

The 'High-level Proficiency in Second Language Use' program: final report

Background

The research program 'High-level Proficiency in Second Language Use' was granted RJ funding for two periods: the years 2006-09 and 2010-12. The program has investigated advanced, near-native, and even nativelike levels of proficiency in second language (L2) use on a broad scale. It was initiated at a point in time when later stages of acquisition and the characteristics of more full-blown L2 use in different contexts had received little theoretical attention, a gap that our program has endeavored to fill.

Several categories of high-proficient L2 users have participated in our research: immigrants who have successfully acquired the language of their host community; their children for whom the host language is either an early additional L2 or a L1 developed simultaneously with the heritage language; proficient users of a L2 who do not live in the target community, i.e. Swedish university students studying in English; advanced university students of foreign languages; polyglots; and staff in international call centers.

The program's division into *research projects* across the funding periods is shown in the following chart (*project leaders* are marked in italics):

1) 2006-09		2) 2010-12	
1	'The role of age of acquisition and language learning aptitude for high-level L2 proficiency' <i>Niclas Abrahamsson</i>	A	'Non-perceivable non-nativeness in a second language: effects of age of onset, or of bilingualism?' <i>Niclas Abrahamsson</i>
2	'The Polyglot' <i>Kenneth Hyltenstam</i>		
3	'Linguistic outsourcing and nativelike performance in international call centres and business process outsourcing operations' <i>Kingsley Bolton</i>		
4	'Receptive proficiency in high-level second language users' <i>Philip Shaw</i>	B	'Listening comprehension of high-level second language users' <i>Philip Shaw</i>
5	'The last stages in second language acquisition: morpho-syntax and discourse' <i>Inge Bartning</i>	C	'Idiomaticity and discourse organization in high-proficient L2 use' <i>Lars Fant</i>
6	'Formulaic structures in relation to communicative proficiency in the advanced learner's L2 usage' <i>Britt Erman</i>		
7	'Aspects of the advanced L2 learner's lexicon' <i>Camilla Bardel</i>	D	'Aspects of the advanced L2 learner's lexicon (2)' <i>Camilla Bardel</i>
8	'Sociolinguistic awareness and language attitudes in multilingual contexts' <i>Kari Fraurud</i>	E	'Sociolinguistic awareness and language attitudes in multilingual contexts (2)' <i>Kari Fraurud</i>
9	'The globalized language user: language learning and use in national, transnational and postnational contexts' <i>Charlotte Haglund; Christopher Stroud</i>		

Our research has addressed issues concerned with language structure in both production and perception (grammar, lexicon, pragmatics, discourse, and their interfaces), receptive and interaction skills, and factors influencing level of proficiency (individual and contextual factors). One overriding question has been how to characterize high-level L2 users in relation to native speakers, although the dividing line between L1 and L2 use can be fuzzy at times.

The L2s involved are Swedish, English, French, Spanish and Italian.

Results

Throughout, our results confirm or point to levels of L2 proficiency that are often functionally on a par with native speaker proficiency, and many of our participants pass for native speakers when using their L2. This is something that should be acknowledged and remembered in the following where we specify the characteristic L2 features that remain at this very advanced level. (For references in the text, see the publication list.)

Language structure. In the studies addressing language structure, much focus was put on the L2 users' level of *idiomaticity*, as measured in terms of multi-word units (MWU). High-proficient L2 users scored clearly lower than native controls with regard to lexical MWUs – in particular *collocations* ('make a decision', 'ask a question') – whereas they scored within the native-speaker range in their use of discursive MWUs ('as a matter of fact'), or conversational routines ('thanks a lot') (Forsberg & Fant 2010, Erman et al 2014). In a study on Swedish long-time residents in a target language community, L2 English users stood out as more nativelike than L2 French and Spanish users, length of stay being equal. This probably reflects a difference both in linguistic and cultural distance and in age of onset. MWU command stood out as perhaps the most forceful quality of L2 nativelikeness (Erman et al 2014, Forsberg Lundell et al 2014).

Regarding grammar, certain features are found to not be fully acquired even at the most advanced stage of learning (Bartning et al 2009, Forsberg Lundell et al 2013). With respect to morpho-syntactic command, MWU use, and vocabulary richness, even very high-proficient L2 users do not reach native levels, whereas their fluency and command of information structure are more often near-native or even nativelike. Thus, nativelike performance can be found among many L2 users in specific domains, but not across the board (Bartning et al 2012b; Forsberg Lundell & Bartning ftc; Forsberg Lundell et al 2014).

In studies on *vocabulary*, a new methodology, refining research approaches based on word frequencies, allowed for a clear discrimination between the advanced learners and native speakers. However a high-proficient L2 learner may well be nativelike in certain aspects of the lexicon (Bardel et al 2012). In terms of cross-linguistic influences in lexis, meaning-based transfer was found to prevail among advanced learners, whereas intermediate learners produced more formal-based transfer (Lindqvist 2010).

For *pragmatic competence*, it was shown that with regard to their repertoire of discourse markers, even very advanced L2 users did not reach native levels (Fant & Hancock 2014). Furthermore, in formulating pragmatic acts such as requests, high-proficient L2 users employed a wider and less idiomatic range of strategies than did the native controls (Forsberg Lundell & Erman 2012).

Receptive and interaction skills. Regarding *receptive skills*, as much as about 30% of Swedish university students were found to score within the native-speaker range on standardized tests of English listening and reading comprehension. For another 40%, scores in the native-speaker range were only possible if the subjects were given more time, and a substantial minority (30%) could not attain this level regardless of allotted time. Interestingly, however, the subjects scored equally well on listening and on reading (McMillion & Shaw *et al.*, Mežek 2013).

Furthermore, even when the comprehension scores were equal, the Swedish L2 users turned out to have smaller vocabularies and longer reaction times than the native controls. This is in line with general findings that near-native L2 users often score below native levels on specific linguistic tests. Nevertheless, there was evidence regarding reading that the more skilled L2 readers of English had automatized word-recognition in a similar way to L1 readers (Shaw & McMillion 2011). A few studies have addressed *interaction skills*. On a task involving interaction in a negotiation situation, even very proficient Swedish users of L2 Spanish manifested clear difficulties in aligning with socio-pragmatic patterns of the target community, Chile (Fant *et al.* 2013).

In studies on international call centers, whose staff may be expected to pass as native speakers, in practice it turned out that the discursive, pragmatic and strategic skills involved in handling customer enquiries and offering solutions as efficiently and as quickly as possible were more significant for success than an entirely nativelike accent (Bolton 2013).

Individual influencing factors. Questions regarding the L2 learners' possibilities of attaining nativelikeness have been a major concern in the program. Among the predicting factors for ultimate attainment, measured through a battery of tests, the *age of onset of language acquisition (AO)* was found to be the strongest, at least in the case of participants who began to acquire their Swedish at 1–15 years of age. In the case of participants with an AO of 16–30, this factor ceased to be relevant; instead *language learning aptitude* was the main predictor for this group, and the second strongest predictor for the younger group. Only one third of the subjects with an AO of 1–15 had nativelike results both on the grammaticality judgment and the phonetic measures, and no subject with an AO beyond 13 performed in a nativelike manner. This lends support to the view that an entirely nativelike attainment is not possible for late learners (Abrahamsson 2012).

In a study involving an additional group of subjects, *viz.* international adoptees, it was shown that losing one's L1 is not an advantageous, let alone necessary, condition for attaining full nativelike proficiency in a language. The hypothesis that bilingualism *per se* could be a predicting factor for ultimate attainment was rejected; instead it was found that in most cases, AO alone can predict and explain the attainment of native *vs.* near-native proficiency, regardless of whether acquisition was monolingual or bilingual (Abrahamsson *et al.* in *prog.*; Bylund *et al.* 2012, 2013).

In another study, results from language aptitude tests were seen to correlate significantly with a collocations test; moreover, both correlated significantly with two dimensions of a personality test, *viz.* 'cultural empathy' and 'open-mindedness' (Forsberg Lundell & Sandgren 2013).

The program's investigation of ten polyglots – highly proficient in at least six languages – showed high aptitude scores, focus on linguistic form, preference for explicit learning and average to high systemizing ability for each of the individuals. Empathization skills were more variable within the group. Results also showed a high general cognitive ability for the group as a whole as well as

extremely strong motivation or drive, especially in terms of choice and executive motivation (Hyltenstam etc).

Contextual influencing factors. A number of studies have addressed the question of differences between skills acquired inside and outside the target language community ('second' vs. 'foreign' language learning) and the distinction between 'instructed' and 'naturalistic' learning. Although the latter type definitely favors competencies such as idiomaticity, the picture is less clear regarding grammar (Erman et al 2014).

A multi-methodological folk linguistic study showed that young people differ considerably in their perception and construction of the linguistic variation in their environment. They focused on different dimensions of language variation such as ethnicity, social class, and language correctness, and identified speakers differently in ways related to their own social background and mono/multilingualism. They also differed with regard to how they delimit and distinguish various migration related varieties such as suburban slang and learner language as well as in how they identify and delimit the standard norm. Furthermore, some listeners, in a self-perception test, showed a gap between their sociolinguistic self-perception and their own speech production (Bijvoet & Fraurud 2010, 2012, 2013). The results raise questions as to the exact applicability of the distinction between L1 and high-proficient L2 use profiles.

The ways in which political, economic and labor market-related circumstances influence patterns of L2 use were addressed in studies that explore processes of marginalization or construction of Otherness that serve to position young people and their aspirations 'in a space' beyond attaining full access to 'native' or 'full' multilingual proficiencies. Being categorized as a 'foreigner' or 'immigrant' is highly formative in the profiles of multilingualism attained, or even attainable, rather than being an effect of cognitive parameters alone (Eliaso Magnusson & Stroud 2012, Stroud etc).

Implications

The findings have various theoretical and practical implications. They have contributed significantly to:

- current theoretical understanding of age, aptitude, personality and cross-linguistic influence as factors in the development of high-level ultimate L2 proficiency
- insights into L2 comprehension at the most advanced level compared to L1 standards
- theories of L2 grammatical developmental stages, complementing earlier knowledge with a characterization of the most advanced stages, including the interface between grammar, discourse and MWUs
- frequency-based theories of L2 lexical development
- insights into the impact of contextual constraints on the choice of MWUs
- a comprehension of how individuals perceive and construct the monolingual/multilingual variation in their immediate sociolinguistic environment
- the wider societal influence on the construction of notions such as native and non-native speaker and how linguistic ethnography allows insights into language as a construction of Self
- initial systematic research in a new area: polyglots
- an understanding of the sociolinguistics of international call centers

These achievements have been possible due to partly innovative methodologies, specific to each of the sub-projects.

Apart from practical implications for language education at specific points, the program has contributed to a praxis-related general understanding of the demands of the L2 user's situated communication, including the perspective that nativelikeness in itself is not a realistic or desirable goal for second language teaching.

International contacts and dissemination From its inception, the program has maintained an intense dialogue with leading European and North American centers of research in L2 acquisition and use. Excellent scholars have been invited to comment on the ongoing research in the various projects, both at two conferences arranged in 2008 and 2013 for the program as a whole, and in connection with a number of workshops arranged by the specific projects.

The program has been made visible through the frequent and active participation of its researchers – often as plenary speakers – at the most important international and Scandinavian conferences in the field. Its researchers have also been frequently involved in dissemination activities outside academia with public lectures in various contexts, articles in the press and media presentations.

Publication strategies

The program's aim has been to achieve publications in as wide array of fora as possible. A considerable number of articles have been published in international prestigious journals, including a whole thematic issue of *SSLA* (34:2, 2012). Contributions have been made to a number of volumes at important publishers, and two anthologies directly addressing the program topic are currently being prepared.

Open access publishing has been made possible for all items in the publication list – either because this was allowed by the journal/publisher (with or without a one-year delay), or through the publishing of submitted next-to-final versions of articles at the DiVA portal.