22 Social Influences on Language Learning

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Actual talk does not occur like a travelogue, with the scene and the narration separate.

(Mehan & Wood, 1983, p. 140)

22.1 Introduction

Learning an additional language is a difficult and complex endeavor. There exists not only the awesome task of mastering the grammatical system of the language, but also the job of learning how to utilize this system appropriately and effectively when actually communicating in real-life situations. Describing and explaining this process is perhaps even more difficult. There is obviously something going on inside the heads of language learners. But this remains unobservable. Matters are further complicated when the outcomes of that learning, now observable, are examined within any social context. An infinite number of variables suddenly come into play. The work of applied linguists includes the disentanglement of this complex web of cognitive and social arrangements.

Applied linguists, however, are concerned with more than answering an intriguing question. They do not spend their time grappling with this mystery in order to further their understanding of what language is all about; that is, "to further a linguistic theory" (Davies, 1999, p. 6). Instead, their work is "grounded in real-world language-driven problems and concerns" (Kaplan & Grabe, 2000, p. 4), a position supported by Widdowson (2000, p. 3) who says that applied linguistics is a mediating activity which "seeks to accommodate a linguistic account to other partial perspectives on language so as to arrive at a relevant reformulation of 'real world' problems." If it were possible to discover how people learn an additional language, and how they do so most economically and efficiently, there would be enormous and very useful implications for those involved in actually *teaching* additional languages. Of course, societal problems with which applied linguists engage themselves go beyond those associated with learning and teaching languages, both outside and inside classrooms. Language learning, however, is the focus of this chapter. More specifically, it aims to provide a broad overview of the many

proposals which have tried to explain how language learning and the social context in which it takes place relate to each other.

The title of this chapter, "Social Influences on Language Learning," needs some explaining. It is not as straightforward as it seems. There are three components to the title, each in its own way problematic: (1) social influences, (2) language learning, and (3) on. The challenge with the first of these is mainly one of definition. Instinctively we all feel we know what is meant by "social," but scanning the literature on language learning produces a range of definitions which seldom describe the same thing. For example, in his chapter on *social factors* and second language acquisition (SLA) (in a section on *external factors* and SLA), Ellis (1994) distinguishes between *social context* and *social factors*. The former refers to "the different *settings* in which L2 [second language] learning can take place" (p. 197), or to put it another way, "each *setting* can be seen as a *context* in which constellations of *social factors* typically figure to influence learning outcomes" (p. 197). His examples of *social factors* are age, sex, social class, and ethnic identity, and *contexts* could be either natural settings, where informal learning occurs, or educational settings, where formal learning takes place. Elsewhere, Ellis has referred to social *aspects* (1997, p. 37), social *determinants* (Ellis & Roberts, 1987, p. 26), *situational domains* and *situational contexts* (Ellis & Roberts, 1987, p. 7), *situational variables* (Ellis, 1992), learning *environments* (Ellis, 1990) and *external constraints* (Ellis, 1999, p. 461). Brown and Fraser (1979) use the term *situation*, dividing it into *scene* and *participants*, with scene in turn divided into *setting* and *purpose*. Long (1998, p. 93) uses both *social settings* and *environment*, apparently interchangeably. Stern (1983, p. 269) describes the social context "as a set of *factors* that is likely to exercise a powerful influence on language learning," also referred to as *environmental factors* which generate *environmental influences* (p. 270), thereby hinting at the direction of the influential force; i.e., from social to learning. He also refers to the relationship between *social milieu* (p. 271) and language learning, which on other occasions occurs within a *social climate* (p. 426). In a final example, Spolsky (1989), too, refers to social factors as a subset of the social context, a relationship which becomes manifest in a number of *conditions* for language learning.

In other words, language learning takes place in a social context which consists of a number of influential social factors. These factors include the physical scene or setting and the participants, including the learner, which together establish the conditions or the environment for language learning.

The meaning of the second component of the title of this chapter, *language learning*, is easier to explain. The first question to be asked is whether this refers to learning one's first language, an additional language, or more than one language simultaneously in some bilingual/multilingual arrangement. In this chapter the focus will be on learning a second or an additional language. What this means sounds simple enough, but becomes slightly more complex when the process is discussed in terms of *acquiring* another language. Krashen's (1981) distinction between the two, learning as consciously studying the language and acquisition as subconsciously internalizing it, has been found to

be problematic by researchers and SLA theorists but popular with teachers. In most cases the distinction has been abandoned and the terms used interchangeably. Evidence of what has been learned/acquired (i.e., interlanguage – see Section 22.2.3) can be found in the learner's output (see Section 22.2.2). SLA researchers who look at the development and use of interlanguage and output are interested in both the product of the learning (the form of the actual language used by learners) and the process of learning (the psychological processes that occur during learning and the social context factors that interact with the learning process; see, e.g., a review in Kormos, 1999). In this chapter I make a distinction between the product/processes of language acquisition/learning on the one hand, and *language education* on the other. Language education refers to the practices, procedures, and provision of language learning. Associated with these are language-in-education policies and the concomitant variable opportunities for learning. In other words, it is social context in a broader sense.

Finally, the smallest part of the chapter's title, *on*, links the other two components, but exactly how, is the difficult question. There are two issues involved, both of which will be examined in more detail later. Firstly, it seems obvious that there must be a relationship between social context and language learning; learning does not and cannot take place in a social vacuum. But it is the nature and strength of this relationship which provides language learning theorists with a challenge. A related question concerns the extent to which the relationship should be considered in explanations of SLA. Tarone (2000, p. 182) raises this question as follows:

> The central question has been whether a theory of SLA must account only for the psycholinguistic processes involved in acquiring an interlanguage (IL), or, alternatively, whether social and sociolinguistic factors influence those psycholinguistic processes to such an extent that they too must be included in such a theory. It seems very clear that SLA *is* a psycholinguistic process. But to what extent are those psycholinguistic processes affected by social context?

Secondly, what is the direction of the relationship? In the early years of SLA research and theorizing, the dominant discourse seemed to indicate that social context influences learning; i.e., that they are separate entities with the former having an effect on the latter (e.g., Beebe & Zuengler, 1983). Questions, however, have been asked about whether what was spoken about as language learning was actually language *use* rather than language or interlanguage *development*. Tarone and Liu (1995) demonstrate progress with this dilemma in their report of a study which shows that "interaction in different social contexts can influence both interlanguage use *and* overall interlanguage development" (p. 108). A more recent discourse in the field has emphasized the *sociality* of language development, whereby learners and learning are socially, historically and politically constructed (Toohey, 2000). So, instead of learning being described as something which happens to learners as they interact in

their relative social contexts, they themselves are partly constitutive of those contexts, which at the same time reflexively organize who they are (their identities) and their language learning.

The title of this chapter, then, quite clearly announces a relationship which is complex, and one which attracts the interest not only of those involved in SLA theory and research but also those in linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and education, including language teachers. It is to be expected, therefore, that multiple perspectives on language learning will be evident and that solutions to some of the problems raised will be hard to find. Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 174) sums up this thought in the following prediction:

> A major contribution of SLA/AL [applied linguistics] over the next decade lies in coming to terms with our differences – not so that we all agree, but so that the field can become more inclusive, when justified, and so that the complexity of the SLA process and learners is duly respected. A coherent epistemology would be a remarkable contribution of the next decade. Should we fail to accomplish this, I fear that we will experience continued internecine feuding and fragmentation.

The remainder of the chapter is concerned with the three main components of its title: the definition of social context, the nature of language learning and language education, and the complex relationship between the two. In some parts they will be addressed directly and in others they will be implicitly referred to in the ideas and research presented.

22.2 A Basic Model of Language Learning

Learning an additional language necessarily involves at least five elements, or to put it another way, any explanatory model of language learning must take into account at least the following five elements (see Figure 22.1): To start off, there has to be a *learner*, the person learning the language. No language learning will take place if the learner is not exposed to *input*, some form of the language being learned, and one of many constituents of the *social context*. In the process of learning the language, a systematic representation of that knowledge, an *interlanguage*, develops inside the learner's head. Learning is evident in *output*, a display of the learner's ability in the language.

The aim of SLA research is to discover how these obligatory elements fit together; that is, what arrangements would most adequately explain how languages are learned. For instance, in Figure 22.1, simply adding an arrow-head, converting a solid line into a dotted line, subdividing any of the elements, or giving them different names would be making a comment on theory. My purpose in this section is to provide an overview of attempts to explain how the social context element relates to the other four. In the following section a selection of models or theories of SLA which incorporate some configuration of social context will be presented.

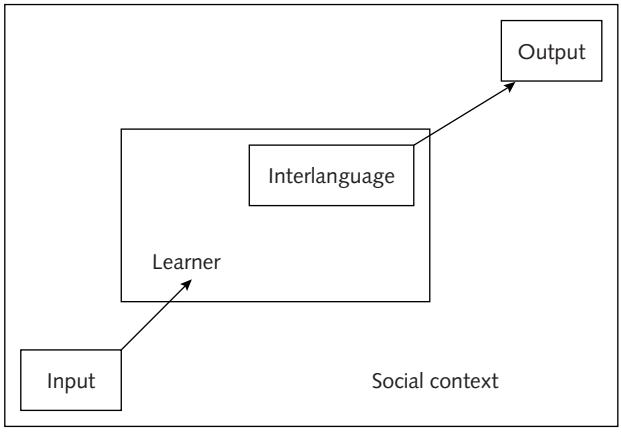

Figure 22.1 Necessary elements for learning an additional language

22.2.1 The learner

Ellis (1994) provides a thorough review of social factors, mediated through learner attitudes, which affect language learning. These are to be distinguished from individual learner differences such as learner beliefs, affective variables, learning strategies, and cognitive styles. Ellis covers four factors, age, sex, social class, and ethnic identity – and warns that it is not these factors "that determine L2 proficiency, but rather the social conditions and attitudes associated with these variables. Also, the factors interact among themselves, and their effect on learning depends to a large extent on the setting. Any conclusions, therefore, must be cautious" (1994, p. 211).

Ellis (1994) sums up his review of age-related research by indicating that younger learners are generally more successful at learning languages than older learners. A more recent review of research (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000) includes this finding as one of three misconceptions about age and L2 learning, the others being a misattribution of conclusions about language proficiency to neurobiological factors and a misemphasis on unsuccessful adult language learners at the expense of those who do achieve native-like proficiency levels. The authors ascribe some of these misconceptions to aspects of the social context, such as the environment in which the learners (of all ages) find themselves and their levels of motivation which develop as a result of their interaction with their social worlds.

The relationship between language learning and gender (Wodak & Benke, 1997), has recently received considerable attention. Ellis (1994) points out that sociolinguistic research has shown that men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women but that women tend to be at the forefront of linguistic change. He adds that "both principles suggest that women might be better at L2 learning than men; they are likely to be more open to new linguistic

forms in the L2 input and they will be more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target-language norms" (1994, p. 202). He concludes his summary of the research by saying, however, that although the results have been mixed, females generally do better than males in classroom settings, and they also have more positive attitudes to learning (see also Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). More recently research has moved away from the restrictive designs of sociolinguistic variationist studies to "broad-based ethnographic investigations and an examination of discourse and conversation where language is studied in genuine communicative contexts" (Freed, 1995, p. 3; see also Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Norton Peirce, 1995). These studies mirror research approaches which draw on poststructuralist theory and which are being adopted in other fields, such as education. They explore the changing subject positions of individuals as they relate to others in their groups and communities within variable relations of power. Nelson (1999), drawing on queer theory, uses this approach in her examination of sexual identities in an ESL (English as a second language) classroom. Although she does not directly address implications for language learning (focusing instead on pedagogy), the possibilities for future research are encouraging.

Ellis (1994) comments that there have been few studies which have investigated social class and L2 learning, and summarizes the findings of those that he reviewed as follows:

> The results to date suggest that middle-class children achieve higher levels of L2 proficiency and more positive attitudes than working-class children when the programme emphasizes formal language learning. This may be because they are better able to deal with decontextualized language. However, when the programme emphasizes communicative language skills, the social class of the learners has no effect. (1994, p. 206)

Belonging to or being labeled a member of a particular social class means that an individual will experience life in a particular way. Wong (2000), for instance, reports that in the US the social stratification of school children begins in the first grade. Children from the highest achieving reading groups are "tracked" into college-bound course in secondary school, and those from lower-level reading groups are tracked into the industrial and technical classes. The former are typically children who come from middle-class homes where storytelling and educational-type toys abound. The latter are typically working-class children from a diverse range of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural homes. Once the children are placed in their respective reading groups they experience varying quality of instruction, coupled with different sets of expectations. Dropping out of school and moving on to college are the opposing outcomes. The place of L2 students in this scenario (and no doubt in other similar contexts) is unclear. L2 students may, for example, be classified as intellectually deficient because of low English proficiency and tracked into inappropriate courses.

This uncertainty serves to illustrate the complexity of social factor arrangements; age, gender, social class, and ethnicity "are not experienced as a series of discrete background variables, but are all, in complex and interconnected ways, implicated in the construction of identity and the possibilities of speech" (Norton, 2000, p. 13). The poststructuralist tone of this comment will be taken up later, but for now its message is relevant to the following comments about ethnicity and language learning.

Fishman's (1997) extended definition and historical overview of the concept of *ethnicity* encapsulates the difficulty in pinning down exactly what it is. Its unsatisfactory comparisons with race, nationality, and culture over time make it even more challenging to find connections between ethnicity and language learning. In its various guises, however, Ellis (1994) states that there is general agreement that ethnic identity plays an important role in language learning. The influence can take three possible forms (Ellis, 1994): a normative view of the relationship which emphasizes the influence of ethnic group membership on L2 learning; a sociopsychological view of the relationship which emphasizes the role of the attitudes learners have to learning a particular L2; and a sociostructural view which also considers the role of attitudes in language learning, but this time in inter-ethnic communication (ethnolinguistic identity theory, Giles & Johnson, 1987, will be examined when considering theories of SLA below). An alternative approach, already hinted at by Norton (2000) above, is one which takes a critical stance that emphasizes the dynamic experience of identity and subjectivity in the process of being or becoming a member (including learning the language) of a particular group. Ibrahim (1999), in his study of francophone African youths learning BESL (Black ESL) in a Canadian setting, for example, asks, inter alia, the following questions: "Who do we as social subjects living within a social space desire to be or to become? And whom do we identify with, and what repercussions does our identification have on how and what we learn?" (p. 352). Such an approach does not lend itself to linear connections between ethnicity and language learning.

22.2.2 *Input and output*

Input refers to the type of language input received by learners when listening or reading in the target language. Whether in a language classroom (Ellis, 1990; Wong-Fillmore, 1985), a natural setting (Parks & Maguire, 1999), or an SLA experimental laboratory (Mackey, 1999; Toth, 2000), the relationship between input and interlanguage development has attracted the attention of SLA researchers for the past few decades. The relevance of the connection for this chapter lies in the fact that input, however generated, is part of the social context. A mentalist view of language learning, for example that associated with Universal Grammar, however, dramatically plays down the role of input, suggesting that minimal exposure to input is all that is needed to trigger the cognitive acquisition system. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis initiated a steady stream of studies focusing on

input and learners' interaction with it and its providers. Further research classified input into, inter alia, baseline, premodified, and interactionally modified (Ellis & He, 1999) and it was also hypothesized that input and output worked together in developing interlanguage. Swain's (1985) Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, for example, claims that acquisition may occur when learners have to make efforts to ensure that their output is comprehensible, a claim not always supported by research (e.g., Izumi & Bigelow, 2000).

Sociocultural perspectives propose a zone of proximal development within which learners and more knowledgeable input-providers together socially construct opportunities for language learning. Perspectives which foreground the role of the learner's social identity and relations of power within the target language community would paint a very different picture of what input and output are, how they are (co-)constructed and their role in language learning. Thus, in Norton Peirce's (1989) account of the learning and use of People's English in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid, output is not perceived to be merely the appropriate use of linguistic forms. It is, rather, a source of resistance, a political tool. Although it is clear that written and spoken input are external to the learner and that access to them is gained through interaction, in modified, negotiated, or scaffolded forms, it is less clear what the effect of input is on language learning (Ellis, 1999; Spada, 1997).

22.2.3 *Interlanguage*

One goal of language learning is to construct a mental system of L2 knowledge, what is referred to, in a number of different ways, as an interlanguage (IL). Another goal is to utilize this IL for effective communication. Very broadly, IL research asks the following questions: What does this system look like? How is it used? How does it change? Attempts to answer these questions have drawn on a range of different perspectives, from psycholinguistic on the one hand to sociolinguistic and co-constructionist on the other. Tarone (2000), in a review which reminds us of the complex relationship between social context and L2 acquisition, points out that "neither strand of SLA research has consistently and systematically set out to gather the sort of data which might show whether social factors affect cognitive processes of *acquisition* in specific ways" (2000, p. 186, my emphasis). What studies within these traditions do more successfully, however, is to show how social factors affect IL *use*. There is a distinction between IL use and IL development; the first being synchronic variation and the second diachronic variation. There is some disagreement in the literature, however, as to the extent to which this variation is systematic (as opposed to free variation), and how important it is for understanding L2 acquisition (see Preston, 1996).

Tarone and Liu (1995) report on data which indicates that participation in different interactional contexts results not only in differential IL use but also in differential IL development. Bob, a young Chinese boy, was observed over a period of 26 months in a range of contexts with peers and teachers at school

and with the researcher. Interactions with the researcher were most productive with regard to both rate and route of acquisition. The authors interpret this finding as stemming from the nature of the researcher's input (since his sessions with Bob were one-on-one, the input was finely tuned to his needs) and from Bob's attempts to produce comprehensible output. What this study does is to show quite clearly the connection between all the elements in the basic model of SLA illustrated in Figure 22.1.

Young (1999), in a review of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA, points out that pragmatics has been attracting much research activity. It is easy to see why. Pragmatics is the study of how language is used to communicate in different social contexts. Researchers concerned with IL development, therefore, would not only want to know how linguistic knowledge is acquired, but also how linguistic knowledge relates to the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately. Kasper (2001) provides an assessment of four approaches to the study of IL pragmatics. They range from those which grapple with finding a place in IL for pragmatic ability in relation to grammatical ability and communicative competence to sociocultural and language socialization approaches. Kasper (2001, p. 525) concludes as follows:

> I advocate multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives to the acquisition of pragmatic ability as a domain in SLA. I do not advocate an unprincipled "anything goes" approach. Progress in developmental interlanguage pragmatics requires that practitioners continue to examine critically the fit between research goals and investigative approaches as well as the compatibility of candidate theories.

This comment is perhaps relevant to SLA research more generally, and will be addressed in the next section.

22.3 Language Learning

Contrary to those working within mentalist paradigms of SLA research, Selinker & Douglas (1985, p. 190) believed that "until we are able to come to grips with the notion 'context' in a doable research framework, our work on IL will be at least incomplete, and perhaps wrong." Fifteen years later Tarone (2000) declared that we are still wrestling with context in interlanguage theory. During that time a captivating debate took place which considered, sometimes quite vitriolically and possibly unproductively, the role of social context in SLA theory. It was ignited by a Firth and Wagner (1997) article which claimed in the abstract that "methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA reflect an imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language, the former orientation being unquestionably in the ascendancy" (1997, p. 285). Aligned with the mentalistic perspective is a research approach which gives pre-eminence to "coding, quantifying data,

and replicating results. It prioritizes explanations of phenomena in terms of underlying cognitive processes over descriptions of phenomena" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 288), reminiscent of laboratory-located, experimental research. The same authors conclude by calling for a more balanced, "holistic" consideration of both cognitive and social factors in SLA theorizing and research approaches. A number of responses within the same journal followed (e.g., Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997), but the lengthiest (and most entertaining) came from Long (1998). He justifies his defense as follows:

> Paying too much attention to our besiegers risks legitimizing some of the woollier critics of SLA, who might be better simply ignored, as well as some of their more absurd criticisms. Worse, it could gradually create a siege mentality and isolate the field from its constituents and from neighboring disciplines. On the other hand, completely ignoring all the current assaults (and insults) also seems ill advised. (Long, 1998, p. 112)

Long's main concern with regard to the social context debate is that critics of the more established psycholinguistic approaches to SLA have failed so far to produce any evidence of their own that social factors influence language acquisition, as opposed to use, which, he believes, is hardly the "explanandum for SLA" (p. 91).

It is a lack of this sort of evidence, too, which is common to the following models or theories of SLA. I have selected them here because they represent different perspectives (i.e., cultural, sociopsychological, and poststructural) on the relationship between social context and the process of language learning. A brief description of each theory, with illustrative examples of research, will make this relationship evident. Different selection criteria could have included the following: (1) Gardner's (see 1988) socio-educational model which was developed to explain language learning in classroom settings, (2) sociocultural theory approaches to SLA associated with the ideas of Russian psychologist Vygotsky (see Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995 for an overview), and (3) Larsen-Freeman's (1997) discussion of the parallels between complex non-linear systems occurring in nature and language acquisition.

22.3.1 The acculturation model

Schumann's (1978, 1986) acculturation model has as its main ingredient the learner adapting to a new culture. It was established to explain the acquisition of an additional language by immigrants in naturalistic majority language contexts. The theory emerged from a now famous case study of a 33-year-old Costa Rican named Alberto who failed to acculturate to the target language community and thus developed only a "pidginized," early-stage form of English. Schumann (1978, p. 34) explains the finding as follows: "Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target-language group will control the degree to

which he acquires the second language." Acculturation is expressed in terms of social distance (becoming a member of a target language group) and psychological distance (how comfortable learners are with the learning task). The model has been very influential over the years and still generates research to this day. Welsh (2001), for example, using an acculturation framework, investigated English learners' perceptions of their language learning within a homestay environment in New Zealand. All the students were studying at a tertiary institution and all had high expectations of improving their English by living in a homestay, which Welsh (2001, p. 4) defines as "an accommodation which includes full board and lodging for students studying in a foreign country through which they may be exposed to the culture, language and social structures of that country." For many of the students their expectations were not met, and although language learning was not actually measured, the study did provide useful insights into the connection between acculturation (or lack thereof) of international students and their experiences of language learning.

For some theorists, one limitation of the acculturation model, as a theory of SLA, is that it does not explain the internal mechanisms of how an L2 is acquired; it is a sociopsychological model rather than a cognitive-processing model. Another claimed limitation is that the model does not consider the language learner "as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 13). It focuses instead on group differences between the language learner's group and the group associated with the target language.

22.3.2 *The intergroup model*

These criticisms could be leveled against Intergroup Theory (Giles & Byrne, 1982), a theory which also takes into account the relationship between the learner's group (the ingroup) and the target language group (the outgroup). However, unlike the acculturation model, which sees the relationship between the groups as static or changing very slowly, Intergroup Theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of the *interaction* between the groups; specifically, groups with different ethnolinguistic identities. According to Giles and Byrne (1982), language learners are more likely to define themselves in ethnic terms and adopt strategies for linguistic divergence, and are less likely, therefore, to acquire the L2, to the extent that they (1) identify strongly with their own group, which considers language an important symbol of its identity; (2) make insecure social comparisons with the outgroup; (3) perceive their own group's vitality to be high (i.e., having institutional support and a high status, and being relatively large); (4) perceive their ingroup boundaries to be hard and closed; and (5) identify strongly with few other social categories. Ethnolinguistic convergence, on the other hand, will lead to more successful social integration as well as L2 proficiency. In considering the relevance of ethnolinguistic identity theory for SLA in the context of the work of social psychologists (mostly

psychologists) and applied linguists (SLA researchers), Beebe & Giles (1984, p. 17) make the following observation: "Neither field can succeed in explaining second language data without the other. Interdisciplinary research, merging the interests and findings of the two approaches, will enable us to inspect data from a broader, more balanced perspective." Intergroup Theory, probably because of a lack of any research evidence to support its claims, particularly with regard to interlanguage development, as well as the two criticisms mentioned above, never really got off the ground. Its strength, however, lies in its emphasis on ethnicity (and, although downplayed, issues of social inequality) as a social factor in L2 learning.

Using ethnolinguistic identity theory as a framework, a study by Barkhuizen and de Klerk (2000) investigated the inter-ethnolinguistic interactions of the personnel in a multilingual army camp in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. Although English was the official language of communication and instruction in the camp, Xhosa, the majority language in the region, was actually the most widely used (albeit mainly for non-work-related functions) because of the ethnolinguistic demographics of the camp (40 percent of the 279 personnel who participated in the study were Xhosa-speaking). In South Africa there is a relatively static view of the relationship between language and ethnicity, one which perpetuates "the myth of linguistically and culturally homogeneous communities within Southern Africa" (Herbert, 1992, p. 2). This differs from interpretations such as those offered by Rampton (1997, p. 9), who argues that "people don't sit contentedly in the social group categories that society tries to fix them in, and they don't confine themselves only to those identities that they are expected to have legitimate or routine access to." All personnel in the camp were members of the army. As such they worked together to accomplish the goals of the army. They shared certain beliefs, duties, values, and motivations. But they were also members of other groups; different ethnic groups in which they interacted with their families and close friends when not in the army. The research attempted to discover to what extent army personnel identified with the superordinate identity of the army, its "armyness," in order for the army to function as a successful social institution, and how being in the army affected their language behavior, including their perceptions of their language learning.

Findings show that the personnel who could speak English (including L2 speakers) were quite happy to do so, and that those who could not speak Xhosa were willing to learn the language. Many did so successfully, as the following exchange shows (I = interviewer; T = trainee; TS = trainees):

I: Okay, but you speak Zulu so you can understand Xhosa and speak it quite well, but what about North Sotho or Tswana?
TS: [laugh] They forced to speak Xhosa.
I: So they are forced to speak Xhosa because you are in this area where everybody speaks Xhosa?
TS: Yes, that's right.

I: Is there anybody here [14 trainees] who hasn't learned any Xhosa this year?
T1: I think all they learn Xhosa.
T2: All they know it.

The following comments from trainees further reveal their motives:

> Nowadays we work together like here in the army, so I think where there are different people from other tribes and so on I think it is very interesting to speak those languages whereby we try communication. We are different nations. All over South Africa we are like this now. (T, Xhosa speaker)

> Well I can say the main thing to make most of the other language [speakers] to learn Xhosa is just because of when we start to get the passes and start to go out we already know that here in Grahamstown there stay Xhosa speakers, so when we go in to look for some cherries [female companions] we are going to suffer when we don't know Xhosa. That's the main thing to make us learn Xhosa; the girlfriends. (T, non-Xhosa speaker)

The reformulated and extended version of ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson, 1987) takes into account situational variables in inter-ethnolinguistic interaction, such as the concern to maintain communicational efficiency, and the interactants' perception of overlap between themselves in terms of shared group membership. Both these variables may help to explain the patterns of language behavior and language learning in the army camp. Although this study does not address interlanguage acquisition, it does provide useful insights into the dynamic nature of ethnicity, and the multiple, changing social (and context-bound) identities of individual language learners.

22.3.3 Social identity and investment

McNamara (1997, p. 566) states that the "centrality of the notion of social identity to current work on language learning reflects a renewed theoretical and political concern for the social dimension of language learning." He adds, however, that applied linguists "have drawn variously on different conceptualizations of social identity, making no reference to the existence of alternatives" (p. 565). The wide array of articles in Norton's (1997a) edited special-topic issue of *Tesol Quarterly* illustrates this point only too well. Norton's own work (1997b, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) presents perhaps the clearest and certainly most accessible account of the relationship between social identity and SLA theory. She argues that "a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). Identity is not constant, but multiple, fluid, and often contradictory. A person is both "subject of and subject to relations of power" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15) in

any particular social interaction. He or she takes up a certain subject position, but this positioning is changeable, it can be challenged. In Norton's view of the relationship between social context and L2 acquisition, then, learners and their learning are socially constructed. Her main criticism of SLA theory is that it has not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity which integrates the language learner and the social context in which that learning takes place. It has been concerned with questions such as who is learning language, what they are learning, and how they are doing it. But it has not examined these questions in relation to the social and cultural practices of the language learner and target language communities.

Central to Norton's ideas on language learning is the concept of 'investment," which refers to learners' commitment to learning the L2, the level of commitment being tied to their perceptions of their relationship to the social world; in other words, it is an investment in the target language as well as in their social identity. Norton (2000, p. 10) explains:

> If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.

Norton's study of adult immigrant learners of English in Canada (see Norton, 2000, for a full account of the study) provided the data on which she based her perspectives on SLA theory. As her own study demonstrates, she recommends research which adopts qualitative methods and which emphasizes analysis of how L2 learners make sense of their experiences of learning the language. She also invites researchers (language learners and their teachers) to participate in collaborative classroom-based social research which collapses "the boundaries between their classrooms and their communities" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 26).

Toohey (2000), who acknowledges the flimsiness of these boundaries, nevertheless focuses her study on classroom activities and practices. The participants were a small group of children from minority language backgrounds in Canada. During their time in kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2, Toohey examined, through observation and interviews, the practices of the school with respect to assigning identities to the children, how participation in physical, material, and intellectual practices determined access to classroom resources (including conversations with peers and the teacher), and how discourse practices "regulated children's access to possibilities for appropriation of powerful and desirable voices in their community" (2000, p. 3). Her findings are couched in a discussion of theoretical ideas which expose the intimate and complex nature of the relationship between language learners and their identities, their learning and their educational environments.

Kapp (2001), in a very different educational context, addresses the politics of English in her examination of ESL classroom discourses in a South African

school. The school is located 15 kilometers away from central Cape Town in a township which, during the apartheid years, was designated for African people. The township has a very high unemployment rate and Kapp (2001, p. 129) points out that it is one of the most dangerous areas in Cape Town:

> I was always tense and fearful as I drove from my relatively safe, middle-class, racially mixed suburb, past the working-class "colored" townships. A thick pall of wood-fire smoke hanging over the bridge signaled arrival in the township. This area does not exist on my street map of Cape Town. As one turns left into the unmarked main street, the huge police station dwarfs the semi-detached houses (commonly known as "matchboxes"). The main road is filled with litter and potholes and is devoid of trees and shrubs . . . There is a middle-class sector in the township where some of the teachers live, a section inhabited by hostel dwellers, and an informal settlement inhabited by more recent migrants to Cape Town. The latter consist of wood and iron shacks. According to the 1996 census data, 58% of households in the township have electricity and running water.

The school has 30 classrooms and approximately 1,600 students, almost all of whom live in the township. In order to develop the thick qualitative data endorsed by both Toohey and Norton, Kapp explored, through longitudinal observation, informal interviews and student writing, students' and teachers' attitudes to English in relation to Xhosa, the predominant home language; language practices across the curriculum; school culture and local social conditions; and regional and national policy-making and language debates. Using critical classroom discourse analysis, Kapp paints an incredibly vivid picture of how township life, school life, English-classroom life, and the aspirations and realities of the ESL teachers and their students all intersect in the process of constructing their identities and their learning and teaching. She says, in her abstract (Kapp, 2001, p. ii):

> The study describes and explains a number of contradictions with regard to English. It explores the ways in which students' complex, seemingly contradictory language attitudes and classroom practices are intimately linked to their attempts to define appropriate roles and identities in relation to the unstable school and township environment, as well as their construction of their place in the world within and beyond the township. It also highlights the contradictions of the English curriculum, which emphasizes the centrality of language for learning and student-centered pedagogy; but values "banking" of facts and functional, oral communication in its assessment practices. It explores teachers' negotiation of these contradictions, their constructions of their students and their notions of learning English.

Kapp's study explores SLA research in order to examine the social context of language learning. It demonstrates quite clearly that the relationship between learning and context is not a simple, linear one: besides the psychological and social components of this relationship, there are also very powerful

political processes involved. Kapp's study, like those of Norton and Toohey, shows that in order to gain a fuller understanding of SLA they cannot be ignored.

22.4 Language Education

I refer to language education as the practices, procedures and provision of language learning. Associated with these are language-in-education policies and the variable opportunities for learning which they provide. As the studies described immediately above indicate, the contexts of language learning are always complex, and boundaries between naturalistic language learning settings and educational (or formal) ones are necessarily soft and multidimensional. Distinctions have, nevertheless, been made. Judd (1978, described in Ellis, 1994), for example, distinguishes between three broad types of natural L2 learning contexts: (1) L2 learning in majority language contexts (e.g., Mexican migrants in the United States learning English or army personnel learning Xhosa in an army camp in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa); (2) L2 learning in official language contexts (e.g., learning English in Nigeria or India); (3) L2 learning in international contexts (e.g., English for business, academic work, science, the media and tourism in many countries around the world). Ellis (1994) summarizes four broad types of educational contexts distinguished by Skuttnab-Kangas (1988): segregation, mother tongue maintenance, submersion, and immersion. In what follows, I consider factors inside and outside of classrooms and show how they operate collaboratively to determine the success or not of language learning. I use as a framework for the discussion five of the twelve questions asked by Kaplan (2000, pp. viii–x) in his elaboration of the myths and political realities associated with language teaching, and I use language teaching and learning within the school system in South Africa to conceptualize my discussion. I choose South Africa because it is a context with which I am more familiar, but it is by no means a special case. Other multilingual countries, such as India, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea, face similar concerns and have also been involved in very lively, multi-faceted debates.

During the apartheid era, language-in-education policy in South Africa was directly reflective of apartheid ideology. Under the current government, the main sociopolitical and ideological principles underlying the constitution of the country are given as the promotion of democracy for all South Africans, the reconstruction of South African society (by addressing past imbalances and discriminatory practices), and the reconciliation of the peoples of South Africa. Such ideological concerns are manifest in decisions regarding both language policy and language-in-education policy. Central themes in the national language policy are: (1) societal multilingualism as a national resource that is an integral part of nation building and the creation of access, (2) the linguistic equality of all South African languages, and (3) the need for actively

promoting African languages, which were, unlike English and Afrikaans, neglected in the past, and through such redressive action facilitating the empowerment of the majority of the country's people. While English and Afrikaans continue to enjoy official status, nine African languages now also enjoy equal official status at the national level. The nine provinces are free to choose which of these eleven official languages are to be declared official at regional level.

Language-in-education policy is reflective of the language policy as a whole (Kamwangamalu, 1997), and has at its core the following two principles: (1) redressing past linguistic imbalances and encouraging educational multilingualism, the purpose of the latter being to promote the educational use of African languages at all levels of education against the continued dominance of English and Afrikaans, and (2) ensuring linguistic freedom of choice for learners in terms of language as subject and medium of instruction in the context of gaining democratic access to broader society.

(1) *What language(s) will be taught in the public school system?* and (2) *Who will be taught these languages?* Under apartheid (pre-1994), the advancement of the indigenous African languages as subject and medium of instruction was used as a central instrument of the policy of divide and rule. Linguistic difference was not only used as a tool for dividing racial groups in the country, but was also exploited to divide the African people themselves. There was a specific attempt to create and foster an ethnolinguistic nationalism amongst pre-identified ethnic groupings. The primary goal of mother tongue education was thus not educational but ideological (achieved, for instance, by forcing children to attend specific schools created exclusively for those groups). Besides these general factors, there was a gross disparity in the language-in-education policies of black and white schools, policies which had their origins in general apartheid concerns (see Hartshorne, 1987). For white students, the medium of instruction was exclusively either English or Afrikaans. Because English speakers had to attend English schools and Afrikaners Afrikaans schools, a division within the privileged white group itself was created. For black students, on the other hand, the situation existed where the enforced mediums of instruction were, for different subjects, English, Afrikaans, and an African language. Integral to the motivation of this policy appeared to be the perspective that blacks had to function as effective servants of the white state and therefore had to be competent in both official "white" languages. As far as language as subject is concerned, black children were expected to learn not only the two official languages (at the time, English and Afrikaans) as white children had to do, they also were required to study an African language (their mother tongue). Given the deprivations of apartheid education, instruction and learning in all these languages suffered.

Implementation of new state and regional language-in-education policies has lagged behind the ambitious policy statements made over the past ten years. The main reasons have been lack of funding for human and material resources, an interest in matters more pressing than linguistic ones (e.g., provision of education generally and vast curriculum changes such as the

introduction of an outcomes-based mode of teaching and learning), and the language attitudes of educators, students, and their parents. There is little motivation, for example, to learn African languages as formal school subjects as they are perceived largely as horizontal codes (languages of everyday interaction and solidarity) rather than as vertical codes (languages of educational and societal access).

(3) *Who will teach these languages?* Any language-in-education policy decisions have to be supported by appropriate language teacher education. Pre-service teacher education, in the past, was notorious for its lack of success in training language teachers. The segregated teacher education system produced black teachers who were hopelessly under-qualified with regard to modern language teaching methods, a problem which continues today, especially with regard to African languages (Barkhuizen, 2000). The English proficiency of those who taught English was woefully inadequate. Some would argue that this situation has hardly changed in South African schools, most of which are under-resourced, crowded, and rural. In the past, white teachers received a much better training and their schools were better resourced, and of course they typically taught their own mother tongue, English or Afrikaans. With recent calls for a multilingual approach to language education the nature of teacher education has had to change accordingly. The lack of resources for this, both human and material, presents further barriers to quick and effective change. The majority of language classrooms in the country are, in any case, still monolingual (i.e., made up of students who speak the same mother tongue). The minority would be in former white, typically urban schools, which have attracted students whose mother tongue is not English or Afrikaans, and which still have the better qualified teachers, who are able to implement syllabus changes and new assessment practices.

(4) *How will success be determined?* Success in learning (and teaching) is determined by how well students do on various forms of internal (including continuous) and external assessment (see Barkhuizen, 1995; Kapp, 2001). Results dictate whether or not students move from one grade to the next, what jobs they get and whether or not they go to university. The relationship between assessment and teaching practices in South Africa has been carefully planned and monitored since the gradual introduction in the mid-1990s of the controversial outcomes-based education curriculum. Historically, assessment practices in South Africa have been very complicated, the situation being compounded by unfamiliarity with the new curriculum and poor provincial level administration. In the past, different languages had their own examinations, the languages were examined as first, second, and third languages, and these in turn were examined at higher, standard, and sometimes even lower grade levels. With recent curriculum changes, these distinctions are beginning to disappear. Whether or not students are successful will depend to some degree on answers to the following questions: (a) How many languages will students be required to study as subjects? The popular suggestion is that at least two and preferably three of the official languages (including one African language)

be studied. (b) Will results from language assessment (including external examinations) count for purposes of promotion from one grade to the next? (c) Will there be specific language requirements for admission to tertiary education institutions? (d) In terms of other school subjects, will students be allowed to answer examination questions in the language of their choice? This could mean, for example, that a student may choose to answer an examination question in Xhosa, even if English was used as the language of learning for that subject.

(5) *What is the best methodology for teaching these languages?* The methodology deemed to be the most appropriate for South African school children has been communicative language teaching (this refers particularly to teaching English and Afrikaans; very few students learn African languages as additional languages). A communicative approach has been endorsed in syllabus documents since the early 1980s (and reinforced in a range of new syllabuses that emerged post-1994) but it was rarely implemented with any effect. Many black students, for example, endure endless grammar lessons working steadily through outdated language textbooks, mainly because their teachers are themselves unable to communicate very efficiently in the target language. The grammar exercises (and answer books) provide teachers with a crutch for getting through the classes. In some cases, where communicative language teaching is attempted, it is interpreted as oral practice only, typically in groups, and often results in code-switching or use solely of the mother tongue. Since 1995, and coinciding with the new political dispensation, communicative language teaching goals have been reinforced through special emphasis in syllabus documents, the purpose being to empower language (especially English) learners to be successful users of the language in situations outside of the classroom, particularly for further study and in the job market. Recently, language-in-education planners have also been responsible for a critical language awareness (CLA) thread running through the curriculum, an innovation which South African language education should certainly welcome. Consistent with the goals of CLA, their objective is to instil in South African language learners the ability to question and resist the content and composition of the texts they encounter in language classrooms, something which had no place in earlier syllabuses. Whether teachers are able to grasp the principles behind CLA and to implement them appropriately in the classroom, and whether appropriate materials are going to be produced, is another matter.

22.5 Concluding Remarks

In the opening paragraph of this chapter I pointed out that learning an additional language is a difficult task, and that describing and explaining the process of language learning is probably just as difficult. Those who attempt to do so, that is, applied linguists, have to decide where their focus should be. As I have shown in this chapter, it is sometimes the case that commentators

and researchers have different starting points: some concentrate their efforts on the psychological aspects of language learning, some pay attention to the social context in which learning takes place, and others believe that both these perspectives should be considered in relation to the broader sociopolitical contexts of language learning, contexts in which learners are positioned and position themselves. At the same time, the work of language learning researchers has important implications for language-in-education planners, teachers, and material developers; their work has practical implications but the complexity of language learning, the difficulty of describing and explaining the learning process, and the responsibility associated with the implications of the work does not make what they do easy.

It is the complex nature of the language learning task and the different perspectives adopted in trying to explain learning which have been the central theme of this chapter. My basic model of language learning illustrated in Figure 22.1 mirrors almost exactly the four major variables which Breen (2001, p. 1) believes have to be accounted for in any explanation of how people learn a language: "(1) what the learners contribute to the process; (2) the language data made available to the learners in the communicative environment in which the learning occurs; (3) the interaction between learners and the environment in terms of the situated learning process; and (4) the actual outcomes from the learning."

At the start of the chapter I named five elements necessary for language learning: the learner, input, interlanguage, output, and social context. Throughout the chapter I presented the ideas of SLA theorists and the findings of SLA researchers who have also referred to these elements. They may have given them different names, they may have identified a different number of elements, they may have stressed their relative importance in varying ways, and they may have configured their interrelationships differently. What they have in common, however, is their connection, a connection which, in whatever form, is displayed in a social context. How we define the elements and explain the processes which connect them is the work of those who contemplate the social influences on language learning.

See also 12 Language and Gender, 20 Second Language Learning, 21 Individual Differences in Second Language Learning, 30 Language Planning, 32 Critical Applied Linguistics.

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