

The Concept of L2 User and the goals of Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

It is generally considered that knowing one language is not enough in this era. People need to learn a second language in addition to their mother tongue to meet the demand of today's life as many of them are becoming a part of multilingual society as well as to face the globalisation. This article aims to discuss the goals of second language learning as a means of communication within multilingual society. Subsequently, it also provides criticism against the majority of English language teachings that set native speaker's competence as the ultimate goal and highlights the concept of L2 user as a new paradigm and its implication to second language learning.

Keywords: second language learning, second language acquisition, L2 user

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in a person's life. People use it to express their intentions, feelings and emotion. They plan their lives and remember the past; they exchange ideas and form social identities through language. Cook (2008:1) calls language "the most unique thing about human beings". It is also one of the reasons that humans are superior to other creatures, as we use language to speak to each other.

Nowadays, it is commonly believed that knowing one language is not enough. People need to acquire another language besides their native one to meet the demands of this era. Hence, learning a second language (L2) has become a necessity. This article attempts to discuss the goals of L2 learning as a means to communicate and interact with others who speak a different native language within multilingual and global societies, including the use of English as a lingua franca. Subsequently, it will highlight the common goal of English language teaching that attempts to make students gain a similar competence to native speakers. Finally, it will be linked to the concept of L2 user, as well as its

implications for second language learning.

DISCUSSION

Second Language as a Means of Communication within multilingual societies

The rapid development of technology offers people numerous advantages, it provides opportunities to access information quickly and allows people to travel from one place to another easily. Moreover, it also enables us to build connections as well as interact with others from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Consequently, in this era, it is crucial to understand another language other than the mother tongue. Savile-Troike (2006:2) mentions the term "second language" which means the additional language people use subsequent to their first languages. Second language can also refer to the third, fourth or even tenth language acquired by individuals.

There are various goals people want to achieve by learning a second language. One of them is to gain the ability to interact and communicate with those who do not speak the same native

language. Currently, many people are becoming a part of multilingual communities and a number of them may live in a place where several languages are spoken. In addition, as a result of globalisation there are also a number of people who need to deal with others from various parts of the world for several reasons, such as business, academics or pleasure. In this kind of situation, they need a “common language” to interact with others who come from different linguistic backgrounds. A language which is understood by both sides is required to make the communication successful. Therefore, a second language is learnt and taught to meet this sort of need. Cook (2007) categorises such an aim into external goal of the second language learning. External goal relates to the use of language in real life outside the classroom. These type of goal emphasises language functions and interactions in external contexts. Ellis

(1996) assumes that the target of learning a second language is to use it in a communicative way. Admittedly, the current global situation means that a language (such as English) can be used not only in a single territory but across several regions/countries.

De Swaan (2001) classifies languages into four types that make up a hierarchy, specifically peripheral languages, central languages, supercentral languages and hypercentral language. Peripheral languages are at the lowest level of the hierarchy. They are the first languages used within a limited geographical territory, such as Sundanese in some regions of Indonesia or Welsh which is spoken in Wales. Peripheral languages are also known as local languages (Cook, 2008) and used by a small number of native speakers throughout the world.

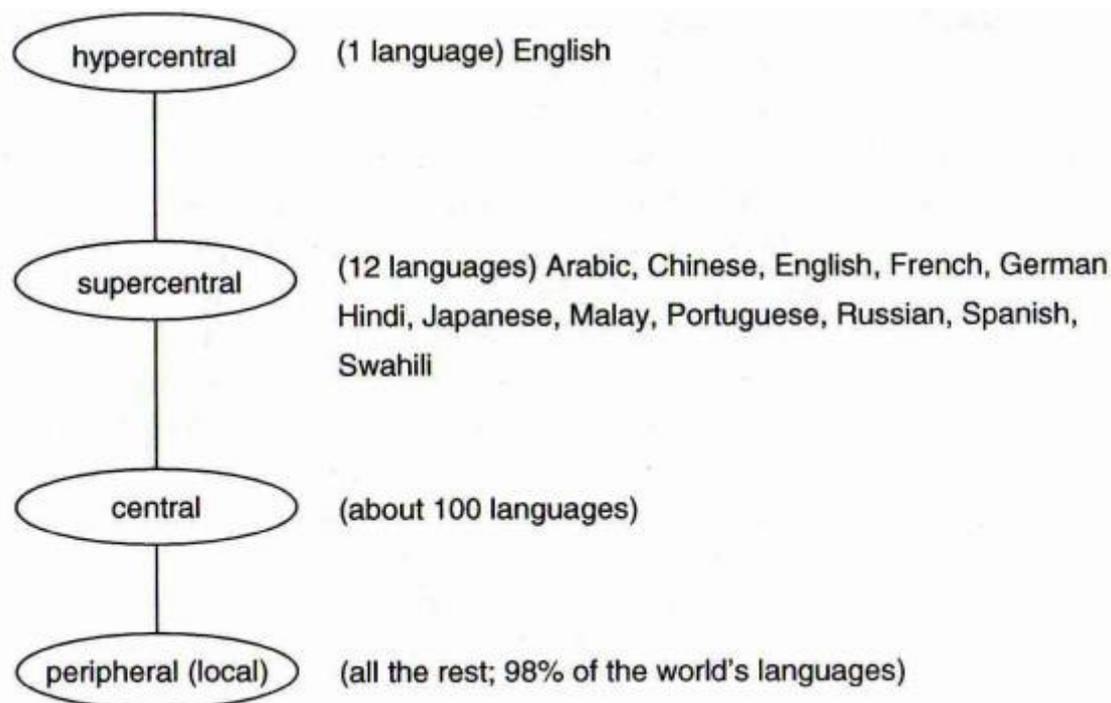


Figure 1 The hierarchy of the language

Second languages are usually acquired go up the hierarchy rather than down. Peripheral language speakers need to learn a central language, which is in the upper-level of the hierarchy, to live and stay in touch with the rest of the population in multilingual societies. As an example, speakers of Sundanese have to learn Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) if they want to be able to communicate with people who come from other parts of the country. In this case, Bahasa Indonesia is the central language as it functions as the main

language within the nation. Cook (2008) asserts that users of central language may occasionally deal with both native speakers and non-native users with different first languages in the same country or geographical region.

Furthermore, people have to acquire languages in the next level of the hierarchy, either supercentral languages or hypercentral languages, when they want to go beyond the nation. Supercentral languages are used by natives and non-natives across several countries for certain functions (Cook and

Singleton, 2014). For instance, several countries in Africa, such as Cameroon, Mali and Burkina Faso use French as the official language, or Arabic is learned by Muslims in some parts of the world for religious purposes. Finally, at the top of De Swaan's hierarchy, there is a hypercentral language which is used globally by many speakers for a variety of purposes. In this respect, English is the only one that exists at the moment.

Communication Strategies of second language learners

Communication takes place smoothly and the message can be transferred successfully when both sides of participants understand each other. In normal verbal communication among people who speak the same native language, communication usually happens without any constraint as each participant has good comprehension of the shared meaning in their first language. A sender can convey information through a communication channel and a receiver can obtain it with less effort to understand the message. Moreover, the sender can also express what he/she wants in both spoken or

written form easily without any further thought.

However, it is different when looking at interaction among people with different linguistic backgrounds who use second language as a means of communication. More attempts are needed to achieve the same understanding as the participants are dealing with a language that is not their own. In this case, they have to do more efforts to make successful communication happen. For L2 learners or users with low proficiency particularly, the process is even more challenging. Therefore, communication strategies are employed to overcome the lack of shared meaning among participants. In a conversation for instance, when things go wrong, both participants try to devise a communication strategy in order to get out of the difficulty. Communication strategy refers to conscious plans to solve anything which an individual considers as a problem in achieving a particular communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper: 1983). Similarly, Stern (1983) argues that communication strategy is a set of techniques used to

deal effectively with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language. With regard to this matter, Tarone (1983) mentions several types of strategy, namely paraphrase, transfer and avoidance. The following paragraphs are discussing those three strategies in more detail.

Paraphrase is used for linguistic simplification. Tarone, Cohen and Dumas (1983:10) define it as “the rewording of message in an alternate, acceptable, target language construction, in order to avoid a more difficult form or construction”. Paraphrase is divided into three main groups as follows:

- Approximation. The use of alternative lexical item that expresses the meaning of the target word as closely as possible. Someone who is groping for a word usually takes a strategy of using a word that has approximate meaning, for example “ship” for “sailboat”.
- Word coinage. Another form of paraphrase in which L2 learner creates a word that does not exist in the language to substitute the

word he does not know. For example, “vegetarianist” instead of “vegetarian”, “airball” for “balloon”.

- Circumlocution. Describing the characteristic of object or action, rather than using appropriate target word. For example, “the clothes you wear at school” for “uniform”.

The second type of communication strategy is transfer, where the speaker falls back on the first language. Selinker (cited in Tuten, 2003: 55) argues that transfer happens because the speaker makes “interlingual identification” between their native language, interlanguage and the target language. Some examples of transfer as mentioned by Cook (2008:107) including:

- Translation from the L1. A German-speaking student says “make the door open” instead of “open the door”
- Language Switch. “That’s a nice tirtil” (caterpillar)

Other than paraphrase and transfer, avoidance is chosen by learners when they do not want to deal with things that

are difficult to express in second language. It can be done by message abandonment, leaving a message unfinished due to language constraints, as well as avoiding the topic areas or concept which might cause language difficulties.

English as a Global Language

Looking back at De Swaan's hierarchy, English, as hypercentral language, is currently learnt and taught in most countries. It has been an international language spoken by an immense number of people all over the world. The British Council (2013) estimates there are more than one and a half billion people worldwide speaking English at a useful level. This number continues to increase and it is predicted that more than two billion people will be using English by 2020. The desire to be involved in the global community has become one of the goals for individuals to learn English as the second language, seeing as it is the bridge to international interaction and a means to undertake communication across multilingual groups of people. According to Seidlhofer (2005) English is also used as

a medium of intercultural communication which facilitates separate groups and cultures to share information.

However, Crystal (2003) argues that most English users nowadays are those whose native language is not English. In other words, most interactions in English take place among "non-native" speakers, rather than between native speakers and native speakers or native speakers to non-native speakers. With regards to this matter, the term "English as Lingua Franca" (ELF) emerges as a result of this phenomenon. The phrase "lingua franca" refers to a communication language used by speakers of other languages (Cook, 2008). In this context, Firth (1996) defines ELF as "a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication". ELF appears as a part of the more prevalent phenomenon of English as the international language. This situation has a consequence in which English non-native speakers are taking as much share as its native

speakers in shaping the language. It leads to a paradoxical situation as Seidlhofer (2005) mentions. On the one hand, English is a foreign language for the majority of its user and most verbal communication in English do not involve any of its native speakers. Conversely, there is still a propensity for native speakers to be assumed as the best reference regarding the correct and acceptable use of English.

“Native Speaker” as the Goal in English Language Teaching

Over the past few years, the native speaker has taken a prominent place as the best role model in language teaching, in terms of pronunciation and grammatical structure. Particularly, in most English language teaching (ELT), the ultimate goal is to make students approximate to native speakers (Cook:2007). Therefore, the students' success in learning is assessed according to how close they are to native speakers. Stern (1983) puts it candidly that “The native speaker's ‘competence’ or ‘proficiency’ or ‘knowledge of the language’ is a necessary point of reference for the second language

concept used in language teaching”. Similarly, Gonzales-Nueno (1997) also thinks that “sound like a native speaker in all aspect of the language” is the primary target of language learning although it is perhaps impassable for some students. As a result, a native speaker is therefore considered to be the best teacher as he can represent the target of language learning that students are endeavouring to emulate. This issue has led to some debates regarding whether or not this sort of goal is feasible for learners. The term "native speaker" does not clearly refer to who he/she actually is, as they may come from diverse backgrounds and social classes and even have different accents.

Defining the term “native speaker”, Bloomfield (1933) states that “the first language a human being learns to speak is his native language, he is a native speaker of this language”. Similarly, according to the Oxford Dictionary, a native speaker is “a person for whom a specified language is their first language or the one which they normally and naturally speak, especially a person who has spoken the language since earliest childhood”. Thus, it can be

concluded that individuals can be called native speakers of a particular language if they learn and acquire that language in childhood as the mother tongue. In other words, Davis (1996) terms it “bio-developmental definition”.

From those definitions mentioned, Cook (2007) argues that there is no point in putting the concept of native speaker as the goal of second language learning. It is impossible for an English language learner to become a native speaker, since by definition someone cannot be a native speaker of any languages other than the first language he/she learnt since childhood. Moreover, setting native speaker’s competence as the goal of L2 learning may lead to different degrees of failure (Cook: 2007). It therefore suggests that native speakers are assumed to be the only perfect models to use the language accurately and fluently. Firth and Wagner (1997) state that the norm of native speakers has been viewed as the baseline from which non-native speakers’ utterances can be compared and the criterion from which judgement of correctness, appropriation or aberration, can be made. Consequently,

it is inevitable that most non-native speakers have shortcomings and fail to produce accurate grammatical form and fluent pronunciation similar to native speakers. Moreover, accepting native speakers’ goals also creates confusion related to which native speakers and in what roles (Cook:2007), given that native speakers, especially English, come from all parts of the world, which comprise different classes of society, ages and genders.

Furthermore, it is also inappropriate to set native speakers goals when looking at the fact that most English users are non-native speakers, as mentioned previously. In fact, there are no native speakers involved in the majority of communication in English. As discussed previously, this brings new status to the language as a global “lingua franca”. Jenkins (1998) argues that communication among English as Lingua Franca (ELF) users still runs smoothly, even when they do not follow some native speaker norms. In addition, she also suggests that English language teaching (ELT) should change the traditional “native speaker-centred” paradigm and focus more on

communication between non-native speakers, as well as understanding amongst ELF users, rather than only being intelligible to native speakers.

In this respect, the government of Israel, for instance, has set a policy regarding English language teaching in the country. The target on page 8 of the Israeli National Curriculum (2001) clearly states that it “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 appropriate”. This goal seems well-balanced seeing as it equips students with the ability to use the second language in appropriate situations, in addition to not forcing learners to emulate native speakers that makes them lose their identity. It does not place importance merely on being “native speakers like”. Instead, the English curriculum covers broader aspects, such as social interaction, access to information and appreciation of literature and culture, and language (p.7). Similarly, an additional example can also be found in the development of the English language teaching

curriculum in Indonesia. From the 1960s until the 1980s, the goal of English teaching in the country was native speaker orientated and was a result of the adoption of the audio-lingual approach. However, in the recent curriculum (Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan, 2006) the government has made several changes. Besides developing students’ communication competence both oral and written, the goals of language teaching in Indonesia also expect students to have an awareness of the importance of English in global society, as well as improving students’ understanding of the relationship between language and culture. Therefore, taking native-speakerism as the ultimate goal does not really make sense seeing that it seems unattainable and is not pertinent to today’s reality.

The L2 User Concept and Its Implication for Second Language Learning

As a rejection of native-centred bias, the concept of second language user has emerged to be an alternative. L2 users refer to “people who know and use a second language at any level”

(Cook:2007). Based on this definition, L2 users can be anyone in any part of the world. For instance, an Indonesian student who is doing a degree in the UK, or a footballer who speaks Japanese but plays for a football team in the USA. The term L2 user is more preferable in the field of Second Language Acquisition compared with the traditional term “non-native speakers” (NNS). This concept is also a result of the multi-competence approach coined by Cook (1991). Multi-competence means the knowledge of two or more languages in the same mind; the first language (L1) and interlanguage (the knowledge of the second language in the learner’s mind). The point of the L2 user concept is to alter the prejudgement of language learners’ success or failure, according to the native speaker’s norm. This concurs with Labov’s view (1969) that considers L2 users as distinct sorts of groups from monolingual native speakers, who should not be judged as better or worse for using the standard of the NS group. Instead of being imperfect, Labov adds that L2 users are just different.

Cook (2007) assumes that the difference between L2 users and

monolingual native speakers can be identified by several aspects, such as the use of languages, command of L2 and L1, and their minds. In terms of the use of language, L2 users are able to undertake translation, something that monolingual native speakers cannot do. Translation becomes an everyday activity for L2 users, even for many children across the world, it is a part of their bilingual lives (Malakoff and Hakuta: 1991). In addition, code-switching is an additional use of second language. It is common for L2 users to do code-switching from one language to the other depending on several reasons, for instance social roles, the discussed topic or the grammatical overlap between two languages. One example might be a sentence recorded in a staff room where Malaysian teachers of English are talking to each other (Cook, 2008:174), “*Suami saya dulu slim and trim tapi sekarang plump like drum*” (My husband used to be slim and trim but now he is plump like a drum). In that sentence, the code-switching can be identified easily, as there is a phrase or word in English, as well as in the Malaysian language. Code-switching is

usually noticed when bilingual speakers or L2 users speak to each other.

Furthermore, L2 users also have different command of the first language from monolingual native speakers. With regards to lexis, the knowledge of vocabulary in the first language is affected by L2. For instance, when an Indonesian who understands English discovers the Indonesian word “slip”, he or she will recognise that it means “to slide unintentionally” in English, in addition to the Indonesian meaning “a small piece of paper”. Moreover, compared to monolingual native speakers (MLNS), L2 users have distinct first language competence. In fact, they also have greater metalinguistic awareness than MLNS (Cook:2007).

The introduction of the L2 user concept has had significant implications in relation to the second language learning paradigm, especially on setting the goal of L2 teaching. Firstly, it is viewed as a more attainable goal for L2 students to become successful L2 users rather than to become native speakers. In the traditional native-centred approach, L2 students are expected to gain native speakers’ proficiency and competence;

nevertheless, only a few can achieve the target. Therefore, it may create a condition where L2 students experience a feeling of inferiority and frustration that leads them to give up half way, as they realise that it will be impossible to accomplish the goal.

Nowadays, however, the L2 user concept might encourage students to be aware that being similar to a native speaker is not a mere goal in learning a second language, indeed it is just an option. Additionally, they may have more motivation with regards to learning and using L2, given that they are not judged based on native speakers’ norms anymore. Secondly, the replacement of the term “non-native speakers” with “L2 user” also has a positive connotation that might increase student’s self-confidence. For instance, the name “non” native speaker in the native-centred methodology has a negative meaning because students are defined in terms of what they are not, or at least not yet (Kramsch:1998). On the contrary, the concept of L2 users focuses more on the positive aspect of multilingual competence. Therefore, we need to consider how successful a L2 student is

from the perspective of the L2 user (Cook:2007), instead of assessing their achievement using native speaker's norms.

CONCLUSION

There are various goals that encourage people to learn a second language. The demands of living in a multilingual society might be one of the motives. Other than that, the desire to be part of the global community, as well as the necessity to meet today's requirement to interact with people from different countries for particular purposes has also encouraged individuals to learn English, which is the global lingua franca, as a second language. However, problems occur when in some second language classes, particularly in English teaching, the students' performance is assessed using native speakers' standards. Besides, it is a kind of unattainable thing, and moreover, created a situation where the students feel pessimistic and desperate. Therefore, the concept of L2 user appears as a form of rejection and is counter to the belief of traditional native-centred methodology. It offers a new

paradigm in which L2 users are recognised as unique figures and viewed within different groups of monolingual native speakers based on multi-competence perspective. In addition, the concept has also created a great shift in the goal of language pedagogy. It is now considered to be more possible and attainable for L2 students to become a successful L2 user rather than a native speaker. In addition, replacing the old term "non-native-speaker" with "L2 users" has an impact on enhancing students' motivation and creating a positive sense.

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