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What are the goals of language teaching?

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ABSTRACT

For many centuries people who speak more than one language, that is to say second language (L2) users, have been admired. In the 16th century an advisor to Elizabeth I of England said:

> 'For even as a hawk flieth not high with one wing, even so a man reacheth not to excellency with one tongue.'
>
> Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster,* 1570

In the 21st century the education minister for Elizabeth II proclaimed:

> 'It is literally the case that learning languages makes you smarter. The neural networks in the brain strengthen as a result of language learning.'
>
> Michael Gove, UK Education Secretary, 2011

Yet, despite these public statements, bilingualism is more often seen as a problem to be solved than an asset to be developed. Second language (L2) users indeed have problems, whether social, psychological or economic – like everyone else. But few of these stem from their bilingualism itself.

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Conceptualising multicompetence

This paper looks at the goals of language teaching from the multicompetence perspective. Multicompetence is defined as 'the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community' (Cook, 2012). It thus looks at second language acquisition (SLA) from the point of view of the L2 user as a whole person rather than from that of the monolingual native speaker. L2 user is the term for 'someone who is actively using a language other than their first, whatever their level of proficiency' (Cook, 2012); the term is preferred over 'bilingual' or 'L2 learner' as a more neutral term for the multicompetent user of more than one language, however much they know.

Multicompetence 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. Multicompetence changes the angle from which second language acquisition is viewed, hence the reason why it is here called a perspective rather than a model or a theory. If taken literally, it has important implications for language teaching goals and methodology. The antithesis of the multicompetence perspective is the monolingual perspective based on the native speaker model, usually defined as 'a person who has spoken a certain language since early childhood' (McArthur, 1992, 692). The crucial overall thrust of the multicompetence perspective is then to put the L2 user at the centre rather than the native speaker.

Characteristics of L2 users

So what are these L2 users like? First let us see how many of them there are. While it is almost as difficult to count L2 users as it is to count monolinguals, we can find some relevant figures:

- two billion people are learning English around the world, according to the British Council
- 90% of children in Europe are taught English in secondary school
- 71% of people in Singapore can read in more than one language
- 56% of EU citizens can have a conversation in two languages, 10% in three
- 438 languages are spoken in the EU, 300 in London
- children in English schools have 240 different home languages
- 42.6% of people in California speak another language than English in the home
- 43.5% of people in Toronto speak another language than English or French

From this we can deduce that probably the majority of people in the world use more than one language, very often English. In a sense it is now normal to use more than one language in your everyday life. Hence, far from L2 users being outsiders and exceptions to the norm, they are typical modern people of the 21st century: the dwindling number of monolinguals may now be considered as people who live unusually sheltered lives.

What are the characteristics of these multitudes of L2 users? The research built up over the last fifteen years suggests that they are unique in many ways, such as the following:

*L2 users think in slightly different ways from monolinguals***.** Cook and Bassetti (2011) described the revised form of the linguistic relativity hypothesis as applied to bilingualism: L2 users demonstrably think differently from their monolingual peers. One theme is categorisation experiments such as Cook, Bassetti, Kasai, Sasaki and Takahashi (2006), which showed that Japanese people who had been in England longer than three years had lost some of their preference for categorising objects in

terms of material to the English preference for using form. Another is the question of colour perception. Speakers of English have a single colour which they call *blue*, whether it is the blue of the sky or the blue of a sapphire. Speakers of some other languages see two colours, corresponding to English *light blue* and *dark blue*, called *ble* and *ghalazio* in Greek, *ao* and *mizuiri* in Japanese and *sinij* and *goluboj* in Russian. Where an English eye sees one colour, speakers of other languages see two. When you learn another language, your colour perception shifts slightly towards the L2 usage. So your two Greek blues are affected by your single English blue (Athanasopoulos, 2009). Learning another language affects other areas of your mind than those devoted to language.

L2 users use language in different ways from monolinguals. One instance of this is the ability to use two languages at once, i.e. codeswitching – alternating between two languages within the same situation or conversation, as most L2 users do when talking to other people who share the same languages. There are complex rules for switching, based on the topic or social roles. Codeswitching is a complex use of language drawing on two grammars and two sets of vocabulary virtually instantaneously, as seen in the following example from a column in the newspaper *Gibraltar Panorama.*

Telephone conversations between Cloti and Cynthia

Wink and nod...

I say, have you noticed how the police se han espavilao in going out against fishing where fishing should not take place, even en el quarry?

My dear Cloti, of course I have. I also know, or have often heard, que la polilla are independent when it comes to operational tasks, so how come that before they were mas manso que un perrito?

> Don't ask me, querida Cynthia, pero you must be aware of the Wink and Nod way of doing things, after all you are half English so you must know of such things!
>
> By the way, dicen que tenemos un earthquake under the Rock where los plates meet.

L2 users do not simply duplicate the uses of language that monolinguals employ: they have unique uses of language of their own, like code-switching and translation.

L2 users have an increased awareness of language itself compared to monolinguals. Metalinguistic awareness has been a constant research topic with L2 users, with the result that people's awareness of language has been shown to be increased by learning another language. Young children who learn another language are for instance more conscious of the arbitrariness of language. Ben Zeev (1977) played a game with children in which she told them 'the way to say "we" is with "spaghetti". How would you say, "We are good children?"'. Children who knew another language were better than monolinguals as they better appreciated the arbitrariness of language, i.e. they replied 'Spaghetti are good children' more often. This enhanced feeling for language may be one reason why there are so many bilingual writers, whether Vladimir Nabokov, André Brink or Catherine Lim.

L2 users have a slightly different knowledge of their first language. If you test the knowledge of the L1 in L2 users, you find it has minor differences from the L1 of monolinguals in many aspects. Vocabulary experiments by Spivey and Marian (1999) and Beauvillain and Grainger (1987) showed that your first language is never turned off when using your second language. For phonology, experiments with L2 users in their L1 by Queen (2001) on intonation and many others with Voice Onset Time (e.g. Zampini & Green, 2001), say English *bit/pit* versus French *bière/pierre,* showed that the L1 pronunciation of L2 users was subtly different from monolinguals. An L2 user is not

just an L1 user with an L2 tacked on; the L2 has changed all the languages in their mind.

L2 users have different brain structures from monolinguals. Research into brain structures is still highly experimental and no result seems to be safe for more than a handful of years. Nevertheless research suggests that long-term use of a second language increases the connections between the brain's hemispheres (Coggins, Kennedy & Armstrong, 2004) and that even short-term use may increase the amount of gray matter in some areas (Kwok, Niu, Kay, Zhou, Jin, So & Tan, 2011). Even at the age of 10 months, bilingual babies have different brain responses from monolinguals (Pettito, Berens, Kovelman, Dubins, Jasinska & Shalinsky, 2011). In other words, L2 users have brains that appear to be physically different in some respects from monolinguals.

Multicompetence and the goals of language teaching

How does multicompetence relate to the goals of language teaching? One overall issue concerns what the students are aiming to be – imitation native speakers or successful L2 users? Until the 1990s, it was more or less taken for granted that the purpose of teaching was to get students as near as possible to native speakers since the only valid model of language was the knowledge and behaviour of native speakers. Yet virtually everyone inevitably fails to reach this target; most L2 users probably regard themselves as failures for not speaking like natives. Multicompetence suggests that language teaching should aim to create successful L2 users rather than native speakers. The students preserve their own identities as being from their own culture but gain valuable skills at talking to people from other cultures. Rather than imitating native speakers, what counts is the ability to use the second language purposefully for their own reasons, whether to native speakers or fellow L2 users. Students can be successes as L2 users, not failed imitations of native speakers.

In more general terms, the overall goals of language teaching should be related to the nature of the L2 user. Cook (1983; 2002) made a distinction between two types of goals - *external* and *internal.*

External goals concern the use of the second language outside the classroom, whether to native speakers or to fellow L2 users. The students might want to be tourists, they might want to be on Facebook, they might want to study engineering, they might be refugees, or might be aiming at any of the other potential roles humans can have. For a hundred years, most modern language teaching has stressed external goals in a native context, whether audiolingualism, situational teaching, communicative teaching or task-based learning. From the multicompetence perspective, these goals need to be rethought in terms of L2 users. The situations described cannot be just native-to-native interaction; the role models in coursebooks and so on must include powerful L2 user figures, not always relegating the L2 user to the humble role of petitioner – the archetypal coursebook situation of the helpless young student asking the way from the wise mature native speaker; the language taught must reflect both 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 as individuals rather than their social interactions. Through acquiring a 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 above. Historically, language teaching often stressed these internal goals: learning Latin trained the brain; studying L2 literature heightened people's cultural awareness. Though modern syllabuses sometimes mention such goals, they are seldom instantiated in actual teaching or examinations. Multicompetence suggests that the metamorphosis that L2 learning brings to the mind should involve language teaching exploiting and encouraging these changes. Language teachers should not forget the

internal mental side effects of L2 learning alongside the potential external for external uses.

The overall goal of language teaching is then to create skilful L2 users with all their extra attributes, not shadows of native speakers. This 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, like a person with joint nationality rather than a naturalised citizen.

To some extent recent syllabuses and curriculums have begun to recognise these dual goals for students, as we saw with the Israeli National Curriculum (2001) above. The Japanese Ministry (MEXT, 2003) too produced 'A Strategic Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"'. In both Japan and Israel the goal is L2 users who do not give up their native identity in emulation of the native speaker. The Common European Framework (CEFR) (2001, p. 5) proclaimed that:

> … the aim of language education is … no longer seen as simply to achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place ...

Their goal is to develop people's language repertoire, not to lead them to quasi-native status.

While CEFR sounds on the right lines, there is, however an important difference between their advocacy of plurilingualism and the concept of multicompetence, as seen in following key quotation:

> Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. ... (CEFR, 2001, p. 4)

In English, the words 'plurilingualism' and 'multilingualism' have essentially the same meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary (1996) glosses 'plurilingualism' as 'fluency in a number of languages', 'multilingualism' as *inter alia* 'the ability to speak many languages'. The CEFR clearly approves of plurilingualism, which seems to be natives of one EU country speaking the language of another, and disapproves of multilingualism, which seems to be people belonging to the same community speaking two languages. Hence plurilingualism does not transform the individual into something new, different from a monolingual, but multicompetence does. So, at the heart of the CEFR, the goal of language teaching appears to be to allow EU citizens to talk to one another, not to be transformed into the citizens of a multilingual Europe.

Multicompetence thus casts a new light on language teaching: L2 users are different kinds of people from monolinguals and the responsibility of language teachers is to help students make this transformation. One way of doing this is to encourage their skills as L2 users rather than deprecate their failure to be like monolingual native speakers, selling language teaching as something that leads to different levels of success, not varying amounts of failure. Another way is for teachers and students to be aware that there are always two languages around in their minds and in the situations they encounter in the classroom or outside, even if one language may be lurking invisibly. Two books by Ortega (2009) and Scott (2009) elaborate on what this means for language teaching.

Multicompetence also continues to contribute to different aspects of bilingualism and second language acquisition research, particularly by developing two hitherto

barely touched on research questions: how the first language is affected by subsequent languages that are taught and how L2 users think differently from monolinguals in either language. But far more research is needed that starts from the multicompetence premise, in particular into how multicompetence exists within the overall framework of the multilingual community, not just the minds of individuals. The goals of language teaching go beyond the individual to those of the community and the society: we are teaching language to help people participate more fully in the wave of multilingualism that is sweeping the world.

Reading

Three books with similar attitudes are:

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Ortega, L. (2009). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Hodder Education

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