Portraits of the L2 User

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Edited by
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Contents

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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-