Who is the L2 user?
Multi-competence and Foreign Language Learning/Teaching

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Abstract

The idea of ‘multi-competence’ is defined as ‘the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community’ (Cook, t.a.). Multi-competence thus presents a view of second language acquisition (SLA) based on the second language (L2) user as a whole person rather than on the monolingual native speaker. It involves the whole mind of the speaker, not simply their first language (L1) or their second. It assumes that someone who knows two or more languages is a different person from a monolingual and so needs to be looked at in their own right rather than as a deficient monolingual. Multi-competence changes the angle from which second language acquisition is viewed. If taken literally, it has important implications for language teaching goals and methodology.

Keywords: the L2 user, multi-competence, language teaching

1. The spectrum of language users

A starting point is to look at what second language learners want to be. Some possible types of learner are outlined in the box alongside, based on Cook (2009). One group consists of people who are using an L2 within a larger community, say Turkish residents of Berlin using German. Another group is made up of those using it internationally for restricted functions, for example Muslims using Arabic for religious purposes regardless of their first language and the country in which they live whether France or Saudi Arabia. Then there are those using a second language globally for a wide range of functions, primarily nowadays through English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), say for business, tourism or electronic communication. One group is using it with spouses, siblings or friends with different first languages. And finally come
those historically from a particular community (re-) acquiring its language for cultural use, say British Chinese speakers of Cantonese learning Mandarin. It is then dangerous to assume all students are going to have the same ambitions in a second language. Particularly important is whether they want English for say some particular international functions such as tourism or they want it for broad general reasons that cannot be specified in greater detail until they encounter them in the world.

2. What are L2 users like?

In François Grosjean (1989)’s famous phrase, ‘a bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person’. L2 users differ from those who use one language in many ways. So what are the distinctive features possessed by people who speak more than one language?

- **L2 users have different ways of thinking**

  Learning another language makes people think more flexibly, increases language awareness and leads to better attitudes towards other cultures. For example, Japanese tend to categorise objects in terms of material, English people in terms of shape; shown a cork pyramid and asked to say whether a plastic pyramid or a piece of cork is most like the original, Japanese go for the cork, English speakers for the plastic pyramid. After living in England for three years, however, Japanese people categorise by shape much more than their monolingual counterparts (Cook et al, 2006). Another area is colours where speakers of different languages tend to perceive colours differently; research has shown that L2 users perceive colours differently from their monolingual peers (Athanasopoulos, 2009). Bilingual cognition has become a developing new area of research; a selection of current research is reported in Cook and Bassetti (2011). The consensus is that learning another language subtly affects the way you think, sometimes in unexpected ways not predictable from the combination of languages involved.

- **L2 users use language in different ways**

  Restricting the target of language teaching to what monolingual native speakers can do neglects those uses of language that L2 users can carry out which monolinguals cannot. The L2 user doesn’t just imitate the native speaker rather badly but has language uses denied to the native. The most striking is the ability to code-switch, that is to say, to go from one
language to another in mid-conversation, mid-utterance or mid-sentence. Here is a Japanese student talking to another Japanese student in English: Reading sureba suruhodo, confuse suro yo. Demo, computer lab ni itte, article o print out shinakya. She is switching effortlessly from one language to another when convenient. It is not that she doesn’t know Japanese words for reading and print out; rather it is a particular type of talk between people who know each others’ languages. And impossible for monolingual native speakers, by definition as they do not have two languages to switch between.

The other obvious use of language unavailable to monolinguals is translation. Some, though not all, L2 users can turn one language into another, whether immigrant children interpreting for their mothers in doctor’s surgeries or simultaneous interpreters in the European Parliament. The ability to go from one language to another is then the core ability of interpreters.

A third use that people have become increasingly aware of is the L2 user’s ability to communicate with other non-native speakers. A frequent complaint at international meetings using English is that the L2 users can understand each other very well but cannot understand the English native speakers present. The native speaker appears to lack flexibility of adaptation to non-native speakers, except through such crude devices as speaking louder and more slowly. L2 users can adapt to the new circumstances where monolingual native speakers cannot. Interestingly this has been found in the specialised discourse of aviation English where native speakers of English have more problems than non-native speakers (Alderson, 2009).

- **L2 users have an increased awareness of language itself**

One of the reasons put forward for studying second languages is that it makes you better able to think about language. Research with bilingual children has indeed shown that they are better at making grammaticality judgments about sentences (Bialystok, 2001). In one well-known test, children were told the way to say ‘we’ is with “spaghetti” and then asked ‘How would you say “We are good children?”; bilingual children seemed to grasp the arbitrary nature of word meanings more easily than monolinguals (Ben Zeev, 1977). In another experiment children were asked to say which was the biggest word in such pairs as ‘hippopotamus’ and ‘skunk’; bilinguals were able to keep the word size distinct from the object size and to answer the question correctly (Bialystok, 1991); again they could see the arbitrary nature of language. Evidence for the heightened awareness of language may also be the cause of success of bilingual writers such as André Brink, John Milton or Vladimir Nabokov.

- **L2 users have a slightly different knowledge of their first language**

While it is again obvious from everyday experience that the second language has an effect on the first, this has been comparatively under-researched. Yet people’s intuitions of their L1, their processing of sentences and even their gestures are affected to some extent by the L2.
that they know. Recent research has shown the effects of a new language on the other
languages the person knows (Cook, 2003): language transfer goes in many directions (Jarvis
& Pavlenko, 2009). L2 users’ pronunciation of their L1 is subtly different from monolingual
native speakers, for example in the timing of plosive consonants (Zampini & Green, 2001).
Their processing of syntax is changed too. For example languages have different ways of
indicating the subject of the sentence: Japanese speakers rely on the subject being animate,
English speakers on it coming first in the sentence (Cook et al, 2003). So in a test sentence
like The ball hits the boy, a Japanese would say the boy is the subject, an English speaker the
ball, with rather different meanings of who is doing what to whom. Sure enough Japanese
people who know English no longer treat subjects in the same way in Japanese as Japanese
monolinguals but are influenced by English. The L2 user does not then have the same
knowledge of their first language as a monolingual speaker.

- L2 users have greater effectiveness in their first language

Another benefit of learning second languages has often been held to be that it improves
the command of the first language. Indeed research with Hungarian school children shows
that those who know another language use sentences that are more structurally complex when
writing essays in Hungarian (Kecskes & Papp, 2000). After five months of one hour a week of
Italian, English-speaking ‘bilingual’ children were learning to read better than their peers
(Yelland et al, 1993); the pay-off from language teaching may not be in their minimal
command of Italian but in their enhanced reading skills. Originally this was held to be one of
the virtues of learning classical languages; Dryden felt it advantageous to write poetry in
Latin and translate it into English. The unexpected benefit of learning another language may
be that they use their first language more effectively.

All in all, learning another language changes people in many ways. The languages exist
side by side in the same person, affecting both the two languages and the person as a whole.
Acquiring a second language does not mean acquiring the self-contained language system of
a monolingual but an L2 that coexists with an L1 in the same mind. Aiming to be like a
monolingual native speaker may be impossible for all but a handful of people. Trying to get
students to be like native speakers is ineffective; their minds and their knowledge of language
will inevitably be different. The benefits of learning a second language are becoming a
different kind of person, not just gaining another language. Learning another language doesn’t
just add another language: it changes the whole person. It’s not a matter of adding an
extension to the back of your house but of remodelling it by shifting all the internal walls.

3. Questions for language teaching

Let us now turn to the implications of the multi-competence perspective for language
teaching. If the multi-competence is correct, then much that we take for granted about
language teaching needs to be questioned.
**the status of the native speaker**

The native speaker has been the ghost in the language teaching machine for many years. Explicitly or implicitly it has been assumed that L2 learners have the goal of being like native speakers and that they succeed according to how close they can approximate to this goal. Most language teachers and students believe that their goal is to be as close an approximation as possible to a native speaker of the second language. Yet, in terms of the usual definition of the native speaker as a person speaking the language they acquired from birth, this is in principle unachievable by definition; L2 learners will never become native speakers unless they can find a time-machine. This assumption more or less guarantees that, for the rest of their lives, the vast majority of L2 learners feel failures for not being able to pass for native speakers.

The multi-competence perspective gives equal status to the L2 user and the native speaker; L2 users necessarily differ from monolingual native speakers in all the ways described above and many more. It is grossly unfair to measure L2 users’ accomplishments against another group to which they cannot belong since this is bound to treat differences as deficits and to ignore the unique assets of L2 users.

In terms of numbers, purely monolingual native speakers are probably in the minority in the world as a whole: almost everybody has at least a smattering of English from school. English is a hypercentral language used for many functions in many countries (De Swaan, 2001). As such most of its use is between non-native speakers. Graddol (2006) claims that 74% of the English used in tourism is by non-English native tourists in non-English speaking countries. English is used globally for certain specific functions such as air-traffic control; native speakers are only one part of this community. TV viewers of Formula One motor-races can now hear live radio dialogues between drivers and team managers, all in English even when both of them have Spanish as a first language. Graddol (2006) claims ‘native speakers are increasingly seen as part of the problem rather than the source of a solution’. So far as global teaching of English as an international language is concerned, the target use for L2 students is chiefly with other non-native speakers.

**the goals of language teaching**

The overall goals of English language teaching should be related to the nature of the L2 user. Teaching should be aiming at producing, not imitation native speakers, but L2 users, to be measured against success in using an L2, not how native speakers use their language. Cook (1983; 2002) made a distinction between two types of goals - *external* and *internal*.

- **external goals** are how the students want to use the second language outside the classroom, possibly to native speakers, possibly to fellow L2 users. They might be tourists, they might want to be on Facebook, they might be students of engineering, they might be refugees, or all the other potential roles humans can take. Most language
teaching of the past fifty years has emphasised external goals in a native context, whether audiolingualism, situational teaching, communicative teaching or task-based learning. From the multi-competence perspective these have to be thought out in terms of L2 users. The situations described cannot be just native to native; the role models presented in coursebooks etc must include powerful L2 user figures not always relegating the L2 user to a humble role; the language taught must reflect both the nature of L2 user speech and the specific accommodations that native speakers make when dealing with non-native speakers.

- internal goals relate to the students’ inner life. Because of the second language, they may think differently, approach language in a different way, or be better citizens: the minds of L2 users are different from monolingual native speakers in many respects, as we have seen, usually to the benefit of the L2 user. So-called traditional language teaching often stressed the internal goals: learning Latin trained the brain; studying L2 literature heightened people’s cultural awareness. While modern syllabuses often throw a sop in this direction, such goals are seldom instantiated in actual teaching or examinations. The multi-competence perspective suggests that the transformation that L2 learning brings to the mind means language teaching exploiting and encouraging these changes. The mental side effects of L2 learning should not be forgotten as well as the external potentials, particularly when so few L2 learners of English will ever have the possibility of using the language outside the classroom.

The overall goal of language teaching is then to create skilful L2 users with all their extra attributes. It is already being adopted by some countries. In Israel the curriculum ‘does not take on the goal of producing near-native speakers of English, but rather speakers of Hebrew, Arabic or other languages who can function comfortably in English whenever it is appropriate’ (English Curriculum for Israel, 2002). The aim of teaching English should not be just to make students use English like monolingual native speakers but to equip them for the unique position of L2 users, a person with joint nationality rather than a naturalised citizen.

**the role of the first language**

Since the invention of the Direct Method in the late nineteenth century, it has been an accepted maxim that language teaching should only use the second language in the classroom. Teaching methods such as audiolingualism specifically banned it. Even the current task-based learning approach suggests ‘Don’t ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language’ (Willis, 1996, 130). It has been even more influential at the level of ministries and teaching inspectors. Local Education Authority advisors in the UK for example do not see ‘any pedagogical value in a teacher referring to the learner’s own language’ (Macaro, 1997, 29). Whatever their own feelings, teachers have been wary about using the first language in the classroom for fear of what their superiors would say.
From the multi-competence perspective, however, there is little justification for banning the first language from the classroom. Both languages are inevitably present in the L2 user’s minds; they are inextricably tied together and the first language cannot be turned off, only have its level of activation lowered. The classroom is a situation of L2 use, not a monolingual L2 place; even if nothing is heard of the L1, it is actively being used in the students’ minds and often written down in the students’ notebooks. Switching from one language to another is a skilled and controlled part of L2 use and natural in any classroom where the students, and possibly the teacher, share the same first language. Obviously there are strong arguments for a high proportion of L2 use in the classroom as this may be the main or only source of the second language for the students. These do not however provide any pretext for pretending the first language does not exist by banning its use, as grotesque as the attempt by teachers of Deaf children to make them sit on their hands to prevent them using sign language.

Multi-competence suggests that, given the impossibility and undesirability of cutting the students off from their first language, language teaching should look at the rationale for using the first language in the classroom to help the process of second language learning. Based on how teachers already use the first language in the classroom, suggestions include:

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<th>Potential uses for the L1 in the classroom</th>
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<td>• explaining tasks, tests etc</td>
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<td>• explaining grammar</td>
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<td>• practising L2 uses such as code-switching</td>
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<td>• teaching in methods such as reciprocal language teaching and the Bilingual Method</td>
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- **conveying L2 meaning.** When it is possible to give the meaning of a new word to the student through the first language, this may provide a convenient short-cut (and pre-empt the learner guessing the translation silently to themselves). This is not the same as systematic use of translation of texts etc. It is simply providing a link between the new word and the existing L1 vocabulary in the student’s mind.

- **explaining tasks, tests etc.** At the early stages of learning an L2, getting across to the students instructions about what they have to do may be time-consuming because of the disparity between the level of the second language required and the level the students know. Far better to spend a minute explaining the task in the L1 and let them go on to practice it in the L2 than to spend five minutes explaining it in the L2 – they’ve gained four minutes practicing time.

- **practising L2 uses such as code-switching.** Use of the L1 is normal in many L2 using situations; banning it may emphasise the artificiality of the classroom. While the teacher may have to keep an eye on overuse, it is not only natural for students to switch to the L1 between themselves and this trains them for a normal L2 use of language rather than forcing them into a fake monolingualism.
- teaching in methods such as reciprocal language teaching and the Bilingual Method. Some lesser-known teaching methods indeed structure the L1 into the teaching. One such is reciprocal learning (Cook, 1989): pairs of students learn each other’s languages, alternating the roles of teacher and student. Another is the Bilingual Method (Dodson, 1967) used with English and Welsh: students are given the meanings of texts in the first language – not, Dodson insists, the same as the translation technique.

4. Conclusion

To conclude we can see that the multi-competence perspective casts a new light on perennial questions of language teaching ranging from the very general question of the status of the native speaker down to the practical question of which language to use in the classroom. However it should be emphasised that these are questions rather than precise solutions. They are for teachers to consider and to accept or reject in the light of the complex factors present in any language teaching situation.

Further reading


