

Children's Third and Second Language Acquisition: The Effects an L3 can have on an L2



Jannah Larrazabal Garcia, 3919862
English Literature and Culture - British English
Utrecht University
Supervisor: Roselinde Supheert
Second supervisor: Alisson Kirk
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Abstract

Early English learning has been a topic in the Netherlands for the past few years. This means that Early Bird programmes which emphasise on the need for early English learning are implemented in more and more schools. However, according to the Voorlees Express (2016) there is still a large group of children with a language deficit in Dutch caused by little exposure because of differences in cultural backgrounds. This literary review researched effects of an L3 on further acquisition of an L2 for children with a language deficit in their L2. The main influences an L3 can have on an L2 are caused by transfer, code-mixing and possibly the setting of parameters. However, little research has been done in consideration of the target group which is why there is a large opening for further research.

Keywords: children's language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, language deficit.

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, the number of people who are low-literate¹ has been growing for a number of years (Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014). Research shows that one out of nine people between the age of 16 and 65 can be seen as low-literate (De Greef, Segers & Nijhuis, 2014; Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014). This is a warning number because literacy is an important skill for participation in society. Therefore, it is important to try and stem this growth. The majority within the group of low-literate people is between 40 and 65 years old and are mainly allochthonous² women who have received little education (Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014; De Greef, Segers & Nijhuis, 2014). There is also a smaller percentage of low-literate people aged between 16 and 30 whose low-literacy can be explained by the limited duration of their education (Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014; De Greef, Segers & Nijhuis, 2014). Most people in this group did not exceed the proficiency level of MBO-2,³ which is a minimal requirement for most jobs on the labour market, or dropped out of school even before that (Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014). This suggests that short education is an important originator for low-literacy. To minimise the group that is struggling with language in school and would therefore drop out before MBO-2, it is important to help children from a young age so they can reach better results in their overall education. Research from the public benefit organisation Taal doet Meer⁴ showed that many adolescents who do not reach any level higher than the MBO-2 level have a language deficit⁵ in Dutch (De Wit, 2014; Geertsma, Heuts, Van Velzen & Bos, 2011). The research was conducted on adolescents between the ages of 15 and 24 that live in the province of Utrecht. One of the originators that was suggested as a cause of the language deficits that was also supported by other sources, was a

¹ According to Fouarge, Houtkoop & Van der Velden (2011) people are considered as low-literate when their proficiency level is around A1 for writing and reading, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language. More specific, the PIAAC- research (European research for education in Europe) sees people as low-literate when they have an elementary vocabulary, can deduce simple information from short texts or fill in their personal data but have difficulties reading large texts and differentiate relevant from irrelevant information. They are on the verge of illiteracy.

² "In Flanders, as in the Netherlands, the term "allochthone" is widely used in academic, political and institutional circles (as in the press) to refer to immigrant-origin, mainly non-EU origin, inhabitants" (Jacobs & Rea, 2009, p.43). Immigrant is not used because the term allochthone can also be referring to the second generation (i.e. children of immigrants) while immigrant cannot.

³ Most jobs require at least an MBO diploma. MBO level 3 can be seen as the BTEC level 3 in the UK or in some countries this is classified as intermediate vocational education.

⁴ Taal doet Meer is a professionally managed organisation in the Netherlands that is supported by volunteers. It has the 'Algemeen Nut Beoogde Instelling' status which means they initiate projects that support society. Their aim is to help people who experience difficulties with speaking, writing or communicating in Dutch.

⁵ Low-literacy and a language deficit are two concepts that will be used separately in this research. A language deficit will be defined as a level in usage of language that is not sufficient when compared to the average level for that age and educational level in the Netherlands. This concerns children and adolescents who are still learning the language (Geertsma et al., 2011). Low-literacy, as stated in note 1, refers to adults.

language deficit at a young age caused by lack of exposure to Dutch as a second language (De Wit, 2009; Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014; Geertsma et al., 2011). This suggests that children's language deficit at primary school can affect their overall academic record.

The Voorlees Express is a project initiated and supported by Soda Productions that aims to reduce children's language deficits at primary school. Soda Productions is a private organisation that devises practical solutions to societal questions, such as, in this case, children with a language deficit in Dutch between the ages of two and eight. The Voorlees Express aims to minimise children's language deficits by introducing them to a bed-time reading ritual to enhance their reading skills and improve their vocabulary and enthusiasm for reading (Erkenningscommissie Interventies, 2012; De Vries, Moeken & Kuiken, 2015). During the researcher's experience as a volunteer at the Voorlees Express, she encountered many children with different cultural backgrounds who spoke a language different from Dutch at home. In addition, many of them attended a primary school that followed an Early Bird⁶ programme which introduced these children to more intensive English learning than average primary schools. These children with a language deficit in Dutch are now introduced to English as a third language. Early Bird asserts that children with a language deficit can benefit from early English learning because they follow a methodology in their programmes that allows the schools to adapt the programme to the needs of the children. (Early Bird, 2016). They are positive that introducing early English learning is necessary for these children considering the societal use and need of English (Early Bird, 2016). This has led to the question what kind of influence learning English as a third language (L3) has on the acquisition of Dutch as the children's second language (L2). In this regard, the following research question will be answered: What are the effects of learning English as an L3 on children's L2 Dutch proficiency, particularly children with a language deficit?

The focal point of this research is a group of children between the ages of four and six⁷ with a language deficit in Dutch as their second language who start to learn English as their third language in primary schools. This age group has been chosen because the children will, for the first time, receive elaborate exposure to Dutch because they go to primary school and therefore can begin to minimise their language deficit. This is why it is interesting to see whether learning an L3 can stimulate or delay the diminishing of the language deficit. It is important to note that the children's language deficit has been caused by a lack of exposure to

⁶ Early Bird is an commercial organisation that has developed programmes for nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, and after school care to implement English in their curriculum.

⁷ In the Netherlands children are allowed to go to primary school from the age of four.

Dutch because they speak a different language at home due to cultural differences. The first language will not be specified because, especially in the area around Rotterdam but also in Utrecht, there are many different allochthonous backgrounds present (De Wit, 2009; Buisman & Houtkoop, 2014; De Vries, Moeken, Kuiken, 2015; Geertsma et al., 2011). Children who have a language deficit in Dutch with different causes such as dyslexia, hearing problems, or a psychological dysfunction, will not be included in this research.

To answer the research question, a literature study was conducted. This form of qualitative research was chosen to be able to explore the research field and give recommendations for further research. Quantitative research was also eliminated because of time constraints and the problem of finding participants at such short notice, especially because the research focuses on children. The search for literature was conducted through Google Scholar, JSTOR and the catalogue of the Utrecht University. The search was based on the following keywords: L3 acquisition, multilingualism, L3 learners, and cross-linguistic influence. Variations on these keywords were also used. The articles were selected based on their relevance and the quality of the research. By the means of the snowballing effect, more articles were found through the references of important articles. The main articles were from important researchers in the field who were cited many times. The articles were analysed and the most important and relevant findings were connected to the research question of the current study. This has led to the following chapter breakdown: firstly, the effects that learning an L2 can have on the L1 will be explored. This will be connected to cross-linguistic influence. The second chapter will concern third language acquisition and the differences between bilinguals and multilinguals. This will be connected to the traits of the languages themselves in the next chapter to see whether the similarity of two languages can have consequences for the acquisition process. Finally, the conclusion will connect all the findings to children with a language deficit to answer the research question and recommend areas for further research.

A second language affecting the first language

Much research has been done on bilingualism and multilingualism and the effects an L1 can have on an L2 (Cook, 2003; Hummel, 2013). However, little research has been done on the effects an L3 can have on the L2 and L1. Before assumptions can be made about the effects that learning an L3 can have on the proficiency of an L2, it is important to explore the fields of research of bilingualism, multilingualism, third language acquisition (TLA) and cross-linguistic influence.

Beforehand, it is important to notice the difference between transfer, usually seen as adopting elements from one language into another, and cross-linguistic influence, entailing transfer and every other effect one language may have on another language (Kellerman and Sharwood Smith, 1986; Plavenko, 2003). This present paper will follow the assumption that transfer is an element of cross-linguistic influence.

The children who are the focal point can be seen as multilingual learners because they are still acquiring their mother tongue, they acquire Dutch as their L2, and, from the moment they start in primary school, English as their L3 (Aronin & Hufeisen 2009; Hummel, 2013; Erkennisscommissie Interventies, 2012; De Vries, Moeken & Kuiken, 2015). Although little research has been done on how an L3 affects an L2 or L1, there is a large volume of published studies describing the effects an L2 can have on the L1 within the field of bilingualism. Cook (2003) has written a literary review that lists a large amount of the research that emphasises the effects an L2 can have on an L1 and how “the first language of people who know other languages differs from that of their monolingual peers in diverse ways” (Cook, 2003, p. 1). This change in the L1 can be seen as backward linguistic influence caused by learning an L2. This backward influence is noticeable in, for example, code-switching but also in use of syntax and phonology during a conversation in the L1 (Cook, 2003; Hummel, 2013). The integration continuum is a way of explaining the dynamics between two languages in the bilingual’s mind (Cook, 2003; Cook, 2002). According to this theory, the two languages of a bilingual can exist in all variations from complete separation

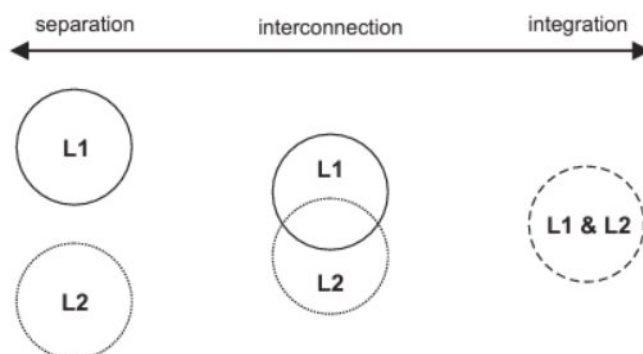


Figure 1. The integration continuum of possible relationships in bilinguals (Cook, 2002).

to complete integration in their mind. The model has connected the different views of researchers which go from seeing languages as two completely separate entities to an integrated unity. The separateness or unitedness of the languages can differ per language aspect such as syntax, lexicon, or grammar (Cook, 2002; Cook, 2003). This model further suggests that the degree of separation or integration can be influenced by a number of aspects,

for example, the similarity of two languages, the stage of development, or the social use of the languages (Cook, 2002; Cook 2003). This means that a bilingual person can use solely the vocabulary of one language at one moment and for example code-mix between the two languages at another moment. The model also implies that, hypothetically, the syntax could be learned separately for each language, while the vocabulary would then be learned by comparing the two languages with each other to form an integrated model (Cook, 2003). This shows that not only the L1 can affect the learning process of the L2, but also that an L2 can have influence on the L1 in different ways. One of which is attrition. It has been found that an L2 can cause attrition of the L1 or an L1 can prevent the acquisition of certain aspects of the L2 (Jessner, 2003). It has been acknowledged that attrition plays a crucial role in the interplay between two languages in contact (Jessner, 2003; Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986; Hummel, 2013). In consideration of the current research, it is important to note that the L1 and L2 can have beneficial or weakening effects on each other and that they vary in contact with each other in the bilingual's mind.

Third language acquisition

It is only logical to think that learning a third language (L3) can be affected by and have effects on the L1 and L2 in consideration of the integration continuum. Third language acquisition is an aspect of multilingualism. The reason multilingualism is named separately from bilingualism is because many researchers believe that there are differences between bilinguals and multilinguals that have considerable effects on the learning process and language use (Klein, 1995; Jessner, 1999; Kemp, 2009; Nation and Mc Laughlin, 1986). The following paragraphs will mention some of these differences and the implications they may have for further language acquisition.

Multilingualism has received considerably more attention over the last decade. This expanding field of research has also adapted and refined the definition of multilingualism. According to Kemp (2009), who reviewed a large body of work, the term multilingualism can be applied to people who know more than two languages to fluctuating proficiency and use. The acquisition of three languages can therefore be seen as multilingual acquisition. Multilingualism is different from bilingualism because of the differences in prior knowledge, prior learning experience, and cross-linguistic influence (De Angelis, 2007). These differences may be seen as redundant by some, however, they are some of the same distinctions between monolinguals and bilinguals that have a significant effect on the learning process and the making of mental models of the languages (De Angelis, 2007; Jessner, 2006;

Woolfolk, 2014). Prior knowledge and prior learning experience will not be mentioned in great detail because the children who are the focal group of the research are not yet at an age where they consciously can use prior knowledge and prior learning experience in their language acquisition. Cross-linguistic influence on the other hand can occur unconsciously. Attrition, transfer, and code-mixing are the most common cross-linguistic interferences that are found in multilinguals (Jessner, 2003; Cook, 2002). The profoundness of the languages has a large effect on the extent to which the cross-linguistic interferences will take place. When there is one dominant language, this language will probably be used when code-mixing in one of the other languages (Jessner, 2003; Hummel, 2013). Code-mixing is the usage of two or more languages in one conversation or writing sample in which there is usually the use of one dominant language and the insertion of words from another language. It is common to happen to language learners or groups of people who have different language backgrounds (Wolff, 2000). Code-mixing is not necessarily an example of wrong language acquisition but rather an example of the interconnectedness between languages in the multilingual's mind (Wolff, 2000; Hummel 2013). Attrition however, as stated in the previous chapter, can cause problems in the language acquisition of one of the languages. Additionally, transfer can have positive and negative influence on language acquisition (Hummel, 2013). For example, transfer of a grammar rule from the L2 to the L3 while this grammar rule is not correct in the L3. This kind of transfer could slow down the acquisition process of the L3. In consideration of backward transfer mentioned in the bilingual research, transfer of a grammar rule from the L3 to the L2 that does not apply to the L2 could slow down the acquisition of the L2.

Furthermore, metalinguistic awareness is an important topic that has added more psychological depth to research on multilingualism (Jessner, 1999; Jessner, 2006; Thomas, 1992). Cross-linguistic interaction between the language systems in the multilingual's mind during the acquisition of a third language, enables learners to become more conscious on the differences and similarities between the languages (Jessner, 2006; Thomas, 1992). This can help learners become more metalinguistically aware on the acquisition of languages and the languages themselves (Jessner, 2006; Jessner, 2008; Thomas, 1992). This can help them to compare the languages and see them as separate entities, but also to form mental models of the ways in which languages behave (Jessner, 2006; Thomas, 1992). Moreover, it has been suggested that multilinguals develop more advanced cognitive skills that can help them in additional language acquisition (Kemp, 2009; Nation & Mc Laughlin, 1986). It has to be said that most studies on metalinguistic awareness were performed on children from the age of 10 and upwards or on adults. The studies named above mainly focused on children between the

ages of 10 and 18 and therefore the findings cannot be applied directly to the focal group in the current research. However, it has been proven that learning multiple languages at a young age, can help to develop metalinguistic awareness at a later age (Hummel, 2013; De Angelis & Dewaele, 2009). This suggests that there are cognitive differences between monolinguals, bilinguals, and multilinguals, even at a young age, that have an influence in the educational development of children. This is why the findings on metalinguistic awareness above are still relevant to the current research.

Similarities between languages

Although some researchers believe that multilinguals are better at further language acquisition because of their more evolved metalinguistic awareness as stated above, there are researchers that believe the similarities of the languages have a greater influence.

Multilingualism can be viewed through the perspective of Chomsky's universal grammar theory (Hummel, 2013). According to this view, multilinguals are only better at acquiring a new language if the parameter settings are similar to antecedent languages. Klein (1995) reviewed the research of L1 and L2 acquisition in consideration of the universal grammar theory and compared it to third language acquisition. For the comparison, Klein (1995) used 17 monolinguals who acquired English as their L2 and 15 multilinguals who acquired English as their third or fourth language. Furthermore, the research was only aimed at the acquisition of syntactic structures. Because the study is very limited, the findings will not be seen as hard evidence but as guidelines for further research in regard of this current study.

According to Klein (1995), the multilinguals outperformed the monolinguals in the acquisition of specific verbs and prepositional complements. In the study, the languages of both the monolinguals as one of the languages of the multilinguals were similar to English as the new language. The research suggests that if an L1 and L2 have parameter settings that are similar to the settings of an L3, this can be beneficial for the acquisition of not only the L3 but also for the further acquisition of the L2 and L1. A conclusion that followed was that "if the parameter settings of antecedent languages also differ from those of the target language, there should be no substantial differences" in acquisition between monolinguals and multilinguals (Klein, 1995, p.424).

Important for the current research is therefore that similarities in parameters between the L1, L2, and L3, could have influences on the acquisition of all three languages. This suggests that the L3 can indeed have influence on the L2 or even the L1 depending on the profoundness of the languages in the multilingual's mind.

Conclusion

The focal group of this research consists of children between the ages of four and six with a language deficit in Dutch caused by less exposure to Dutch in comparison to their peers. According to De Vries, Moeken & Kuiken (2015), a programme like the Voorlees Express where children are stimulated to read more and are read to more often by their parents, shows a diminishing effect on the children's language deficit. This suggests that exposing children to more language contact can improve their proficiency. However, the children in the focal group are not only exposed to more Dutch but also to English as their third language. The Early Bird programme emphasises the need for early English learning for all children, also children with a language deficit in Dutch (Early Bird, 2016). However, they do not state which particular effects learning English as an L3 might have on the language development in the L1 and L2 of the children. The literary review showed some important effects that come to play in the multilingual's mind. These findings will now be connected to the focal group in order to answer the research question; what are the effects of learning English as an L3 on children's L2 Dutch proficiency, particularly children with a language deficit?

Recommendations for further research will be mentioned where the information was not sufficient to answer the research question.

In consideration of the integration continuum, languages can be separate and integrated in varying degree depending on the profoundness, similarity, and social use of those languages. The means by which the languages are affected, depends on the profoundness of the languages in the child's mind. In the light of this research, attrition is an important effect of multilingualism which can have influence on the acquisition process. When one language receives more attention than the other languages or is more dominant than the other languages, it may cause attrition or prevent learning (Jessner, 2003). In consideration of the focal group of children who have a language deficit in Dutch, it would not be the goal of an Early Bird programme to increase the deficit while demanding their attention for the acquisition of English as an L3. Therefore it would be interesting to do quantitative research where a group of children with a language deficit that go to an Early Bird school with an intensive English programme are compared to children with a language deficit who go to a regular primary school. This group can be identified in schools that both participate in the Early Bird programme and in the Voorlees Express.

In consideration of the children with a language deficit in their L2 it can be interesting to highlight the findings from Klein's (1995) research on the universal grammar. Whenever

the parameter settings in the L3 are the same as those in the L2 that has yet to be set in the process of language learning, the acquisition of the L3 parameter settings may help set the correct use of the L2 parameter settings (Klein, 1995). However, when the parameters set differently, this could slow down the acquisition of the L2 parameter settings. The children might therefore be slowed down in diminishing their language deficit in their L2. However, further research has to be done to provide evidence for this effect. In addition, the L1 of the children should be taken into account because this might be the dominant language in the child's mind. In the current research, the mother languages of the children in the focal group were not taken into account because there is a large variety of allochthonous backgrounds within this group of children. Additionally, the effects of the L3 on the L2 were the main focus of this research. It could be interesting however, to take the L1 into account in further research.

Furthermore, metalinguistic awareness was mentioned as a special early development for multilinguals. It suggests there are cognitive differences between monolinguals, bilinguals and multilinguals which, even at a young age, have an influence on the educational development. However, further research has to be done on the direct effects on cognitive development in this particular group of young multilinguals.

To conclude, it can be said that a large body of research was analysed. However, there is very little research that concerns children between the ages of four and six who are acquiring three languages and have a language deficit in their L2. With the growing interest in the Netherlands for early English education, it is important to keep the multilingual effects above in mind when confronting children with a language deficit in their L2, with English as their L3.

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Faculty of Humanities

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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.

Name: Jannah A.J. Larrazabal Garcia

Student number: 3919862

Date and signature: 27 June 2016

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jannah A.J. Larrazabal Garcia', enclosed in a blue oval.

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