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Rebekah Rast

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Abbreviations

1p	first person
2p	second person
3p	third person
Acc	accusative case
Adj	adjective
Adv	adverb
AP	adverbial phrase
B	bilingual
C	complement
Conj	conjunction
Cop	copula
Dat	dative case
f	feminine
FLA	first language acquisition (the field of)
FT/FA	Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis
Freq	frequency count in the input
Gen	genitive case
Instr	instrumental case
IP	On-line Input Processing
L1	first language
L2	second language
L3	third language (or more)
Loc	locative case
m	masculine
M	monolingual
n	neuter
N	noun
Neg	negator <i>nie</i> 'pas' (not)
Nic	negator <i>nic</i> 'rien' (nothing)
NL	native language
Nom	nominative case
NNS	non-native speaker
NP	noun phrase
NS	native speaker

O	direct object
OP	operating principle
pl	plural
Prep	preposition
PP	prepositional phrase
PP/Adv	prepositional phrase/adverbial
Pron	pronoun
Refl	reflexive pronoun <i>się</i>
S	subject
sg	singular
SLA	second language acquisition (the field of)
TL	target language
UG	Universal Grammar
Vf	finite verb
Vi	non-finite verb
Voc	vocative case

Introduction

My interest in the role a learner's linguistic environment plays in the process of acquiring a foreign language came out of a decade of teaching English to adult speakers of an array of other languages, in particular those whose jobs often required them to perform extraordinary feats in the English language with minimal training. I prepared them as best I could for their respective presentations and meetings, sharing the responsibility for what would result in either success or failure. The stakes were often high. Beginning to wonder to what extent my interventions helped, I made an attempt at determining the types of interventions that seemed at once most beneficial and economical. Although I found some ephemeral solutions, I was far from satisfied. I sought to learn more about what my students actually *got* from what I provided. Little did I know at the time that this was the beginning of a long journey into the study of initial processing of foreign language input.¹

Having expressed my interest in examining how learners work on second language (L2)² input, I was given the responsibility of a pilot study at the University of Paris VIII on French learners of Polish at the absolute beginning of the acquisition process (cf. Rast, 1998). Following the pilot study, with the help of many, I conducted a large-scale observational study on initial processing of L2 input in adult second language acquisition, the material from which provides the foundation of this book. My initial questions included the following: what knowledge does a learner bring to the acquisition process? How, when and under what conditions do learners rely on target language (TL) input, on their native language (NL) or on other known languages to acquire elements of the TL? What strategies do learners use to accomplish a task in the TL at the moment of first exposure to that language? What hypotheses do learners formulate with regard to their new language, and what do they do with these hypotheses? In essence, how is a second language born, and how can the first hours of its acquisition be described?

Before moving on to the details of this book, let us think first about language in general. Pinker (1994: 7), when speaking of the ability to use a first language (L1), observes that, 'The ability comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is'. Most adult learners would likely *not* say this about the ability to learn or use a second language. Second

language acquisition is often seen as a laborious process, one for which hundreds of language teachers and methods developers from Gattegno (*The Silent Way*, cf. Gattegno, 1976) to Lozanov (*Suggestopedia*, cf. Lozanov, 1978) have sought to unearth the magic formula. But what if we try to think of L2 acquisition in a different light? Is it not quite phenomenal in fact that after having somehow completely learned one complex language already, we manage to begin learning another, and that some adults even gain native-speaker or almost native-speaker proficiency? Not only this, some 'acquire' a third, fourth, fifth (or more) language in addition to the second, and this with everything else that is going on in our lives. How do we do it? What processes are involved that make L2 acquisition a feasible endeavour for an individual who is beyond the so-called 'critical period', if this period in fact exists (cf. Singleton, 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004)?

Research on first exposure to L2 input and during the first seconds, minutes and hours that follow is necessary for further insight into these questions. This book presents a study conducted at the absolute beginning of L2 acquisition, from the moment of first exposure to the TL through the 8 hours that follow. In this book, you as the reader will become acquainted with a group of native French speakers who had had no contact with the Polish language at the onset of the study. All the Polish input they received was recorded and analysed. You will, therefore, have the opportunity to contemplate the TL input to which these learners were exposed, to discern what the learners *do* with this input and to observe their development (or lack thereof) over the first 8 hours of their acquisition of Polish. We will also examine data collected from other groups of native French speakers at the moment of first contact with Polish. In short, this book describes certain aspects of the initial stages of L2 acquisition to which minimal research has been devoted until now. The in-depth analysis of the TL input, the type of analysis performed in this study, not only sheds light on questions still unanswered in the second language acquisition literature, such as what knowledge is brought to the L2 acquisition process and how that knowledge is used by a learner to process new linguistic information, but it also brings clarity to the role of input and intake at this early stage. My hope is that the data and analyses presented in this book will provide insights into language processing that will be of service to both language acquisition researchers and language teachers alike.

Four principal objectives have guided this study:

- (1) Identify the knowledge available to learners before exposure to the TL and identify the strategies used by the learners upon first exposure to the input.
- (2) Completely control the TL input provided to the learners.

- (3) Analyse various language activities (perception, comprehension and grammatical analysis) relative to the input provided at this early stage of acquisition.
- (4) Identify what aspects of this input are taken in by the learner, and to what extent this intake is subsequently used for further processing.

It is important to mention here that the current study is of a heuristic nature. This approach allows us to evaluate the potential contributions of various theories, models and frameworks proposed in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) to the study of initial L2 processing and acquisition. This is the first comprehensive study of its kind to attempt to completely control, measure and describe natural TL input with a view to observing its effects on L2 processing and on L2 acquisition.

A point about terminology needs to be made before moving on. Terms will be defined throughout the book within the context in which they appear. The exception is the term 'processing'. It is important to signal the abundance of definitions that exist for the term 'processing' in SLA and psycholinguistic research. To illustrate, VanPatten (2004) uses 'input processing' to refer to how learners make a connection between form and meaning. His usage of 'processing' is *not* analogous with 'perception' or 'noticing'. Carroll (2004: 294–295), on the other hand, points out that, 'Among psycholinguists investigating speech perception and sentence comprehension, the term *processing* can refer to any dynamic operation in real time that converts a stimulus into a message or a message into a motor-articulatory plan'. In this book, the term 'processing' is used in its most general sense, encompassing all of the above definitions, for the simple reason that we do not yet thoroughly understand the systems involved in 'processing' foreign language input. As this is an observational study about what learners *do* with the input they receive, aspects of the actual 'processing' are under investigation. Here, 'processing' is defined as what the learners *do*. This includes perceiving, noticing, segmenting, converting a stimulus into a message, parsing, mapping form to meaning or meaning to form, and so forth. Such aspects of processing, in particular initial processing, are the essence of the current study.

As mentioned earlier, few studies in the field of SLA have investigated the processing of TL input at this early stage of acquisition. Although numerous researchers have formulated hypotheses about the processing of input at various stages, including initial stages, these are, for the most part, based on data collected from learners who already had an interlanguage in place. This said, such studies have contributed enormously to our understanding of the role of input in L2 acquisition. To investigate this contribution, our discussion begins in Chapter 1 with an overview of the research concerned with 'input' and 'intake'. Chapter