no more convincing in a second language context than it was in the area of human rights or racial or sexual discrimination. It also ignores the main use of international languages like English for non-native speakers to speak to other non-native speakers rather than to natives. This is not to say that the 'monolingualist' belief in the supremacy of the native speaker is not shared by many L2 users, who apologise for not speaking like native speakers, according to Grosjean (1989), because they 'assume and amplify the monolingual view'.

So it is dangerous to imply that either children or L2 users are incomplete versions of some complete final state. L1 children may use the word *more* in an apparently adult-like fashion; it is only when they are tested experimentally that it becomes apparent that they do not distinguish 'more apples' from 'less apples' (Clark, 1971). Looked at from the adult perspective, they have a partial meaning for the words; looked at from their own system, they have two synonyms. Intermediate L2 users of English often use the word *interesting* when a native speaker would say *interested*, as in *I am really interesting to help*. In native terms their meaning is incomplete; in L2 terms, it has a meaning of its own. Major discusses the idea of completeness applied to phonology more fully in his chapter.

In the absence of the native speaker, there is no single uniform criterion against which L2 users can be measured. Some use the language for comparatively simple daily exchanges such as commuting to work. Some lead their entire lives through the second language, the most extreme examples being spies. Hence the concept of a complete knowledge of a language is meaningless: competence is whatever it is. We communicate with an L1 child who says *Want more up* despite the differences in concepts and syntax. Our lexical knowledge of a word's meanings and behaviour may be incomplete compared with the entry in the dictionary, but our competence in English is not incomplete because we do not know that, for people in Cumbria, the word *man* means 'a cairn or pile of stones marking a summit or prominent point of a mountain'. What is complete is the system at a given moment for a given user. However, while there are names for the L1 and for the L2 interlanguage in the user's mind, no single term covers the overall system made up of the L1 and the interlanguage. Cook (1991) therefore introduced the term *multi-competence* to refer to 'the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind'.

The Integration Continuum Between L1 and L2

The overall question about L2 users is then how two or more languages