# 14 Second language acquisition/learning

"Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb," the Italian nanny explained. "One too may eat of the chocolate."

"And who brings the chocolate?" the teacher asked.

I knew the word, so I raised my hand, saying, "The rabbit of Easter. He bring of the chocolate."

"A rabbit?" The teacher, assuming I'd used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wriggling them as though they were ears. "You mean one of these? A *rabbit* rabbit?"

"Well, sure," I said. "He come in the night when one sleep on a bed. With a hand he have a basket and foods."

The teacher sighed and shook her head. As far as she was concerned, I had just explained everything that was wrong with my country. "No, no," she said. "Here in France the chocolate is brought by a big bell that flies in from Rome."

I called for a time-out. "But how do the bell know where you live?"

"Well," she said, "how does a rabbit?" Sedaris (2000)

Some children grow up in a social environment where more than one language is used and are able to acquire a second language in circumstances similar to those of first language acquisition. Those fortunate individuals are bilingual (see Chapter 18). However, most of us are not exposed to a second language until much later and, like David Sedaris, our ability to use a second language, even after years of study, rarely matches ability in our first language. There is something of an enigma in this, since there is apparently no other system of "knowledge" that we can learn better at two or three years of age than at thirteen or thirty. A number of reasons have been suggested to account for this enigma, and a number of different approaches have been proposed to help learners become as effective communicating in a second language (L2) as they are in their first language (L1).

## Second language learning

A distinction is sometimes made between learning in a "foreign language" setting (learning a language that is not generally spoken in the surrounding community) and a "second language" setting (learning a language that is spoken in the surrounding community). That is, Japanese students in an English class in Japan are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and, if those same students were in an English class in the USA, they would be learning English as a second language (ESL). In either case, they are simply trying to learn another language, so the expression **second language learning** is used more generally to describe both situations.

### Acquisition and learning

A more significant distinction is made between acquisition and learning. The term **acquisition** is used to refer to the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations with others who know the language. The term **learning**, however, applies to a more conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the features, such as vocabulary and grammar, of a language, typically in an institutional setting. (Mathematics, for example, is learned, not acquired.)

Activities associated with learning have traditionally been used in language teaching in schools and have a tendency, when successful, to result in more knowledge "about" the language (as demonstrated in tests) than fluency in actually using the language (as demonstrated in social interaction). Activities associated with acquisition are those experienced by the young child and, by analogy, those who "pick up" a second language from long periods spent in interaction, constantly using the language, with native speakers of the language. Those individuals whose L2 exposure is primarily a learning type of experience tend not to develop the same kind of general proficiency as those who have had more of an acquisition type of experience.

### Acquisition barriers

For most people, the experience with an L2 is fundamentally different from their L1 experience and it is hardly conducive to acquisition. They usually encounter the L2 during their teenage or adult years, in a few hours each week of school time (rather than via the constant interaction experienced as a child), with a lot of other things going on (young children have little else to do), and with an already known language available for most of their daily communicative requirements. Despite the fact that insufficient time, focus and incentive undermine many L2 learning attempts, there are some individuals who seem to be able to overcome the difficulties and develop an ability to use the L2 quite effectively, though not usually sounding like a native speaker (i.e. someone for whom it is an L1).

However, even in ideal acquisition situations, very few adults seem to reach native-like proficiency in using an L2. There are individuals who can achieve great expertise in the written language, but not the spoken language. One example is Joseph Conrad, who wrote novels in English that became classics of English literature, but whose English speech retained the strong Polish accent of his L1. This might suggest that some features of an L2, such as vocabulary and grammar, are easier to learn than others such as pronunciation. Indeed, without early experience using the sounds and intonation of the L2, even highly fluent adult learners are likely to be perceived as having an "accent" of some kind.

This type of observation is sometimes taken as evidence that, after the critical period for language acquisition has passed, around the time of puberty, it becomes very difficult to acquire another language fully (see Chapter 12). We might think of this process in terms of our inherent capacity for language being strongly taken over by features of the L1, with a resulting loss of flexibility or openness to receive the features of another language.

Against this view, it has been demonstrated that students in their early teens are quicker and more effective L2 learners in the classroom than, for example, seven-year-olds. It may be, of course, that the effective learning of an L2 (even with a trace of an accent) requires a combination of factors. The optimum age for learning may be during the years from about ten to sixteen when the flexibility of our inherent capacity for language has not been completely lost, and the maturation of cognitive skills allows a more effective analysis of the regular features of the L2 being learned.

## Affective factors

Yet even during this proposed optimum age for L2 learning, there may exist an acquisition barrier of quite a different kind. Teenagers are typically much more self-conscious than younger children. If there is a strong element of unwillingness or embarrassment in attempting to produce the different sounds of another language, then it may override whatever physical and cognitive abilities there are. If this self-consciousness is accompanied by a lack of empathy with the other culture (for example, feeling no identification with its speakers or their customs), then the subtle effects of not really wanting to sound like a Russian or a German or an American may strongly inhibit the learning process.

This type of emotional reaction, or "affect," may also be caused by dull textbooks, unpleasant classroom surroundings or an exhausting schedule of study and/or work.

All these negative feelings or experiences are **affective factors** that can create a barrier to acquisition. Basically, if we are stressed, uncomfortable, self-conscious or unmotivated, we are unlikely to learn very much.

Children seem to be less constrained by affective factors. Descriptions of L2 acquisition in childhood are full of instances where young children quickly overcome their inhibitions as they try to use new words and phrases. Adults can sometimes overcome their inhibitions too. In one intriguing study, a group of adult L2 learners volunteered to have their self-consciousness levels reduced by having their alcohol levels gradually increased. Up to a certain point, the pronunciation of the L2 noticeably improved, but after a certain number of drinks, as we might expect, pronunciations deteriorated rapidly. Courses introducing "French with cognac" or "Russian with vodka" may provide a partial solution, but the inhibitions are likely to return with sobriety.

## Focus on method

Despite all these barriers, the need for instruction in other languages has led to a variety of educational approaches and methods aimed at fostering L2 learning. As long ago as 1483, William Caxton used his newly established printing press to produce a book of *Right good lernyng for to lerne shortly frenssh and englyssh*. He was not the first to compile exercise material for L2 learners and his phrase-book format with customary greetings (*Syre, god you kepe. I haue not seen you in longe tyme*) has many modern counterparts. More recent approaches designed to promote L2 learning have tended to reflect different theoretical views on how an L2 might best be learned.

## The grammar–translation method

The most traditional approach is to treat L2 learning in the same way as any other academic subject. Vocabulary lists and sets of grammar rules are used to define the target of learning, memorization is encouraged, and written language rather than spoken language is emphasized. This method has its roots in the traditional teaching of Latin and is described as the **grammar–translation method**. This label has actually been applied to the approach by its detractors, who have pointed out that its emphasis on learning about the L2 often leaves students quite ignorant of how the language might be used in everyday conversation. Although this method clearly produced many successful L2 users over the centuries, it is sometimes claimed that students can leave school, having achieved high grades in French class via this method, yet find themselves at a loss when confronted by the way the French in France actually use their language.

## The audiolingual method

A very different approach, emphasizing the spoken language, became popular in the middle of the twentieth century. It involved a systematic presentation of the structures of the L2, moving from the simple to the more complex, in the form of drills that the student had to repeat. This approach, called the **audiolingual method**, was strongly influenced by a belief that the fluent use of a language was essentially a set of "habits" that could be developed with a lot of practice. Much of this practice involved hours spent in a language laboratory repeating oral drills. Versions of this approach are still used in language teaching, but its critics have pointed out that isolated practice in drilling language patterns bears no resemblance to the interactional nature of actual spoken language use. Moreover, it can be incredibly boring.

## Communicative approaches

More recent revisions of the L2 learning experience can best be described as **communicative approaches**. They are partially a reaction against the artificiality of "pattern-practice" and also against the belief that consciously learning the grammar rules of a language will necessarily result in an ability to use the language. Although there are many different versions of how to create communicative experiences for L2 learners, they are all based on a belief that the functions of language (what it is used for) should be emphasized rather than the forms of the language (correct grammatical or phonological structures). Classroom lessons are likely to be organized around concepts such as "asking for things" in different social settings, rather than "the forms of the past tense" in different sentences. These changes have coincided with attempts to provide more appropriate materials for L2 learning that has a specific purpose, as in "English for medical personnel" or "Japanese for business people."

# Focus on the learner

The most fundamental change in the area of L2 learning in recent years has been a shift from concern with the teacher, the textbook and the method to an interest in the learner and the acquisition process. For example, one radical feature of most communicative approaches is the toleration of "errors" produced by students. Traditionally, "errors" were regarded negatively and had to be avoided or eradicated. The more recent acceptance of such errors in learners' use of the L2 is based on a fundamental shift in perspective from the more traditional view of how L2 learning takes place.

Rather than consider a Spanish (L1) speaker's production of *in the room there are three womens* as simply a failure to learn correct English (which can be remedied through extra practice of the correct form), we can look at this utterance as an indication of the natural L2 acquisition process in action. An "error," then, is not something that hinders a student's progress, but is probably a clue to the active learning progress being made by the student as he or she tries out ways of communicating in the new language. Just as children acquiring their L1 produce certain types of ungrammatical forms at times, so we might expect the L2 learner to produce similar forms at certain stages (see Chapter 13). The example of *womens* might be seen as a type of overgeneralization (of *-s* as the plural marker), used by the learner in accordance with the most common way of making plural forms in English.

## Transfer

Of course, some errors may be due to "transfer" (also called "crosslinguistic influence"). **Transfer** means using sounds, expressions or structures from the L1 when performing in the L2. For example, a Spanish (L1) speaker who produces *take it from the side inferior* may be trying to use the Spanish adjective *inferior* ( = *lower* in English) and placing it after the noun, as is typical in Spanish constructions. If the L1 and L2 have similar features (e.g. marking plural on the ends of nouns), then the learner may be able to benefit from the **positive transfer** of L1 knowledge to the L2. On the other hand, transferring an L1 feature that is really different from the L2 (e.g. putting the adjective after the noun) results in **negative transfer** and it may make the L2 expression difficult to understand. We should remember that negative transfer (sometimes called "interference") is more common in the early stages of L2 learning and often decreases as the learner develops familiarity with the L2.

## Interlanguage

On close inspection, the language produced by L2 learners contains a large number of "errors" that seem to have no connection to the forms of either the L1 or L2. For example, the Spanish L1 speaker who says in English *She name is Maria* is producing a form that is not used by adult speakers of English, does not occur in English L1 acquisition by children, and is not based on a structure in Spanish. Evidence of this sort suggests that there is some in-between system used in the L2 acquisition process that certainly contains aspects of the L1 and L2, but which is an inherently variable system with rules of its own. This system is called an **interlanguage** and it is now considered to be the basis of all L2 production.

If some learners develop a fairly fixed repertoire of L2 expressions, containing many forms that do not match the target language, and seem not to be progressing any further, their interlanguage is said to have "fossilized." The process of **fossilization** in L2 pronunciation seems to be the most likely basis of what is perceived as a foreign accent. However, an interlanguage is not designed to fossilize. It will naturally develop and become a more effective means of L2 communication given appropriate conditions. Discovering just what count as the appropriate conditions for successful L2 learning is an ongoing area of investigation.

## Motivation

There are several factors that combine in a profile of a successful L2 learner. Obviously, the motivation to learn is important. Many learners have an **instrumental motivation**. That is, they want to learn the L2 in order to achieve some other goal, such as completing a school graduation requirement or being able to read scientific publications, but not really for any social purposes. In contrast, those learners with an **integrative motivation** want to learn the L2 for social purposes, in order to take part in the social life of a community using that language and to become an accepted member of that community.

It is also worth noting that those who experience some success in L2 communication are among the most motivated to learn. So, motivation may be as much a result of success as a cause. A language-learning situation that provides support and encourages students to try to use whatever L2 skills they have in order to communicate successfully must consequently be more helpful than one that dwells on errors, corrections and a failure to be perfectly accurate. Indeed, the learner who is willing to guess, risks making mistakes and tries to communicate in the L2 will tend, given the opportunity, to be more successful. An important part of that opportunity is the availability of "input."

## Input and output

The term **input** is used, as in L1 acquisition (see Chapter 13), to describe the language that the learner is exposed to. To be beneficial for L2 learning, that input has to be comprehensible, because we can't process what we don't understand. Input can be made comprehensible by being simpler in structure and vocabulary, as in the variety of speech called **foreigner talk**. Native speakers of English may try to ask an international student *How are you getting on in your studies?*, but, if not understood, may switch to *English class, you like it?* This type of foreigner talk may be beneficial, not only for immediate communicative success, but also for providing the beginning learner with clearer and comprehensible examples of the basic structure of the L2 as input.

As the learner's interlanguage develops, however, there is a need for more interaction and the kind of "negotiated input" that arises in conversation. **Negotiated input** is L2 material that the learner can acquire in interaction through requests for clarification while active attention is being focused on what is said. In the following interaction (from Pica *et al.*, 1991), notice how the learner, a non-native speaker (NNS) of English, and the English native speaker (NS) negotiate meaning together. The comprehensible input (i.e. using the word *triangle* to describe a shape) is provided at a point where the learner needs it and is paying attention to the meaning in context.

NS: *like part of a triangle?*
NNS: *what is triangle?*
NS: *a triangle is a shape um it has three sides*
NNS: *a peak?*
NS: *three straight sides*
NNS: *a peak?*
NS: *yes it does look like a mountain peak, yes*
NNS: *only line only line?*
NS: *okay two of them, right? one on each side? a line on each side?*
NNS: *yes*
NS: *little lines on each side?*
NNS: *yes*
NS: *like a mountain?*
NNS: *yes*

In this type of interaction, the learner experiences the benefits of both receiving input (hearing the L2) and producing output (speaking the L2). The opportunity to produce comprehensible **output** in meaningful interaction seems to be another important element in the learner's development of L2 ability, yet it is one of the most difficult things to provide in large L2 classes. One solution has been to create different types of tasks and activities in which learners have to interact with each other, usually in small groups or pairs, to exchange information or solve problems. Despite fears that learners will simply learn each other's "mistakes," the results of such **task-based learning** provide overwhelming evidence of more and better L2 use by learners. The goal of such activities is not that the learners will know more about the L2, but that they will develop communicative competence in the L2.

## Communicative competence

**Communicative competence** can be defined as the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly. The first component is **grammatical competence**, which involves the accurate use of words and structures. Concentration on grammatical competence only, however, will not provide the learner with the ability to interpret or produce L2 expressions appropriately.

The ability to use appropriate language is the second component, called **sociolinguistic competence**. It enables the learner to know when to say *Can I have some water?* versus *Give me some water!* according to the social context. Much of what was discussed in terms of pragmatics (see Chapter 10) has to become familiar in the cultural context of the L2 if the learner is to develop sociolinguistic competence.

The third component is called **strategic competence**. This is the ability to organize a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties. In L2 use, learners inevitably experience moments when there is a gap between communicative intent and their ability to express that intent. Some learners may just stop talking (bad idea), whereas others will try to express themselves using a **communication strategy** (good idea). For example, a Dutch L1 speaker wanted to refer to *een hoefijzer* in English, but didn't know the English word. So, she used a communication strategy. She created a way of referring to the object by using vocabulary she already knew, saying *the things that horses wear under their feet, the iron things* and the listener understood immediately what she meant (*horseshoes*). This flexibility in L2 use is a key element in communicative success. In essence, strategic competence is the ability to overcome potential communication problems in interaction.

## Applied linguistics

In attempting to investigate the complex nature of L2 learning, we have to appeal to ideas not only from linguistic analysis, but from other fields such as communication studies, education, psychology and sociology. This large-scale endeavor is often described as **applied linguistics**. Because it represents an attempt to deal with a large range of practical issues involving language (not only L2 learning), applied linguistics has created connections with fields as diverse as anthropology (see Chapter 20), neurolinguistics (Chapter 12), social psychology (Chapter 19) and sign language studies (next chapter).