Acquiring a third language: What role does bilingualism play?

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following people who acted as reviewers for the papers in this Special Issue: Colin Baker, Jean-Marc Dewaele, Durk Gorter, Björn Hammerberg, Patricia Lamarre and Melissa Moyer.

The aim of this theme issue is to add a further dimension to the language acquisition literature by providing some detailed accounts of third language acquisition as observed in bilinguals. The authors of the contributions all address the question of whether bilingualism plays an influential role when it comes to acquiring a third language and, if this is the case, what the nature of its mediating role is. Three of the contributions do this with regard to the acquisition of distinct competencies of a third language, whereas the fourth provides a comprehensive overview of issues raised in the literature on the subject.

Third language acquisition is a very common phenomenon all over the world, in natural as well as formal contexts. It takes place in a large number of diverse sociolinguistic situations. One might think, for instance, of children growing up in multilingual communities in African countries where different family and tribal languages plus a lingua franca and/or a national language come together. Another example is that of the child of a bilingual family (speaking 2 languages that are not used in the wider community) who is exposed to a third language outside the home. In countries such as South Africa school is often the place where bilingual children acquire a third language that is also one of the national languages. In European countries there are established linguistic minorities that have achieved status and support for their languages, for instance in the Netherlands, Spain and Finland, and in these countries language policies include bilingual programs as well as foreign language programs which encourage the acquisition of a third language starting at primary school level. Of course, it is not only the children of older linguistic minorities who are exposed to a first foreign language at school. Especially in the countries of the European Union, new minorities are becoming established, frequently forming sizeable bilingual communities in predominantly urban areas. Whereas the children in most of the sociolinguistic contexts mentioned so far are likely to have two well established...
languages by the time they start formal schooling, this is less true in the case of the children of immigrant communities. For them third language acquisition may follow close on the heels of second language acquisition. It is therefore important to bear in mind the rich variety of sociolinguistic situations that exist, in terms of the languages and their relative status, the acquisition contexts and the sociocultural and psychological ramifications they present.

There is a growing body of research into third language acquisition and multilingualism which is reflected in a number of recent publications in this area (for instance, Cenoz, Hufeisen, & Jessner, 2001a; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Quay, 2001). This research responds to the need to identify the specific characteristics that distinguish third language acquisition from second language acquisition and multilingualism from bilingualism. This has given rise to studies into cross-linguistic phenomena (e.g., Cenoz, Hufeisen, & Jessner, 2001b, 2001c), and to the development of new approaches to the explanation of multilingual language acquisition and language use phenomena (e.g., Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Hoffmann, 2001a). Social mobility, immigration and the spread of English as an international language are powerful promoters of multilingualism and often, in order to meet new educational demands, research into multilingual acquisition has received an impetus for pragmatic reasons as well, such as studies on the question of the optimum age for the introduction of the third language in a school context where the results may be used to inform language planners.

The study of third language acquisition can be approached from psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and educational perspectives. Evidently, it has a great deal in common with second language acquisition, for example in terms of research methodologies, but it can also be said to entail some specific characteristics: The greater number of linguistic systems, combinatory possibilities and interplay of linguistic and nonlinguistic variables are factors that account for its considerable complexity (see Hoffmann, 2001b). One constant in many of the otherwise very diverse studies is that the third language almost invariably is English. In all acquisition contexts English is associated with being the language that has the greatest international currency and this makes it a useful, and often also desirable, language to learn. Because of this characteristic, it has a different standing from that of any other foreign language that may be acquired, and its acquisition will be facilitated by the ubiquity of English, often in attractive contexts. There are differences with regard to the status of English in different acquisition contexts which may have an effect on the learners’ motivation and, ultimately, their attained proficiency. Whereas in European settings English is simply the foreign language par excellence, in South Africa and Singapore the consequences of not acquiring English are more serious as it is the national or official language. In Israel English has no constitutional status but it is widely used and thus the country’s Arabic citizens and Russian immigrants have to learn to use it if they want to partake in a number of important social activities such as, for example, higher education.

This special issue focuses on a particular aspect of third language acquisition, the influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition. There are a number of reasons why we consider this to be an important area of investigation. First and foremost, it represents an area that demonstrates clearly the differences between second and third language acquisition. Third language learners have already acquired two other languages, either
simultaneously or consecutively, as first or first and second languages. Therefore the knowledge of these two languages and the experience of the acquisition process of another language are likely to influence the acquisition of a third language. Research that compares second language acquisition to third language acquisition is central in third language acquisition studies because it can contribute to the identification of specific characteristics in the process of third language acquisition which are not present in the process of acquiring a second language. In this context, it should also be remembered that, while there is extensive research on the effect of bilingualism on cognitive development and metalinguistic awareness (e.g., Bialystok, 1991, 2001), the particular effect of bilingualism on subsequent language learning has not received much attention.

A further important reason for the focus on our chosen topic is that research in this area brings together the disciplines of bilingualism studies and second language acquisition research. These two areas have often ignored one another, the latter concentrating on the processes involved in the acquisition of a second language and the description of the resulting proficiency, whereas studies in the former have often concentrated on the effects of bilingualism on cognitive development. The study of the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition brings these two traditions together.

The contributions to this volume

This special issue addresses the question of the relationship between bilingualism and third language acquisition from a range of different perspectives in four articles. The first three deal with research studies in which various aspects of the acquisition of proficiency in English are examined, and in each of them the influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition features as a research question. The authors report on research conducted in school contexts involving different combinations of languages, such as Berber-Dutch-English, Turkish-Dutch-English, Basque-Spanish-English, and Catalan-Spanish-English. The studies were carried out in different sociolinguistic and educational contexts. Sometimes the pupils’ mother tongue is neither valued nor used in education as in the case of immigrant learners in the Netherlands, whereas in the case of the nonmajority languages Basque and Catalan the first language has a high status and is used in education in the respective regions. The results of these studies seem to indicate that although bilingualism is a variable that must be taken into account, its influence is weaker than that of variables relating to the sociolinguistic and educational contexts. Only in the case of additive contexts can bilingualism be seen to be a significant variable.

Van Gelderen, Schoonen, de Glopper, Hulstijn, Snellings, Simis, and Stevenson focus on reading skills in ‘Roles of linguistic knowledge, metacognitive knowledge and processing speed in L3, L2 and L1 reading comprehension: A structural equation modeling approach’. In this contribution, bilingual immigrant students who could speak Dutch and another language (Berber, Arabic, Turkish, or Sranan Tongo) learnt English as a third language in the school context. The control group were monolingual Dutch children who were acquiring English. The results of the different tests carried out in this study indicate that Dutch learners showed better reading abilities in all the tests in Dutch and in some of the tests in English than the immigrant students. Van Gelderen and his colleagues also found that the componental nature of reading comprehension was the same in Dutch as L1 and
L2 and English as L2 and L3. These results are discussed in relation to linguistic distance of the systems involved and the social background of the learners.

In her paper ‘Acquiring writing skills in a third language: the positive effects of bilingualism’ María Pilar Sagasta Errasti compares the effect of the different levels of her subjects’ bilingualism on the acquisition of writing skills in English in the Basque Country. The results suggest that balanced bilingualism in Basque and Spanish can have a positive effect on the acquisition of English. The languages involved in this study also present important differences regarding linguistic distance but, in contrast to the research study by Van Gelderen et al., speakers who were highly competent in the minority language (Basque) were also fully fluent in the majority language (Spanish). Other differences are that the comparison in this case is between different levels of bilingualism and that those learners who were more proficient in the minority language did not come from lower social backgrounds, as was the case with immigrant learners in the Netherlands.

In ‘Meta-pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production of third language learners of English: A focus on request acts realizations’ María Pilar Safont addresses the question of a possible positive effect of bilingualism on communicative sensitivity by focusing on a specific area of pragmatic competence, the speech act of requesting. She provides data from another area of Spain, Valencia, where Catalan and Spanish are spoken, and she compares the pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production of monolingual Spanish-speaking students and bilingual Catalan-Spanish students. The results of her study provide evidence of the positive effect of bilingualism on third language acquisition.

The fourth article in this special issue is ‘The additive effect of bilingualism on third language acquisition: a review’ by Jasone Cenoz. This contribution examines the growing body of literature on the subject, including studies carried out in several European countries as well as multilingual contexts such as found in Canada, Singapore and the Philippines. It attempts to identify the main trends observed in the study of the effect of bilingualism, emphasizing the role of contextual factors in the acquisition of a third language. Even though generally bilingualism tends to exert a positive influence on third language acquisition, the language acquisition contexts may be far more significant. Additive and subtractive environments are to a large extent determined by the development of the first language and its status. Not only the influence of the environment, but other individual and contextual factors, too, can wield a stronger influence on third language acquisition than bilingualism.

To conclude, this special issue is a contribution towards a line of research that is quite new. It shows that the results of diverse methodological approaches used in different sociolinguistic environments offer insights that point towards broadly similar conclusions: Bilingualism can have a positive effect on third language acquisition when the socioeducational acquisition context is additive and favorable to the minority language. It is obvious that more research in this area is needed in order to confirm these findings and to isolate the specific influence of bilingualism on third language general proficiency and on the different skills. Of particular interest would be to see whether studies in which the subjects are bilinguals in the process of acquiring a third language in natural contexts corroborate the findings reported on so far.
References


