INTRODUCING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH*

Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada, the joint authors of this work, are both prominent researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) as well as being highly experienced in teacher training. They also possess a thorough understanding of the complexities and nuances of applying research findings to actual second (L2) or foreign language teaching. They openly state their aim right at the beginning: to provide teachers of languages other than the mother tongue, be they second or foreign, with information on recent research findings in SLA and the different theoretical positions which underlie them. They believe both in light of their own personal experience and from the contributions made by course participants, that knowing about language acquisition is part and parcel of the professional development of teachers, since this knowledge will rightly equip them to make principled decisions when new proposals for language teaching are presented to them, being able to relate such proposals to the process of language learning itself.

The introduction, apart from informing the reader about the contents and sections to be developed throughout, also asks for her views on language learning. This is done by asking her whether she agrees or not with twelve popular ideas on the issue. Since the views portrayed are widely known it seems the right note to enable the reader to relate to the subject of the book has been struck. Five chapters deal with relevant issues of learning a language, with the last chapter reviewing these twelve ideas in order to critically discuss them in the light of the main issues covered in the book, with the implications these ideas have for the way languages should be taught, from an informed position and not merely on uncritically accepted beliefs.

Chapter One deals with how children learn their first language (L1), since the theories which account for this complex phenomenon have also influenced L2 research and teaching. Here three fundamental positions have been tackled: the behaviourist, the innatist, and the interactionist, and case studies have been used to illustrate the main tenets of each, acknowledging their importance in explaining the many facets involved in language acquisition as well as pointing out their shortcomings when attempting to give a full picture of this intricate process. Important issues such as the role of imitation and practice in language learning, how adult linguistic competence could be achieved without considering the biological endowment the child is supposed to be born with for language to develop, whether there is a biologically determined age limit for L1 acquisition (Scovel 1988; Ioup 1989; Obler 1989; Wode 1989; Clahsen 199O; Long 199O; Bishop and Mogford 1993), and the role of the linguistic environment on the language acquisition process are discussed. Chapter Two addresses some of the theories advanced to explain the acquisition of an L2,

establishing the differences that do exist between learning an L1 and learning an L2, i.e. personal characteristics, namely age and cognitive maturity, and conditions for learning. To make these differences clearer, a useful chart on profiles of language learners is provided. Amongst the theories considered are behaviourism, the cognitive theory, the creative construction theory and the interactionist theory. In relation to the behaviourist view (Lado 1964), the contrastive analysis hypothesis is discussed and the limitations of its strong version manifested, thus highlighting the need for more complex theories of learning and the fact that L1 influence is far more elaborate than mere habits, i.e. errors are not just bi-directional due to areas of contrast between an L1 and an L2 such as English and French (Zobl 1980; Sorace 1993). Cognitive theory serves to offer a more complex perspective on the language learning process than behaviourism allowed, and the phenomenon called "restructuring" (McLaughlin 1990) is examined in order to demonstrate that automaticity is not just the result of gradually building-up accummulation of practice, since it is sometimes due to the subtle interaction of the different kinds of knowledge which make up the complex language systems we possess. This also explains that not always steady progress in our command of the language under instruction follows the process of language learning and a U-shape development may be shown in our performance. Backsliding or apparent deterioration of our mastery of the target language can occur as a consequence of the learning process when this phenomenon of restructuring takes place, i.e. when newly acquired knowledge has to be integrated into already existing knowledge and hence restructures it, thus achieving more complex internal representations. The creative construction hypothesis understands language learning to be the process of constructing internal representations of the language that is being learnt, thus equating L1 and L2 acquisition. Analysis of the sequence in which certain morphemes are acquired by L2 learners has been used as evidence to underpin this theory. Krashen's Monitor Theory is discussed as the most conspicuous example of this view on L2 learning and with a great influence in L2 pedagogy, namely the communicative approach in North America. It contends that given the learner receives comprehensible input which is right above the level of her current competence learning will proceed (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982; Krashen 1985). In contrast, within the interactionist view emphasis is placed on modified input which is achieved through successful interaction between interlocutors. Here, what matters is the way in which input is made accessible, i.e. comprehensible, to the learner via interactional modifications (Long 1985).

Chapter Three focuses on the factors which affect L2 learning, trying to account for the differences that any experienced language teacher has undoubtedly found in the varying success achieved by her learners in their command of the L2 and which is furthermore in sharp contrast with their overall successful L1 acquisition. Anecdotal evidence of individual characteristics which enhance successful language learning, e.g. extroversion vs. introversion, is contrasted with research findings. Factors commonly considered pertinent to the learning of languages other than the L1 are also discussed, namely intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learning styles, and age of acquisition. Care is taken to warn the reader over the need to be alert about the fussy boundaries between these factors or learner characteristics, since they are mainly qualities representing a complex range of behaviours and characteristics which overlap and are not at all independent in themselves. In this way the reader is made aware of the complexity of research on individual differences, fostering in

her both avoidance of establishing a causal relationship between two specific factors and keeping an open mind as to the interpretation of the results of this research.

Chapter Four undertakes the analysis of learner language, an extremely relevant issue for language teachers due to its own outstanding specific features in comparison with the standard version of the native speaker. Learner language is equated with children's early speech, claiming that both are developing systems in their own right, rule-governed and highly predictable, and in no way deviations or mere imitations of the adult or native speaker system. Special care is given to the discussion of the types of errors made by learners, underlining what they can tell us about the L2 competence learners actually have and how these learners are able to make use of it, as well as to the developmental sequences learners have to go through in order to acquire specific features of the L2, i.e. developmental features acquired sequentially through a series of stages which account for the early appearance of certain features in a learner's language and for the much later appearance of other features, i.e. the development of grammatical morphemes, negatives, questions, and relative clauses. The similarity that exists between the stages of acquisition for specific grammatical features both for L1 and L2 learners is pointed out. The information in this chapter will raise the reader's awareness over the intricacy of the language learning process, keeping her well away from a simplistic and distorted view of achievement in the L2. Stages of development are not neatly separate stretches of developing competency in the target language but degrees of gradual competent use of it which intermingle in their way to full competence in it. Chapter Five focuses on learning an L2 in the classroom, i.e. formal L2 learning. Instructed and natural settings for language learning are compared, and five informed proposals made for the teaching of L2s are discussed. The aim remains in trying to illuminate a better understanding of the profitable application of L2 research findings and theory to L2 pedagogy. Transcripts from two different classrooms, one with a structure-based approach and the other with a communicative approach, are provided so that the input characteristics of each of them can be distinguished. They will also help in the assessment of the five proposals for language teaching by sensitizing the reader to relate teaching and learning, at the same time that she is informed of both formal and informal research which deals with this specific issue, i.e. classroom research. Findings from studies which illustrate this kind of research and that have been carried out to test the efficacy of the proposals are also presented.

It seems then that the reader ends up with a rich diet of L2 theory and research information relevant to the teaching of languages other than our native one. Since each chapter is followed by a select bibliography on the topic discussed, for those interested in further reading on those specific research issues, apart from the Bibliography at the end of the book, and a Glossary is also provided for ease of reference for the terms with technical meanings, this book can be considered as a very promising introduction for language teachers to L2 acquisition research, and to language acquisition in general. It could be argued that the unavoidable selection of the views represented has been quite comprehensive and their discussion impartial enough to lead the reader in the right direction for her to continue further investigation if she so wishes.

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Notes

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