

Preface

At a glance foreign or second language (L2) learning can ostensibly be compared to the processes of learning any other school subject because it requires a systematic study of the content matter (e.g., vocabulary or grammar). However, a routine approach on the part of the student is not sufficient in attaining language proficiency. The reason is that this process additionally poses numerous challenges that are not only cognitive, but also personal and sociocultural. Understandably, the student's individual profile interplays with L2 learning and use. Among the most pronounced individual differences motivation, language aptitude, self-determination, personality and anxiety can be placed (MacIntyre, Clément, & Noels, 2007). Hence, the knowledge of some elements of the new language, for instance, grammatical structures may not prevent the student from a number of emotional reactions displayed while performing in the target language. The complex trajectories of an L2 acquisition are also accompanied by the development of the social aspects of language learning, for example the relation between attitudes towards the second language speaking group and the classroom. Furthermore, what makes language learning a unique, and at the same time challenging experience is the acquisition of the foreign language culture, which may "unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1). Cultural differences have been found to constitute serious obstacles language learners have to overcome, leading to profound difficulties in the foreign language learning process. This risky interplay of powerful linguistic and nonlinguistic influences may result in an internal clash of different opinions and ideas, destabilizing the learner's worldview and beliefs in his or her abilities, as well as threatening his or her ego, which has already been developed in reference to the mother tongue. For this reason foreign language learning can be described as "fundamentally different (...) compared to learning another skill or gaining other knowledge, namely, that language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other" (Cohen & North, 1989, p. 65). Thus it should not be conceived of as just the acquiring a neutral medium of communication, but rather as a constant organization

and reorganization of one's sense of self through identity construction (Jang, 2006). For these reasons every foreign language learner's biography is full of evidence of their decisions; some of which turned out to be good, while other quite irresponsible. Although the ultimate goal appears relatively similar for all of them, the paths to language acquisition vary dramatically. Each day or even every class they are at the crossroads, facing numerous new or familiar challenges and taking decisions that lead them slowly towards the final reward—language proficiency or even communicative ability.

The book aims to enrich the discussion on the complexities of L2 learning processes that pose a challenge to a learner who is constantly at the crossroads of taking decisions in order to acquire a language. These decisions result in complex, individual trajectories of their L2 acquisition that are accompanied by the development of cognitive, psychological and sociocultural aspects of language learning. The papers collected in this volume offer an amalgam of snapshots taken from various learning contexts, researched from the three perspectives: cognitive, that of learner individual characteristics and sociocultural. Undoubtedly, the interplay between language and cognition has long been established, emphasizing the power of language that informs the structure and function of the human mind (Bloom & Keil, 2001). Still, the results of the research into mental processes and language so far are not exhaustive, leaving a number of questions unanswered. Concurrently, more research is needed in order to understand the place of individual learner characteristics that are reported to affect the routes of L2 acquisition and use (cf. Ellis, 2008). The last perspective followed in this volume, the one entailing social interactions and cultural background, aims to cast more light on the role of the context in L2 learning processes. We hope to gain greater insight into the individual's cognitive, affective and sociocultural experiences in second language acquisition by increasing our understanding of such capacities engaged in human development as mental processes, individual learner characteristics and context. As such, it will be more possible to elucidate the role of each in the complexities that every language learner has to face and cope with.

The present volume consists of three parts. Part I contains a selection of papers addressing mental processes and L1 influences in the process of L2 learning. The second part focuses on variables regarding learner characteristics, and how they interplay with L2 learners' attitudes and learning of a number of linguistic aspects of the target language. The papers included in the last part provide an array of sociocultural perspectives, and aim to examine L2 learning processes embedded in international contexts. The papers collected in this volume offer an amalgam of exceptional ideas contributed by international researchers, whose passion and strive for understanding language learning processes is clearly reflected in their writing. This volume is a means for sharing their research outcomes with a larger audience.

Part I, on mental processes and L1 interference, comprises four research ideas that provide insights into the processes and functioning of the mind in L2 learning. Francesca La Russa, whose chapter opens this volume, is concerned with effectiveness of three types of corrective feedback on the short-term uptake and the long-term retention in the group of Italian as a foreign language students in Paris.

The author of the next paper, Tomasz Krawczyk, analyses the impact of the technique of particularization that is grounded, among others, in the Theory of Mind (ToM) on understanding of figurative language. He is interested in brain areas and mental abilities that allow learners to interpret a message in terms of mental states of another person. The figurative component of L2 is also in the centre of Tetiana Kurbatova's research, whose aim is to reveal the connection between language means and knowledge representation structures. The author follows the principles of L2 mental lexicon in order to dissect the structure of the conceptual sphere of GEOPOLITICS. This part finishes with Namsrai Munkhtsetseg's contribution, which focuses on the challenges that the first language poses on L2 learning. The researcher investigates, among others, structural differences between Mongolian and English subject relative clauses, and analyses types of errors made by Mongolian EFL learners in producing English relative clauses.

The challenges set in Part II revolve around L2 learner factors, such as personality traits and motivation. In the first chapter of the second part, Mirosław Pawlak provides an overview of the scant body of research that has investigated the mediating role of individual difference variables on the effects of form-focused instruction, charting future directions for such studies and addressing the methodological issues involved. Subsequently, Katarzyna Ożańska-Ponikwia investigates the possible links between extraversion/introversion and foreign language learners' preferences and attitudes towards L2 learning and use. The results of her study confirm a complex and nuanced nature of the relationship between extraverts/introverts and their approaches to L2 learning. The link between pronunciation anxiety (PA) and motivation, as conceptualized by Dörnyei (2005) in his L2 Motivational Self-System Model, is the focus of the study by Małgorzata Baran-Łucarz, who confirms a significant correlation only between PA and the ideal L2 self, but not between PA and the ought to L2 self. Motivation has also received a priority in the study by Tim Lee, whose attention is directed towards Hong Kong EFL students' feedback on the effectiveness of L2 motivational strategies.

The final part of this volume shifts the reader's attention to L2 learning socio-cultural contexts. More precisely, the researchers investigate the efficacy of study programmes, approaches to assessment and types of linguistic discourse in international L2 learning contexts. The changing reality that poses growing demands on L2 learners' communication skills has been an inspiration to offer an interdisciplinary programme whose successes and failures are analysed in the chapter by Katarzynak Molek-Kozakowska. The effectiveness of the programme is measured in reference to knowledge within the field of social studies, L2 skills and social competences. Next, Dina Tsagari and Ines Sperling review current research into the area of assessment of second language learners (SLL) with specific learning differences (SpLD). The authors aim, among others, to analyse accommodations for SLLs with SpLD applied both at a classroom-based level and in several high-stakes standardized language tests. They emphasize the need for collaboration among the key stakeholders—educational psychologists, authorities and scholars—with regard to the area of assessment for SLLs with SpLD. In the closing chapter Larysa Mosiyevych focuses on political discourse. She is interested in pragmatic effects

caused by specific translation solutions in the political discourse, which is here limited to the mass media samples describing Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

Although learner characteristics, mental processes and contexts are frequent topics of numerous publications, their complex interconnections still call for more data in order to calibrate a more precise picture of L2 learning processes that cannot be unanimously defined and described. It is our hope that the present volume contributes to the explorations of the key concepts associated with language learning and its challenges. This volume may therefore stimulate scholars, students and teachers, and become a useful source for any inquisitive mind reflecting upon the challenges of the language acquisition process that require the learner to constantly assess their assets, responsibilities and obstacles.

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