

Discussion Questions for Chapter 2: Second Language Learning

Learning Contexts

- 1 In what ways are *language learning conditions* for children learning an L1 at home different from those experienced by adults learning an L2 at a language program for newly arrived immigrants? Do you think the adults' prior language knowledge (i.e. of their L1 and perhaps of other L2s) would facilitate or hinder their learning of the *target language*? What factors might play a role?
- 2 L1 learners are exposed to richer and more varied *input* than L2 learners who rely exclusively on classroom input. What are some aspects of L1 exposure that might be helpful for classroom learners? What are some elements that would not be feasible or appropriate in a classroom setting?
- 3 L1 researchers find little evidence of corrective feedback on grammatical errors in child L1 environments. With L2 learners such feedback is more likely to occur in classrooms than in social situations. Why do you think *corrective feedback* in social situations tends to be limited?

Learner Language

- 4 A language learner begins making errors with a feature of the language that was previously used correctly. What does this suggest about the way in which the feature was previously learned? Why might one be justified in concluding that the learner has actually made progress?
- 5 What was an important difference between the *error analysis* approach to understanding L2 learner language and the *contrastive analysis* approach?
- 6 What phenomenon did Larry Selinker describe when he coined the term *interlanguage*? What does it mean to say that interlanguages are *both* systematic *and* dynamic?
- 7 If a grammatical feature of your interlanguage has fossilized, what has happened? Some researchers argue that it is impossible to confirm that fossilization exists. Why might it be difficult to identify 'fossilized errors'?
- 8 How are the errors made by adult L2 learners similar to those made by child L1 learners? In what ways are the errors different? How might you explain the similarities and differences?

- 9 What is the difference between a *developmental* error and an error that is based on the influence of a previously learned language? In what sense are the two error types caused by the same general learning process? From your own language learning or teaching experience, try to come up with examples of errors that you feel confident are either developmental or due to cross-linguistic influence.

Developmental Sequences

- 10 Why do second language learners from different backgrounds appear to pass through similar developmental stages? Do you find it surprising that, for example, German speakers would pass through a stage of asking questions without subject-auxiliary inversion?
- 11 Look at the morphemes in Figure 2.1 on page 47. Think of an obligatory context for each one. Can you think of a way to measure whether learners of English acquire the morphemes in the order presented in Figure 2.1? What kinds of difficulties would you face in getting reliable information?
- 12 What are the variables that Goldschneider & DeKeyser (2001) identified as possible explanations for why some grammatical morphemes are acquired before others? Which of the variables do you think could explain why *-ing* (progressive) tends to be acquired earlier than regular past *-ed*?
- 13 An L2 learner, in speaking about his brother, tells you 'he don't eat meat'. What stage of negation would he be at: Stage 2 or Stage 3? What evidence would you need to have confidence in your assessment?
- 14 The description of developmental stages suggests that a learner's L1 interacts with developmental sequences in the L2 acquisition of negation, questions, relative clauses, and past tense. Give an example of each, using either the information in the text or from your knowledge of how learners from other L1 backgrounds develop these language features.
- 15 Look at the correct and incorrect uses of *his* and *her* at Stage 3 (see pages 52–53). To what degree do you think knowledge of French can account for the learners' use of possessive determiners at this stage? Why do you think learners use 'your' at Stage 1?
- 16 When compared to the other developmental sequences discussed in this chapter, what is different about the way in which the stages of acquisition for relative clauses in SLA were determined?
- 17 *The car that mine is similar to is over there.* According to the accessibility hierarchy for relative clauses in English, which clause type is this? If we find evidence that an L2 learner is capable of producing this sentence, what other relative clause types can this learner probably also produce?

- 18 Which of the following verbs would beginner level learners most likely mark with past tense? Which would they be least likely to use past with? Explain your response by discussing how the verbs are different from each other.

need a haircut
make lasagna
win a prize
like action movies
feel nervous
break a glass

- 19 In addition to influencing how learners pass through developmental sequences, what other ways has a learner's knowledge of L1 been observed to influence L2 acquisition? You should be able to identify at least four ways.
- 20 When learning a grammatical pattern in an L2 that is similar to one in your L1, what might be more difficult to notice – (1) that you can use this pattern in a new way that is different from its use in L1 or (2) that you can't use it in one of the ways you would use it in the L1? Why?

Vocabulary, Pragmatics, and Phonology

- 21 One might think that being able to read would enable second language learners to learn vocabulary much faster than pre-schoolers who are learning their first language. But this isn't necessarily the case – why not? (To answer this, think of both the limitations of learning new vocabulary from reading, and of the vocabulary learning advantages that young children experience).
- 22 How do cognates facilitate the learning of vocabulary? What challenges do they present?
- 23 Do you think that an awareness of the research findings on the factors that play a role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition will influence your language teaching practices?
- 24 Think of an example of *mitigation* in English or another language you are familiar with. Why do you think the use of mitigation is such a late-learned pragmatic ability?
- 25 What type of pronunciation instruction is more likely to help learners improve the intelligibility of their speech—that which focuses on the individual sounds of the language or that which focuses on the overall rhythm and melody of the language?
- 26 What factors would you take into consideration when deciding what the pronunciation goals should be for a given population of learners?