

English Applied Linguistics PhD Programme
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**The role of second language English in the process of learning third
language German**

Summary of PhD Dissertation

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in the field of third language acquisition (henceforth TLA) research. While traditionally it used to be the field of second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) that researched foreign language teaching and learning, it is a new branch of language acquisition research, the research of third language acquisition, that deals with issues regarding multiple language learning situations. Ever since 1987, when the first book on TLA (Ringbom 1987) was published and, thus, the field had established itself as a new research area on its own, it has undergone both significant development and specialisation. This interest is rooted in the fact that the majority of the world's population is multilingual (e.g. Crystal 1997) rather than monolingual, and present-day research is focussed on the processes prevailing in multilingual communities and/or among multilingual individuals.

Although TLA is a very recent field, the versatility of multilingual situations has already created a certain diversification of research areas within the field, depending on the various types of multilingual acquisition processes. TLA experts have been engaged in the study of children who grow up using three languages from birth, as well as that of bilingual children learning an additional language. Some others have studied bi- and multilingual speech communities, while my dissertation aims to contribute to a fourth subfield, namely, to that of the study of individuals learning two foreign languages, an L2 and an L3.

In the past few years, researchers studying third language acquisition processes in the multilingual mind from an educational point of view have concluded that an additional language learnt beyond the mother tongue and the first foreign language makes a qualitative difference, not only a quantitative one. The complexity of TLA is best explained by Cenoz and Genesee's claim that TLA is much more complex than SLA because of the greater number of languages involved, and because of 'the factors and processes associated with second language acquisition and bilingualism as well as unique and potentially more complex factors and effects associated with the interactions that can take place among the multiple languages being learned, and the processes of learning them' (1998:16). This idea is further developed and refined by researchers developing models for L3 processes. Based on mono- and bilingual speech production models, researchers in the past years have attempted to describe the nature of TLA with the help of models. Three models, Groseva's Foreign Language Acquisition Model (1998), Meißner's Multilingual Processing Model (2004) and Hufeisen's Factor Model (1998, 2005) have emerged as influential ones to describe the uniqueness of third and additional language learning as a process and the richness of the

background knowledge that third language learners possess and second language learners do not.

There are several factors that influence third language acquisition processes. Odlin (1989), Cenoz (2001), De Angelis (2007), Jarvis and Pavlenko (2007) and Hall and Ecke (2003) elaborated lists of factors affecting the acquisition of third and additional languages in varying degrees of detail. Some of the factors seem to emerge as crucial ones, such as the cross-linguistic influence between, and the language proficiency in each of the languages involved, as well as the order of acquisition, the age of the language learners and the degree of their language awareness.

From the point of view of third language learners, cross-linguistic influence seems to be one of the most decisive phenomena due to several reasons. First of all, the existence of similarities and differences between languages in a linguistic sense can occur at basically all linguistic levels; some of the levels, such as the level of lexis, orthography and phonology have been studied more extensively from the perspective of TLA, while others, such as that of syntax, semantics and morphology are explored to lesser degrees. Secondly, beyond the similarities and differences between languages in a linguistic sense, the importance of the language learners' own perceptions need to be emphasised; it is the perceived similarities and differences between languages that play a role when recognising novel elements of a target language. Depending on what the language learner perceives to be similar or different, three different levels of similarity relations can be differentiated (Ringbom 2006): a similarity relation, a difference relation and a zero relation between the source language and the target language.

Another important influential factor seems to be the level of proficiency in the source language(s) and the target language. Although research in this area is still to be conducted, the results that are already available seem to indicate that depending on the level that the learner is at, cross-linguistic influence plays different roles. Even less researched, though nevertheless very important areas are the order of the acquisition of the different languages, the age of the language learners at the time of learning the different languages as well as the degree of their language awareness.

This very recent research field has produced several studies describing the language learning situation of learners studying more than one foreign language in the international context. Hungarian learners, however, have scarcely been subject to such studies, whereas the principles and considerations underlying TLA research are relevant for learners whose mother tongue is Hungarian, since there is a significant number of citizens who are involved in

multilingual processes since they are engaged in learning foreign languages. This is especially true for language learners in the Hungarian education system with Hungarian as their mother-tongue most of whom have to learn two foreign languages either simultaneously or in succession. While the National Core Curriculum regulates the number of languages and the target levels that learners have to reach by the end of their high school education, it does not prescribe any harmonisation of the learning processes of the two compulsory foreign languages. Therefore, foreign languages are typically taught as if the language in question were the only foreign language ever learnt by the learner.

The research presented in the dissertation aims at understanding some aspects of the Hungarian learners' third language learning processes with a long-term aim to contribute to creating a curriculum that acknowledges the differences between learning (and teaching) a foreign language as a second or as a third (or fourth, etc.) language, and thus possibly facilitates and makes more effective the complex task of language learning.

2. Research questions

In general, the broad research question I have proposed is how Hungarian language learners' knowledge of L2 English can serve as a point of reference when learning L3 German. More specifically, I have aimed at finding out whether some aspects of the learning processes can be enhanced when learners are instructed in such a way that their attention is called to the differences and similarities between the two languages being learnt.

In order to answer the general research question, the following specific sub-questions are addressed in this dissertation:

- a) Can L2 English lexical items serve as a point of reference when learning L3 German vocabulary? In other words, will language learners, after systematic instruction, score better on vocabulary tests administered on the material taught than the control group?
- b) Can learners of L3 German make predictions about unknown L3 German language items based on their comparative knowledge of English and German? In other words, will systematic instruction result in raised foreign language awareness? Will language learners score better at vocabulary tests administered on novel items?
- c) Do learners rely on their L2 English when learning L3 German? Will they start relying on it or increasingly use it as a result of systematic instruction?
- d) What is the learners' own perception of the effects of their L1 and L2 on their third language learning? Do language learners rely more on their L1 Hungarian,

at which they are more proficient, or their L2 English, which is typologically closer to their L3 German? Will their perception change as the result of the instruction?

e) Does the length of time spent on learning languages (both L2s and L3s) as well as proficiency level have an impact on the foreign language awareness and the language learning strategies of learners? That is, is there a difference regarding sub-questions a), b), c) and d) between more versus less experienced learners?

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the processes of L1 Hungarian subjects learning L2 English and L3 German and to answer the above research questions, a longitudinal study was designed. The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2009/2010 in a Hungarian high school. The participants were 53 secondary school learners in two treatment groups and two control groups with as homogeneous linguistic biographies as possible. The treatment groups – representing two different age groups, 9th graders (Group T1) and 11th graders (Group T2) – were provided with special instruction on the cross-linguistic similarities and differences of English and German approximately once in a fortnight in one of their German classes. The two control groups (Groups C1 and C2) did not take part in the special instruction, but followed their regular curriculum in their German classes. Both the treatment and the control groups were tested on a regular basis, four times during the data collection period. The data sources included two major types, those based on the subjects' own perceptions of their learning processes in the form of questionnaires and interviews and those based on objective tests in the form of placement tests, think-aloud translation tasks and vocabulary knowledge scale tests. The combination of data collected by the different methods supplemented each other to reveal how the special instruction changes the participants' perceptions and achievement.

4. Results

Altogether five kinds of data were collected in order to address the above research questions leading to the following results:

(1) The results of the placement tests administered at the beginning and at the end of the data collection period overall indicate that that the younger and less advanced learners in Groups T1 and C1 achieved greater development than their older and more advanced counterparts as regards the mean results of the groups. However, paired sample T-tests used to calculate whether the differences of the placement test results at the beginning and at the

end of the treatment period reveal a statistically significant difference indicate that the differences of the German placement test results in February and in May are significant at the 0.05 level in the case of Group T1, and both control groups, but not in the case of Group T2, while the differences of the English placement test results are only significant at the 0.05 level in both control groups, but not in the case of the treatment groups. This also means that the treatment sessions themselves made no difference in terms of a general development of the subjects' language proficiency in the two languages during that period of time.

(2) As regards the learners' own perceptions of the role of their L1 Hungarian and L2 English in the learning of L3 German, I have found the following:

A comparison of the values recorded at the time of the initial February data collection reveals that at the beginning of the data collection period, the younger and less advanced learners of Group T1 attributed a larger facilitating role to their L2 English than their older and more advanced counterparts in Group T2. Similarly, the members of Group T1 scored higher when evaluating the facilitating role of their L1 Hungarian mother tongue than subjects in Group T2.

At the time of the second data collection, in April, the results showed a general tendency of being higher than both the February and May results; therefore, they are considered to be of minor importance in the long run. More important is the data collected at the end of the treatment period, in May, when the values of Group T1 increased to a significant extent, while those of Group T2 remained unchanged in the case of the facilitating effect of L2 English on understanding and learning new words in German and on German pronunciation. In the case of grammar and spelling, the values of Group T2 rose to a greater extent, however, the increase did not reach a statistically significant level. This suggests that during the treatment period the subjects in Group T2 did not perceive development as regards their judgment on how their knowledge of English helps them when encountering and learning new German words.

The results also indicate that as a slightly unwelcome effect, the treatment sessions did not only contribute to the subjects' discovery of the facilitating effect of L2 English when learning L3 German, but, as a negative outcome, the perceived negative cross-linguistic influence also increased. The extent of increase in the facilitating factors exceeds the hindering ones in the case of Group T1, but the hindering factors are slightly higher in the results of Group T2. As regards the hindering role of L1 Hungarian, a comparison of the values in Treatment groups T1 and T2 shows that both in February and in May, Group T1 attributed slightly lower values to the hindering role of Hungarian.

(3) The interview data further confirms that learners of English and German have the impression that the foreign language they know better has a facilitating effect on the one that they are less proficient at. According to the interviews, the subjects all believe that whereas there is a definite facilitating effect of their L2 English on the learning process of their L3 German, the only effect of L3 German on L2 English that any of the subjects reported was a negative one, namely, the confusion in the spelling of some cognates.

As the result of the treatment sessions, the subjects have become more conscious of less salient lexical similarities, and, especially in the more proficient treatment groups, of the grammatical structures. This consciousness had many positive effects and some negative ones on L3 German, and did not seem to exert much reverse influence on L2 English. It also seems that there is an age, or rather, proficiency related difference between Group T1 and Group T2. Although some Group T2 subjects reported that they found new aspects as regards the comparison of the lexical items, it seems that by the time the treatment sessions started, their two-and-a-half-year-long experience with learning two languages simultaneously resulted in a higher level of consciousness of the lexical similarities than in the case of the Group T1 subjects. As regards the similarities of the grammatical structures, Group T2 had an overwhelming interest, as opposed to Group T1 who seemed to be equally interested in similarities in vocabulary and grammar.

(4) On the basis of the results obtained from the analysis of the think-aloud data, it was possible to draw conclusions on whether systematic instruction contributes to more attempts and more successful ones as regards the translation of known and novel vocabulary items as well as whether L2 English was involved in the translating process and whether the involvement of English resulted in a successful translation.

In the case of the less proficient groups, Group T1 and Group C1 had almost an equal proportion of attempted translations, however, the correctness of the answers was higher in Group T1. Of the successful attempts, English was used three times more frequently than in Group C1, and the proportion of attempts involving English per total number of items show a similar tendency, the result of Group T1 is three times as high as that of Group C1. This means that both Group T1 and Group C1 were similarly active as regards trying to translate the individual items, but Group T1 was more successful. And, most importantly for this dissertation, their success is attributable to their attempts involving English, since T1 group members were much more inclined to use their L2.

As far as the more proficient groups are concerned, Group T2 members had somewhat more attempted translations, of which the proportion of the successful attempts was higher by

approximately 10%. As regards the use of L2 English knowledge, Group T2 showed more initiative than Group C2 both in relation to the proportion of attempts involving English per successful attempts and the proportion of attempts involving English per total number of items. Thus, similarly to Group T1, the higher proficiency group shows a clear effect for instruction using the comparative method instruction.

A comparison of the results of the two treatment groups yields the following conclusions: owing to their higher level of proficiency in German, Group T2 had a higher number of attempted translations than Group T1, with the proportion of the successful attempts showing a similar pattern. As regards the proportion of the attempts related to the successful attempts, Group T1 used English in almost one third of the attempts, while Group T2 used English in approximately one quarter of the attempts. English contributed to the successful translations in an almost equal proportion, however, in the case of Group T1 this means a higher number of items overall.

These results indicate that the comparative instruction contributed to the higher results achieved by the treatment group members at both levels of proficiency. It seems also that the role of the instruction is even more significant in the case of the less proficient groups, and, as the more detailed analysis suggests, in the case of the weaker learners.

(5) The data obtained from the vocabulary knowledge scale tests administered four times during the data collection period in all four groups reveals that it is Group T1 who endeavours to make guesses at novel items in the largest proportion of the cases with slightly more success than the subjects in Group C1. Both younger groups were almost as successful at guessing as regards the proportion of the attempts compared to the successful guesses as the subjects in Group T2, who were the least ready to attempt guesses, nevertheless, whenever they did, they achieved the highest level of accuracy. It seems that the less experienced the L3 learners are, the more they experiment with trying to find the meaning of a novel item, and the more it seems that the comparative instruction has an influence. Even if we cannot maintain with a hundred per cent certainty that the results are attributable to the effect of English, since the examined items are all words that have a cognate counterpart in English, it can be assumed that L2 English played a role in the subjects' guessing.

5. Conclusion

In my dissertation I have summarised the most relevant findings of international TLA research and then presented data collected with the participation of L1 Hungarian subjects learning L2 English and L3 German. From among a multitude of factors that influence L3

learning, the most common one addressed by many researchers is the issue of cross-linguistic influence (Cenoz 2001, Hall and Ecke 2003, Jarvis and Pavlenko 2007 and De Angelis 2007). As suggested by Meißner (2004), instruction is needed so that language learners can fully exploit the potentials offered by the typological similarities between the languages. This is emphatically true for speakers of Hungarian, since this language is typologically distant from the languages that constitute typical foreign language choices at schools. Therefore, the results of the present study are highly meaningful within the Hungarian context, since L3 learning processes of Hungarian learners had hardly been explored by earlier research.

The most important contribution that this dissertation has to offer to international TLA research is that Hungarian learners do not, in fact, differ from L3 learners with other linguistic backgrounds. The interview data, and the results of the questionnaires, as well as the results of the objective tests assessing lexical knowledge, and particularly those collected from the control group members clearly show, that they, too, by the time they start learning an L3, possess knowledge, knowledge-structures, communication and language learning habits, strategic skills, and learning techniques on the basis of their experiences with L2 learning as suggested by Agafonova (1997) and Hufeisen (1998 and 2005). The main question that this dissertation has aimed at answering is whether these elements already existing in the learners' minds can be developed through comparative instruction to achieve higher results.

The results achieved by the treatment groups provide evidence that they have become more conscious of the potential use of their L2 while learning L3 German than those in the control groups. Even if some learners had problems with mixing the languages earlier in their studies, as a result of the comparative instruction, they managed to keep the languages apart and activate L2 English only at times when certain tasks required it. This indicates that the learners' metalinguistic awareness has increased during the instruction and they have become able to use English as a resource for L3 learning, thus utilising cross-linguistic influence as a problem-solving procedure, or 'strategy' as suggested by Faerch and Kasper (1986), Odlin (1989) and Arabski (2006).

The aim of the research presented in the dissertation has been to show how Hungarian learners' learning processes may be enhanced with the help of comparative instruction. Five subquestions have been asked and answered based on data collected from two treatment groups and two control groups throughout the second semester of the 2009/2010 academic year. These questions have been investigated from the perspective of the learners' own perceptions as well as in a more objective way, with translation tasks and vocabulary tests.

The data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews has provided answers related to the subjects' own perceptions of their L3 learning processes. Both treatment groups reported perceived an increase in the facilitating effect of English as a result of the treatment sessions, however, at the same time they have also perceived an increase in the hindering effect, although the latter happened to lesser extents. The interview data provides an even more optimistic picture: treatment group members in both groups reported that they became more aware of the similarities and differences of the two languages. Furthermore, the analysis of the questionnaire data reveals that the subjects relied on their L2 English rather than L1 Hungarian in their own perception. This finding supports Groseva's (1998) claim that it is the L2, which is consciously learnt and analysed, rather than the L1, that serves as the basis for further comparisons when learning an additional language.

The questionnaire data also revealed differences between the younger, less experienced treatment group members and the older, more experienced ones. The less experienced L3 learners in Group T1 perceived higher facilitating roles of both their mother tongue and L2 English than the more experienced subjects in Group T2. As the result of the comparative sessions, both groups' linguistic awareness was raised in general. It seems, however, that while the less experienced L3 learners perceived an increase in all the facilitating factors of English, the more experienced learners reported stagnating values as regards factors related to understanding and learning new vocabulary.

Similar findings were concluded on the basis of the objective tests. In the think-aloud tasks younger treatment group members relied on English the most frequently. They both had the highest number of guesses and the highest number of successful guesses compared to both the more experienced L3 members in Group T2 and to the control groups. Similarly, in the vocabulary knowledge scale tests the less experienced L3 learners in Group T1 outperformed the other groups achieving the highest proportion of guesses and the highest proportion of successful guesses. These findings are in concordance with Ringbom's (2006) findings and with those of my earlier results (Tápainé Balla 2007) as well as with those of studies on subjects with no previous L3 knowledge (Gibson and Hufeisen 2003, Singleton and Little 2005, Tápainé Balla 2008a and 2008b, Lindquist 2009), but contradict Ringbom's (1986) earlier argument, namely, that learners who are more proficient in the source language are more likely to perceive the similarities between the source and the target language.

The above findings support the claim that, as a result of instruction, the learners who were less experienced, that is, who were at initial stages of their L3 learning, were more successful at recognising cross-linguistic similarities between English and German and were

able to utilise this knowledge when discovering the meaning of novel vocabulary items, both in the learners' own perceptions and as evidenced in the think-aloud data and in the VKS results.

As we have seen, L3 learners at different stages of their learning processes differ from each other in terms of consciousness, since, as pointed out earlier, more advanced and thus more experienced learners had been exposed to the simultaneous instruction of the two foreign languages for a longer period of time, they had been able to deduce a number of cross-linguistic similarities, especially on the lexical level, on their own. Another finding of the present paper is that weaker L3 learners were more likely to resort to their L2 for cross-linguistic help, which can be explained with the same analogy: the less they know in the target language, the more help they need from outside sources. This reinforces Sikogukira's (1993) findings, namely, that beginner language learners are more pre-occupied with formal similarities, while more advanced students do not need to rely on the source language to the same extents because of their more advanced levels in the target language.

My dissertation has been written in the hope that, having provided evidence that a comparative approach to language teaching makes the learning process faster and more effective, the research results will have wider implications. I expect this research to contribute to the field of TLA by providing an insight into Hungarian language learners' situation and also to developing special learning materials. I believe that the outcome of this research might initiate a discussion among both foreign language teachers and teacher trainers for the benefit of Hungarian language learners.

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