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Witney, J. and Dewaele, Jean-Marc (2018) Learning two or more languages. In: Burns, A. and Richards, J.C. (eds.) *The Cambridge Guide to Learning English as a Second Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43-52. ISBN 9781108408417.

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LEARNING TWO OR MORE LANGUAGES¹

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Introduction

Language learning does not take place in isolation. A monolingual speaker learning an L2 will necessarily make a number of conscious or unconscious assumptions about what may be similar to his/her mother tongue during the acquisition process. An L3 learner will do the same, but has the advantage of two dynamic linguistic systems on which to draw and, crucially, one non-native one. In this chapter, we examine the principal facets of multilingual learning, the psycholinguistic processes that inform learners' perceptions and assumptions during the acquisition of additional languages, as well as the various language-learning strategies at their disposal, and we consider the extent to which these elements together may be exploited in the foreign language classroom. We begin with an overview of the topic.

Overview

At the initial stages of L3 acquisition, a multilingual learner will have already developed not only various strategies for learning a foreign language, but also an enhanced metalinguistic awareness – or knowledge about language. It is generally assumed, and has been empirically shown, that such cognitive benefits increase further the more languages the learner acquires. This all sounds very straightforward

¹ Pre-print version of Witney, J. & Dewaele, J.-M. (2018) Learning two or more languages.

In A. Burns & J.C. Richards (eds.), *Learning English as a Second Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43-51.

but in practice, of course, the factors influencing the acquisition of a new language are multiple and the processes dynamic and non-linear, whether in the life time of a multilingual speaker or in the chronological acquisition of foreign languages during the initial stages of classroom-based instruction. Adding to this, research interests in the literature are broad and varied focussing, inter alia, on the role of Universal Grammar, typological relatedness, L1 influence, L2 status, L1 and L2 proficiency levels, recency of use and foreign language exposure. Regardless of specific research paradigms and approaches, let us attempt to establish a few key issues of relevance to all multiple language learners.

Key issues

In this chapter we are concerned with learning two or more languages, so let us begin by looking at what this means in practice for the L3 learner, based on the principal factors outlined above. First, the multilingual learner will draw on his/her previous linguistic experiences at the initial stages of L3 acquisition, with the effects of cross-linguistic influence (Sharwood Smith, 1983; De Angelis & Dewaele, 2011; Yu Liming & Odlin, 2015; Wai Lan Tsang, 2016) being of greater benefit, that is resulting in positive transfer, if the languages are more closely related (e.g. Ringbom, 2007) or indeed perceived to be (e.g. Kellerman, 1979). Of course, not all learners share the same combination of languages and not all who do will exhibit the same patterns and preferences when embarking on another (Jarvis, 2015) but, as we shall see in the sections that follow, what all learners do share is the attention they pay to cross-linguistic similarities – rather than differences – and of course typologically closer languages will present more opportunities. Secondly, the advantage that the L3 learner has over the L2 learner – and possibly over the L1/L2 bilingual L3 learner (see e.g. Le Pichon et al, 2010) – concerns the acquisition of a further non-native

language. It can be assumed, as Bardel and Falk (2012) note, that “L3 learners, especially those who have learned the L2 in a formal setting, have acquired metalinguistic awareness and learning strategies that may facilitate foreign language learning. They are familiar with at least some of the efforts and methods that are required from a learner in order to succeed” (see Figure 1 below). Therefore, where there are fewer opportunities for identifying cross-linguistic similarities, for example where languages are more typologically distant, the learner will nevertheless have a number of cognitive mechanisms, if not linguistic typology, on which to draw; where languages within the learner’s constellation are typologically close, this, alongside foreign language learning strategies, will make for even greater benefits.

@FIGURE_1 HERE

Figure 1: L1, L2, L3 (Bardel & Falk, 2012: 69)

In summary, the present chapter considers three key issues that concern the learning of two or more languages: Cross-linguistic influence, metalinguistic awareness and language learning strategies. These issues will in turn inform the implications for teaching and assessment in the final section, which are followed by some general questions for discussion at the end of the chapter.

Cross-linguistic influence

The main body of research into Third Language Acquisition (TLA) has investigated various aspects of cross-linguistic influence (CLI), indeed several volumes have been dedicated to the concept (e.g. Odlin, 1989; Cenoz et al, 2001; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; De Angelis & Dewaele, 2011; Yu Liming & Odlin, 2015; Wai Lan Tsang, 2016). For the most part, these studies have highlighted the

facilitative effects of CLI on L3 learning (e.g. Rivers & Golonka, 2009; Jarvis, 2015), especially when previously learned languages are more closely related to the target language, given that “consciously or not, [learners] do not look for differences, they look for similarities whenever they can find them” (Ringbom, 2007: 1). So a learner embarking on an L3 will logically draw on his/her previously learned languages to assist with the process and if similarities exist – in either the L1 or L2 – this process will necessarily be facilitated. The question, of course, is what exactly constitutes similarity and to what extent is this in practice present in the mind of the learner acquiring a new language.

For the purposes of the present chapter, let us consider similarity in CLI as a basic subjective concept (see Ringbom (2007) for a full discussion of cross-linguistic similarity). Subjective similarity – as opposed to similarities (or differences) regarding actual or *objective* features of language (e.g. Linck et al, 2014) – affects the degree to which the learner relies on his/her prior linguistic knowledge when using the target language. These similarities have been further divided into two categories in the literature – *assumed* and *perceived*: assumed similarities are the conscious or unconscious hypotheses that a form in the learner’s existing language(s) has a counterpart in the target language, regardless of whether the learner has encountered it or whether it exists; perceived similarities are conscious or unconscious judgements that a form encountered in the target language is similar to a corresponding feature from the learner’s existing language(s). In addition, perceived similarities are more likely than assumed similarities to result in positive transfer (Ringbom, 2007: 24-26; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008: 179).

Applying this frame of reference to L3 learners in a study of identical placement in French and Spanish of two specific adverbs of manner, Witney (2015) showed that L1 English secondary school learners with prior knowledge of French performed more accurately than those without, not only when producing grammatical Spanish sentences that reflected Spanish and French word order, but also in rejecting English word order. As such, the L3 learners had a distinct advantage over the L2 learners in being able to perceive rather than merely assume similarity, at least with this particular feature in two typologically related non-native languages. We shall return to this in the section below on implications for teaching.

In another CLI study of Spanish and Catalan secondary school bilinguals learning German and English, Sanchez (2011) found that a significant proportion of her learners transferred V2 word order constructions from German when narrating a picture story in English. Here, the most recently studied, non-native language – but also perhaps the perception that German is typologically closer to English – appears to have overridden the influence of word order similarity in the L1s (Spanish and Catalan), which in this instance matched that of the L3 (English).

This leads us on to the so-called L2 status effect, which has been seen widely in the TLA literature at the lexical level (e.g. Dewaele, 1998; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998) – where the most recently acquired language may account for transfer effects – and also in syntax (e.g. Falk & Bardel, 2011), where it has been argued that “the L2 can supersede the L1 as a source of transfer, because of a higher degree of cognitive similarity between L2 and L3, than between L1 and L3” (p. 61). Elsewhere, however, (psycho)typological proximity has been shown to be more significant than the L2 status in determining sources of transfer at both lexical and syntactic levels (e.g. Rothman, 2011). More research is therefore needed, testing a

greater variety of properties across linguistic levels and in particular within and beyond the Indo-European family of languages (e.g. Jarvis, 2015, Yu Liming & Odlin, 2015; Wai Lan Tsang, 2016) before any definitive conclusions may be drawn. Indeed, as Jaensch (2013) notes: “[a]lthough it would be empirically ‘cleaner’ if an L3A [TLA] model could be a type of ‘one theory fits all’ scenario, given the complexity of L3A, this might not be appropriate” (p.85).

Cross-linguistic influence however remains one of the most important resources available to the multiple language learner – at least of typologically related languages – and one which, as we shall see in the following sections, interacts favourably with two other major areas of investigation in the TLA literature: metalinguistic awareness and language learning strategies.

Metalinguistic awareness

The facilitative effects of CLI on L3 learning are closely associated with an enhanced metalinguistic awareness (e.g. Bono, 2011; Jarvis, 2015). In accumulating language-learning experience, the learner is able to draw on prior linguistic encounters in his/her development of a number of enhanced cognitive abilities including an “explicit knowledge of language” (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). As such, the multilingual learner is equipped with a higher degree of metalinguistic awareness compared with that of the monolingual learner (e.g. Rivers & Golonka, 2009). Jessner (2008) defines metalinguistic awareness as “the ability to focus on linguistic form and to switch focus between form and meaning. Individuals who are metalinguistically aware are able to categorize words into parts of speech; switch focus between form, function, and meaning; and explain why a word has a particular function” (p. 277). Within a dynamic multilingual framework, the author extends and links two types of awareness: cross-linguistic and metalinguistic, whereby cross-

linguistic awareness during L3 production is defined as “the awareness (tacit and explicit) of the interaction between the languages in a multilingual’s mind; metalinguistic awareness adds to this by making objectification possible” (p. 279). Thus the relationship between cross-linguistic interaction and metalinguistic influence is a significant facet of the multilingual mind (Bono, 2011: 25).

Metalinguistic awareness is an important factor in an instructed environment that has been shown to develop during the learning of a first foreign language and to increase during the learning of a third and subsequent language. In an early L3 study, Thomas (1988) examined the role played by metalinguistic awareness in instructed second and third language learning. The study found that English speaking students with prior knowledge of Spanish had an advantage over monolinguals when performing those activities usually associated with learning French formally in the classroom, providing evidence that developing students’ metalinguistic awareness may increase the potential advantage of knowing two languages when learning a third. Furthermore, the study revealed a distinction between those with formal L2 instruction in Spanish and those who used L2 Spanish actively or passively at home, with the former group outperforming the latter. In more recent studies, Bono (2011) and Witney (2015) found that multilingual learners were able to discuss options based on their prior linguistic knowledge and foreign language learning experiences, making use of an analytical approach to the language learning process unavailable to second language learners, demonstrating that they were equipped with a fine-tuned capacity to focus on the systemic features of the languages within their constellation. An increased exposure to L2 literacy afforded by formal instruction would therefore appear to be of benefit to the L3 learner. Furthermore, Falk et al. (2015) found that

the degree of L1 explicit metalinguistic awareness also played a decisive role in the initial stages of L3 learning.

In short, we know that metalinguistic awareness is an asset for the instructed language learner in general, but it is significantly enhanced among multilingual learners, interacting favourably with cross-linguistic influences and a further variable to which we now turn: language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies

A learner with enhanced metalinguistic awareness will, as a result, be able to make judicious use of appropriate language learning strategies during the acquisition process, in particular beyond the L2. Language learning strategies – whether cognitive, social or affective – may be conscious or semi-conscious, but the ultimate goal will be to increase target language knowledge and understanding, which may be purely linguistic, cultural or socially-motivated. According to Roehr (2004), a mature analytic ability at the cognitive level, reflected more generally in society at large, allows the language learner to think scientifically, thereby maximising efficiency and gaining a sense of order during the acquisition process in which a fine-tuned set of strategies will allow for greater success in the completion of language learning tasks. Kemp (2007) found that learners knowing more languages (up to 12) used a greater number of grammar learning strategies and used them more frequently. Moreover, highly multilingual learners were more likely to have developed their own unique grammar learning strategies. Witney (2015) found that advanced L1 English learners of Spanish (level B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)) were able to turn their knowledge of L2 French to their advantage through language learning strategies, combined with a heightened understanding of interlingual connections at play between two typologically similar non-native languages; they

were equally conscious of and able to identify the grammatical differences and similarities between the languages known to them (native and non-native) through effective use of metalanguage and metalinguistic awareness, afforded to them in an instructed language-learning environment. Berthele (2011) showed that the advantage of multilingual learners extends to receptive competences as they are more efficient in using a process of interlingual inferencing when confronted with previously unknown languages.

In sum, there is evidence that non-native language learning strategies interact favourably with an enhanced metalinguistic awareness among instructed language learners in developing an overall understanding of cross-linguistic influences, which in turn has important pedagogical implications as previously noted in the literature:

“[...] for L2 influence to become a learning accelerator, CLIN [crosslinguistic interaction] needs to be coupled with metalinguistic awareness, which is known to be particularly enhanced in multilingual speakers” (Bono, 2011: 26).

Implications for teaching and assessment

Drawing together the various strands from the sections above, we now focus on the extent to which these elements together may be exploited in the classroom to the benefit of the multilingual learner. From what we have seen so far, the primary aim of the teacher should be to facilitate positive transfer and highlight incidences that may potentially lead to negative transfer, whilst making as much use as possible of learners' metalinguistic awareness and their language learning strategies.

Clearly, not all teachers operate within the same environment. In terms of language instruction and assessment, TWI (Two-Way Immersion) programs in the United States, for example, and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)

programs – favoured particularly by the European Commission and increasingly popular in the bilingual populations of Catalonia and the Basque Country – have for some time challenged the traditional methodologies of the foreign language classroom. However, a review of these programs (Jarvis, 2015) shows that no categorical claims can yet be made as to the overall effectiveness of one over the other based on research in the literature to date.

Let us therefore return to evidence from the CLI literature outlined in the sections above in order to further evaluate implications for teaching. We have seen that knowledge of previous languages (both native and non-native) impacts significantly on the learning of subsequent languages and, as such, new languages cannot be learned – nor should they be taught or assessed – in isolation. This has been addressed by Cook (2008) regarding the L2 classroom and the potential facilitative use of the L1, hitherto frequently seen as “the enemy of the L2” (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008: 217); beyond the L2 classroom, multilingual learners are necessarily drawing not only on knowledge of their L1 and previously learned non-native languages, but also on specific foreign language learning strategies, which will to a greater or lesser extent be active during the process. Furthermore, as Linck et al. (2014) note, it is essentially counter-productive to ignore what is ultimately a powerful resource for the teacher in promoting positive transfer from prior linguistic knowledge and “efforts to completely ignore the L1 and L2 may be futile” (p. 6). As we have seen, in promoting this positive transfer Ringbom (2007) argues that language learners are drawn naturally towards similarities to – rather than differences from – their previously acquired languages. However, this does not of course preclude teachers from focusing on both: whilst drawing the learner’s attention to similarities will necessarily facilitate positive transfer, active highlighting and

explicit teaching of differences will equally reduce the likelihood of negative transfer.

More specifically, we have seen evidence of cross-linguistic interaction at a number of levels including lexis, phonology and (morpho)syntax which, combined with an instructed learner's enhanced metalinguistic awareness, may be exploited by the teacher to maximise the effects of L3 processing at the point of assessment. At the level of lexis, for example, focusing on cognates – both true and false – where possible across multiple languages, especially in the early stages of instruction, will bring substantial benefits in terms of effective L3 lexical processing (e.g. Linck et al., 2014). The same of course applies at the syntax, as we have seen above in the examples of cross-linguistic similarities and differences regarding adverbial placement across three languages and teachers will come across numerous others, whether lexical, phonological, syntactic or morphological. Encouraging the multilingual learner to be aware of grammatical structures that overlap – or providing explicit instruction of those that don't – between either or both the L1 and L2 will significantly help with L3 (morpho)syntactic processing (e.g. Linck et al., 2014).

The ultimate goal of the L3 teacher, therefore, is to make full use of the tools available, encouraging pupils to reflect on their previously acquired linguistic systems through a discussion of objective similarities and differences, turning 'assumed similarities' into 'perceived similarities', thereby increasing the opportunity for positive transfer.

The fact remains, of course, that not all teachers will be proficient in the languages known by the L3 learner and, as such, may feel that in terms of assessment from a practical point of view, it is more useful to focus on cognitive processes rather than structures within specific language combinations, thereby allowing the learner

to facilitate the process more automatically. This is certainly reflected in research that seeks to define a comprehensive TLA framework (e.g. Rivers & Golonka, 2009).

Conclusion

Learners of two or more languages are in a unique position: they have the benefit of prior non-native language learning experiences during which they develop a heightened sense of what language is about in general and how specific languages interact within one multilingual mind. Instructed multilinguals in particular are in a strong position to draw on a range of language learning strategies that interact favourably with enhanced cognitive abilities in developing an overall understanding of cross-linguistic influences.

The aim of the teacher, regardless of any specific program of instruction or assessment protocol that s/he may be required to follow, should be to encourage multilingual language learners to make use of the cognitive and linguistic tools at their disposal, primarily by drawing attention to similarities between languages and by explicitly teaching differences where these elements exist.

Questions for further discussion

1. To what extent may multiple language learners be considered better linguists?
2. Can metalinguistic awareness develop fully without knowledge of metalanguage?
3. Do multilingual language learners need to be made aware of cross-linguistic interactions to become proficient users?

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