



# Revisiting the L2 Factor in Third Language Acquisition: A Brief Literature Review

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## Abstract

This article reviews key hypotheses and research on the influence of the second language (L2) in third language (L3) acquisition. It is highlighted that not only the cognitive status but also the degree of maturity of the L2 can affect the transferability of relevant properties at the L3 initial stage and acquisition outcomes at later stages. The urgency of a new approach to encode dynamic interactions between the two developing interlanguage grammars and to identify consistent developmental patterns in their interplay in L3 acquisition is clear.

**Keywords:** L3 acquisition; The L2 status factor; L2 proficiency; Transfer

## Introduction

Language learning is an extremely complex process. Multilingualism has become a norm nowadays and it is very common that an individual can acquire additional languages after their first language (L1). The acquisition of a non-native language involves variables of a variety of domains, ranging from linguistic and cognitive to individual and societal. For a very long time, it was taken for granted that all instances of non-native language acquisition were essentially equivalent, and sequential learners learning a third (L3) or more (Ln) language were categorised under second language (L2) learners. However, with the spread of multilingualism over the past few decades, a critical mass of data collected from various types of L3 learners have shown that true L2 learners behave differently from L3 learners in terms of the acquisition and processing of a new morphosyntactic system [1,2].

## L3 hypotheses on the L2 factor

The existence of the other non-native language (L2 Interlanguage) constitutes the main difference between L2 and L3 acquisition. As additional languages, the L2 and L3 normally differ from the L1 in the age of onset (from birth or not), learning situation (naturalistic learning vs. classroom instruction), and degree of metalinguistic knowledge. The similar cognitive status shared by the L2 and L3 has been encoded in the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis [3-4] proposing that the L2 can take on a stronger role than the L1 at the L3 initial stage. It is built on Paradis' [6] neurolinguistic framework that differentiates between implicit linguistic competence sustained by procedural memory and explicit metalinguistic by declarative memory. Non-native languages (the L2 and the L3) are normally learned explicitly through formal

instructions. Hence, they are sustained by declarative memory and have a high degree of explicit metalinguistic knowledge [7].

Even though this model has been examined and supported by some formal L3 studies on L3 initial stage transfer [8-10], the nature of this hypothesis is not compatible with L3 research on the knowledge of L1-language [11] as it focuses only on explicit metalinguistic knowledge [4]. In the latest version of the hypothesis, it is emphasised that the L2 status factor has its fundamental basis in formally learned L2s and makes predictions for the learning situation in which the L2 and the L3 have been learnt in a similar manner [12]. This indicates that the hypothesis focuses on modelling L3 acquisition within a formal learning context. Additionally, an important contribution of the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis to the field is that it highlights the special status of the L2 and brings in a new perspective to explore the complexity of trilingual grammars. None of the rest L3 models encodes the L2 as a variable and their predictions are based on a default assumption that the learner's L2 grammar is in a ready state to transfer. In the real world, however, a massive number of trilingual start their L3 before their L2 has reached a mature state. The L2 factor is dynamic and complex: not only the cognitive nature but also the proficiency/degree of maturity and recency (the degree of recent contact with the language) of the L2 have a great impact on L3 acquisition.

### Future directions to research the L2 factor

The factor of L2 proficiency can be approached from two levels: 1) the overall language proficiency; and 2) specific proficiency in a target linguistic property [10,13]. The development of L2 syntax in an L3 learner's mind directly influences the transferability of a certain grammar at the L3 initial stage. However, only a few L3 studies has taken L2 proficiency as a key factor to test and mixed results are reported about the relationship between L2 proficiency and the extent of interlanguage transfer [13-16]. A systematic investigation on the factor of L2 proficiency is timely.

Moreover, it has been found in some recent studies that a low proficiency level in the L2 (as the transfer source language) suffices for it to exert a powerful influence on the acquisition process of the L3 [10] and the development of an L3 can also influence the L2 [17]. Two crucial questions to further investigate in the field are how the two interlanguage grammars interact with each other when they are undergoing development simultaneously and whether there are common rules underlying L2 and L3 development. The need to propose a model that captures the dynamic interactions between L2 and L3 interlanguage grammars, along with the development of methodological and theoretical innovations addressing the L2 factor, is evident.

When designing an L3 study on the L2 factor, it is crucial to include an L2 group and multiple L3 groups sharing the same linguistic background but differing in L2 proficiency levels. By comparing an L2 group with an L3 group with high L2 proficiency (i.e., a mature L2 grammar), we can examine the specific effect of the L2 on the L3. Comparing L3 groups with varying levels of L2 proficiency allows us to investigate how L2 proficiency influences the transferability of L2 grammars. A notable example is Guo's

[18] empirical study on the L3 acquisition of Chinese ditransitive sentences by English speakers and English-Irish bilinguals. This study involves four groups of participants: L1 English-L2 Chinese learners; L1 English-L2 Irish (intermediate)-L3 Chinese learners, L1 English-L2 Irish (advanced)-L3 Chinese learners and Chinese native speakers. It is found that transfer is from the structurally more similar language when both the L1 and the L2 are mature and an intermediate level L2 is sufficient to trigger transfer. Future research should conduct more comprehensive studies to examine the specific influences of L2 related factors and to capture the interactions between the L2 and other critical factors (e.g., typology) in L3 acquisition.

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### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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