THE ROLE OF CONTEXT AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract: *This paper presents a study of the acquisition of Croatian in a taught situation by adult English and Chinese L1 speakers. Twelve subjects have been divided into two groups: control and test group. Each group consisted of three subjects; two linguists and one non-linguist whose L1 was English and three subjects; two linguists and one non-linguist whose L1 was Croatian. This was the subjects' first encounter with Croatian. The roles of context as well as the learners' linguistic backgrounds in their acquisition of Croatian were investigated. Results show that these factors combine to influence L2 acquisition. Some aspects of L2 acquisition which one should bear in mind and focus on in designing L2 teaching methodology have been pointed out*

Key Words: *L2 (Second Language) Acquisition, Context, Learners' Linguistic Backgrounds, Adult Learners, First Minutes of Croatian*

INTRODUCTION

In order to effectively facilitate acquisition, a second language teacher needs to choose the appropriate teaching techniques in order to make the input learners receive as comprehensible as possible. The comprehensible input chosen for teaching a foreign language should be determined by the effect psycholinguistic and processing factors have on L2 acquisition. Consequently, this would determine the choice of the teaching methods used.

Many theories express the need for the *comprehensible input* in L2 teaching, but few define what this phrase is supposed to denote. Krashen claims that 'exposure does not necessarily entail comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1985, p. 7). Corder distinguishes between '*input*' and '*intake*' (Corder, 1967,

p. 165 as reported in Carroll, 1999, p. 342). He defines '*input*' as the language in the learner's environment; while '*intake*' is what the learner makes use of.

Attention, regulated by the learner's *intention* (Carroll, 1999, p. 343) and the *recognition of the intention of others* (Tomasello, 1999, 2003) have been recognized as crucial factors in deciding which elements of the new language become the '*intake*' (Long, 1996, p. 426, as reported in Carroll, 1999).

Carroll (1999) picks up on the *input/intake* distinction and states that *intake* is determined by the learners' L1 grammars (and possibly their interlanguage grammars). She claims that learners pick up the elements in the input which are *familiar* to them and which can be parsed by their linguistic systems in order to be made sense of and understood. Once they encounter an element which they cannot parse, the 'attempted learning is triggered' (Carroll, 1999, p. 362). It follows from this that attention is focused on the *detection of familiar and unfamiliar elements in the L2*.

Another issue of L2 acquisition which directly affects the teaching methods a teacher might choose is the *nature of the input L2 learners get exposed to*. Ellis points out the phenomenon he calls *'foreigner talk'* which is the adjusted, modified speech in which native speakers talk to L2 learners (Ellis, 2000, p. 247). The issue in question is whether this distorted input influences L2 acquisition in a negative way, or is it necessary to get the learners started and avoid frustration and *language anxiety* in the new L2 learning situation (Djigunović, 2004). Krashen calls this 'mental block' which prevents learners form making use of the comprehensible input for successful acquisition, the '*affective filter*'. If the filter is up, the input will not reach the *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD) (Krashen, 1985, p. 3).

Possibly, a way to achieve comprehensible input is to provide (subtly and scarcely) translation into L1 in L2 teaching. *The role of the learners' L1 in L2 comprehension* has been shown to have a positive (Holobrow, Lambert and Sayegh, 1984 as reported in Ellis, 2000, p. 275) as well as negative effect (Hawkins, 1988, as reported in Ellis, 2000). Therefore, it may be suggested that one should be very careful with providing translation into L1 while teaching a second language.

Few studies of a completely unknown L2 have been carried out so far. In their studies Zwitserlood et al. (1994), Rast (1999, 2003), and Gullberg and Dimroth (2005) have looked at the acquisition of L2 by adult learners in a taught situation or through exposure to the L2 solely. The authors have controlled the forms of input and learners' linguistic backgrounds and looked at the kind of learning that can take place when the two mentioned factors meet.

This study presents the acquisition of an unknown and typologically unrelated L2 by adult Chinese and English L1 learners. The efficiency of L2 learning is believed to be influenced by the *form of L2 input* with some *context*

provided or with no such (facilitating) factor. Its role was to help input become intake. The *context* meant to have the teacher *present and do activities with real objects* in order to present the material taught. The effects of *location* and possible *translation into L1* on L2 acquisition have been presented. The previous studies did not look into these factors. Another factor which was looked into in this study was *the learners' linguistic backgrounds*, namely the *L1*, *knowledge of other languages*, whether the learners' *occupations* and *fields of interest* in any way deal with linguistics which could give them some intuition about the structure of languages in general and facilitate the acquisition of a new L2.

For the purpose of this research an experiment has been designed with the mentioned factors controlled in an attempt to teach Chinese and English native speakers some Croatian. On the basis of the results of this experiment, some relevant aspects of L2 acquisition will be outlined which should be taken into consideration when designing L2 teaching methods.

THE STUDY - *First minutes of Croatian*

This study looks at the influence of *context* and *learners' linguistic backgrounds* on language learning. The following questions have been attempted at:

1) How does the presence / absence of context (presenting real objects while teaching, doing activities described in L2) influence L2 acquisition?
2) How do learners' linguistic backgrounds affect their L2 acquisition?
3) How can the findings of this study be exploited in order to enhance L2 teaching methodology?

METHOD

The necessary condition for the participants was that they were **non-Slavic native language speakers and had never studied any Slavic language**. They were all **adult** learners and this was **their first encounter with Croatian**.

Both test and control groups consisted of 6 subjects; 3 native speakers of **Chinese** (having learnt English as their L2) and 3 native speakers of **English**. In each group two participants were **linguists** and one was a **non-linguist**.

For the purpose of the research, an experiment was designed in which adult subjects holding no knowledge of any Slavic language were presented

with some Croatian. Having been presented with the new language, the subjects were asked to perform at the six tests described below.

The factors controlled in the experiment were: the presence (test group) or absence (control group) of context and the subjects' linguistic background (mother tongue, whether they were linguists or not).

Step 1 - Sociolinguistic questionnaire

Prior to doing the experiment, the participants were asked to fill in a **sociolinguistic questionnaire** inquiring about their **linguistic background**, that is; nationality, L1, other languages spoken or studied and the amount of time they had studied these languages. They were also asked to estimate their knowledge of these languages. They were asked to write their profession and field of study as well as their fields of interests (hobbies) and parents' education.

Step 2 - The Task

Both groups (control and test group) were presented with **16 nouns, names for groceries** they were then tested on. The subjects saw these words (in their **nominative** form) **written** on a PowerPoint slideshow together with their translation into English and heard them **pronounced** in full sentences. The subjects of both groups were also presented with the **names for loci** the groceries were placed on/in. Moreover, they heard **the verb 'staviti' (put)** 15 times; 5 times in its **past form**, 5 times in its **present form** and 5 times in its **future form**. At the end of the presentation, the teacher used the verb 'ostaviti', (to leave) only once. Both groups were presented with 4 nouns which were **only spoken**. The control group was presented with the same number of the occurrences of a particular word as the test group. The participants were tested **immediately** after the Task. In every test different words were used to prevent the effect of priming and repetition in the tests.

Test group participants (*learning in context*) were presented with a situation in which the teacher was taking groceries out of a bag and putting them on the table, chair, floor and in the drawer, while commenting on the actions she was performing in Croatian. This type of ***context*** was the only factor that was added to the presentation which the **control group** was exposed to.

Step 3 - Test 1 - Word Recognition Task

Both groups were presented with **slides of words in Croatian**, some of which they had been presented with in the task and some Croatian words they had never seen before. The words were **also pronounced**. They were asked to **decide whether they had encountered the given word in the task or not**. If

they decided they had seen the word, they were asked to **give the translation** of this word into English. The participants were allowed to see the words in the Slide Show only **once** and asked to make their decision **immediately** in order to avoid the priming effect which they could have had, had they been presented with a list of words on a sheet of paper.

The words given in Test 1 (the words presented in the Task part of the experiment are given in **bold letters**): ormar, **na pod, jabuka, banana,** na vrata, **kruh,** grožđe, kuhača, **tanjur,** škare.

Step 4 - Test 2 - Spoken Word Recognition

The subjects from both groups were presented with words which were **only spoken**. They had to decide whether they had heard the words in the experiment and if so, **what they meant**.

The words given in Test 2 (the words presented in the Task part of the experiment are given in **bold letters**): **u ladicu, jagoda**, na polici, **čaj,** boca, ulje, **na stolicu,** brašno, **čokolada**, košara.

Step 5 - Test 3 - Picture-Word Matching Task
(borrowed from Zwitserlood et al., 1994, p. 6)

The subjects were presented with a **slide of a picture of an item they had been presented with in the experiment**. Then they were presented with **three Croatian words**, one being the word **matching the item on the picture**, one a **Croatian word they had encountered in the Experiment** and the third**, a Croatian word they had never heard before**. Every word was also pronounced. The participants were asked to **match** the correct word with the picture given.

Step 6 - Test 4 - Action-Sentence Matching Task

In this test the teacher would perform an **action**. Every action was the exact replica of the *learning in context* part of the Task which the test group was presented with. Every action was followed by a **PowerPoint slide with three Croatian sentences describing activities in Croatian**. Every sentence was also pronounced. The participants had to decide which sentence **matched** the action performed.

Step 7 - Test 5 - Verb and Adjective Meaning Task

The subjects were asked to answer four questions.
1) What does the verb '**staviti'** mean?
2) What does the verb '**ostaviti'** mean?
3) What does the adjective mali / mala / malo mean?

4) What does the adjective veliki / velika / veliko mean?

Both groups were presented with the Croatian words for the adjectives enquired about in this exercise in their spoken and written form. The translation was also provided. However, the subjects could only hear the verbs. The verb 'staviti' (to put) was repeated in every sentence of the Task (in its present, past and future forms), except for the last one, in which the verb 'ostaviti' (to leave) was used.

Step 8 - Test 6 Grammatical Reasoning

The participants were presented with all three forms of the verb '**staviti'** (to put) (past, present and future). They were asked to decide what **the difference between these forms** is.

*Predictions***:**

Prediction 1: The Test Group is expected to perform better than the Control Group as the context the words were presented in is expected to aid the acquisition.

Prediction 2: Words similar to learners' mother tongue vocabulary will be easier to recognize ('banana' (banana), 'čokolada' (chocolate)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Test 1 - Word Recognition Task

In accordance with Prediction 1, with 43 correct answers and 21 correct translations, the test group participants (*learning in context)* performed *better* than the control group participants who had 41 correct answers and 15 correct translations. One must notice, though, that the difference in word recognition was not as great as one would expect. However, the test group subjects had fewer problems recollecting the meanings of the given words. It was interesting to observe the test group participants think and reason while doing the actual test and trying to recognize the words and remember their meanings. They would confirm they had recognized the word, then turn around, look at the objects still lying around the kitchen, trying to remember what the teacher was saying while presenting them. Some objects were removed right after the presentation so they could not see them. They found these objects much more difficult to remember. As predicted in Prediction 2, all subjects (12) had no problems recognizing the word 'banana' (banana) as it is spelled in exactly the same way as in English and the Croatian pronunciation also closely resembles the English one. In Chinese this is 'heong jiu'.

Graph 1 – Word Recognition Task Results

Test 1 - Word Recognition Task
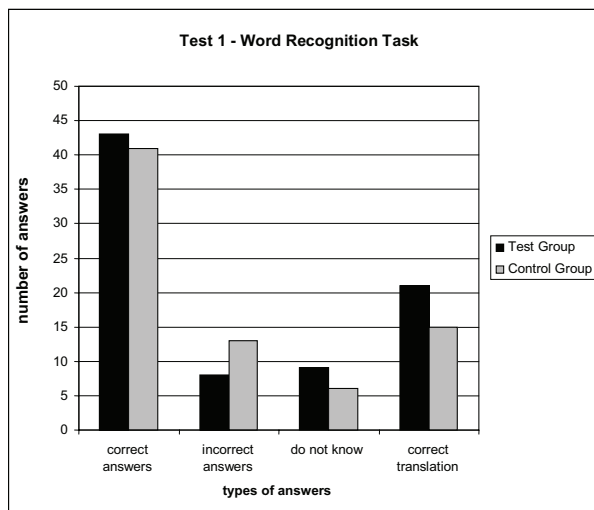
Test 2 - Spoken Word Recognition

Test group participants performed better than the control group participants due to the help of *context in acquisition* with 46 as opposed to 35 correct answers and 20 as opposed to 15 correct translations. The word 'čokolada' was easily recognized due to the similarity of the word to its English as well as its Chinese counterpart 'chugulak'. Two Chinese subjects without context did not recognize the word and one Chinese non-linguist with context after recognizing it did not provide the correct translation.

Some surprising results were obtained when the subjects were tested on the word 'čaj' /tʃaɪ/, the Croatian word for 'tea'. It closely resembles the Chinese word for the same concept /tʃa:/, as well as the informal English word /tʃaɪ/. When asked to try to provide the translation of the word, regardless of their recollection of it in terms of the Experiment, some English native speakers (3 out of 6) referred to the knowledge of their L1 and came up with the correct translation. On the other hand, the Chinese could not decipher what it meant at all. (Only one participant did so and this person was a teacher of English.)

Graph 2 – Spoken Word Recognition Test Results
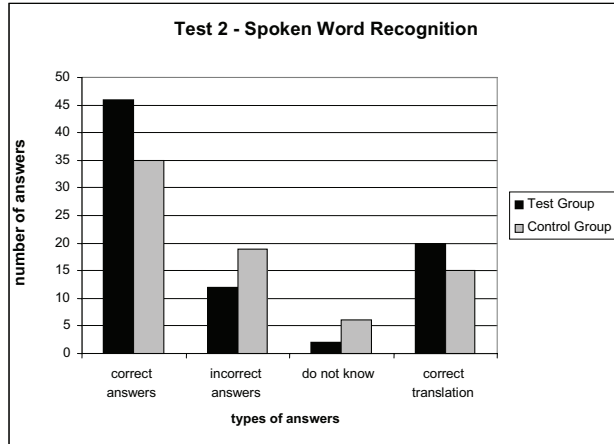
Test 3 - Picture-Word Matching Task

The results of *Test 3* were surprising. The objects in the pictures were the same as the ones presented in the test group experiment. (The author has taken pictures of them with a digital camera and fitted the photographs into the *Test 3* slideshow.) Yet, the control group performed better than the test group on this test (test group 19 vs. control group 21 correct answers). This could be explained with the distractive effect the presentation can have on some learners with highly developed learning strategies. Instead of focusing on vocabulary learning only, they would get distracted by all the additional clues which help learners (possibly non-linguists) who do not have the same efficient strategies previously developed.

Graph 3 – Picture-Word Matching Task Results
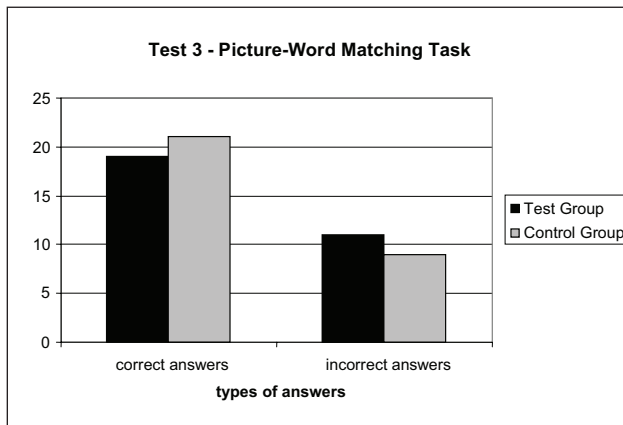
Test 4 - Action-Sentence Matching Task

The activities judged by the subjects were the same ones performed in the test group task. The test group subjects could help themselves with the *context* while the control group participants could only rely on their recollection of the vocabulary presented. The test group subjects have performed better on the task. However, they did not perform as well as one could have expected in comparison with the control group (25 vs. 17 correct answers).

Graph 4 – Action-Sentence Matching Task Results
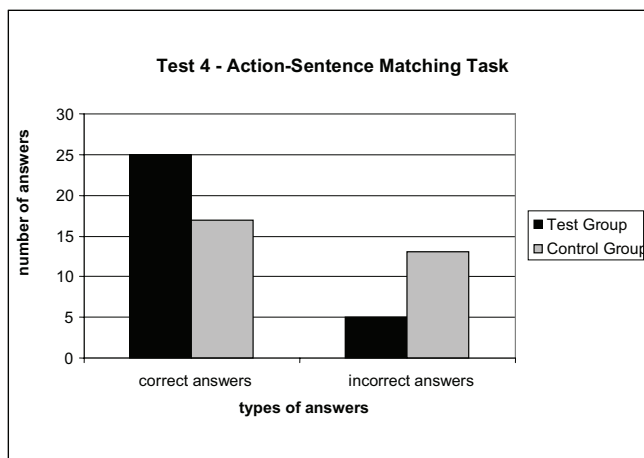
Test 5 –Verb and Adjective Meaning Task

The test group's performance was drastically better on this test with 18 as opposed to 10 correct answers the control group participants achieved. The verbs were directly related to activities which helped the test group participants (*learning in context*) to decipher their meaning. It is interesting to note that only one test group subject (a non-linguist!) provided the correct translation of the verb 'ostaviti' (to leave – presented by leaving the spoon, the little bowl and the plate in the bag). Other subjects (especially the linguists) commented on the relation between the verbs and provided a variety of solutions. Some suggested solutions for the meaning of the verb 'staviti' (to put / to place) were: put, place, there is, I am putting, to be on. The suggestions for the meaning of the verb 'ostaviti' (to leave) were: take and to be in.

One test group English non-linguist (without context) deciphered that 'staviti' means (to put). This could have been concluded from the elements of vocabulary presented (nouns for groceries and prepositions + loci). It seems that translation into L1 would have been necessary for learners to acquire this aspect of language.

Graph 5 – Verb and Adjective Meaning Test Results
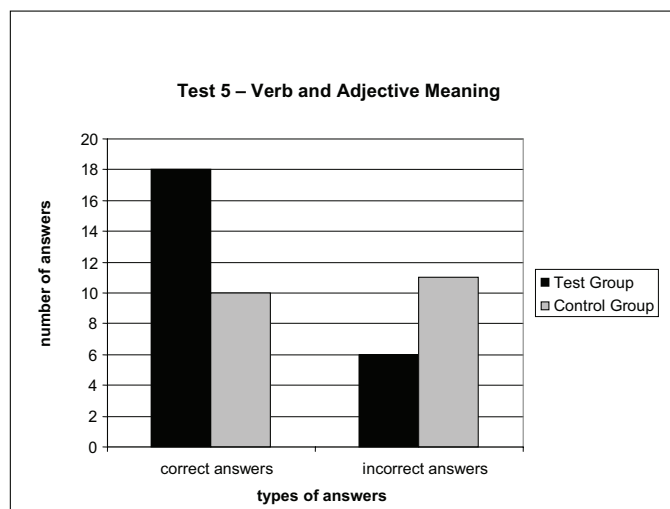
Test 6 Grammatical Reasoning:

Many subjects came up with a few possible solutions such as; distinction in tense, aspect, mode, different locations, persons, forms for gender, different forms for the noun case, affirmative vs. negation. The reader will recall that the correct answer was the tense difference and that this tense difference was presented in the test group by speaking after, at the same time or previously to doing the activities with the objects. However, no subject provided the exact and correct meaning of the forms, although some test group subjects remembered this subtle difference in presentation and commented on it. They just could not recall it correctly by the time they were asked to do this test.

Asking them to reason about the grammatical forms and express their own ideas made the subjects very interested and involved. This applies not only to linguists but also to non-linguists who came up with a number of different solutions. Possibly, this too is the point in L2 acquisition in which translation should be provided.

Answers to the Aims and General Hypotheses of the Study:

Aim 1 – the Influence of Context on L2 Acquisition:

It was surprising to see how small the difference in the performance between the test and control group subjects was. Test group provided 55% of correct answers, while the control group provided 45%. This difference is laid out in Table 1 and Graph 6.

Most test group participants commented on the *facilitating effect of the loci (context)* which they referred to in order to remember the context in which they encountered the words from the input.

Keeping the objects in the same place as when they were presented seemed to be important for the recollection of the forms and meanings of the words.

Table 1 – General results – Test Vs. Control Group

	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5	sum
Test Group	43	46	19	25	18	151
Control Group	41	35	21	17	10	124

Graph 6 – General results – Test Vs. Control Group
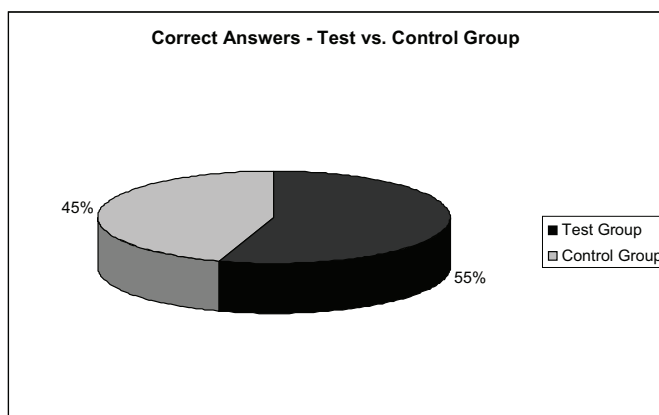
Aim 2 – the effect of the learner's linguistic background on her L2 acquisition:

As Table 2 and Graph 7 show, there was a *significant difference between test and control group non-linguists for whom the presence of context has proven to be beneficial*. This might have to do with the fact that linguists had already developed their own system of reasoning and making connections while learning languages, something we could call L2 learning strategies.

Learners had no problem learning the words similar to English (banana, čokolada). On the other hand, when it came to similar words across two typologically completely different languages, there was often no facilitating effect at all. The case in point was the word 'čaj' /tʃaɪ/ the Croatian word for 'tea' discussed in the results of *Test 2*. The lack of recognition of a word very close to the subjects' L1 showed that in the process of learning, learners

help themselves with the (active or passive) knowledge of the other languages they know **as long as** the new L2 is somehow related to their L1 or any other language they know or simply understand. If not, the similarity has to be *pointed out to them*. On the other hand, Chinese learners recognized the Croatian word 'banana', using their knowledge of English.

Another surprising result was the *English linguists' performance*. The control group performed better than the test group (*learning in context*). Some linguists commented on the distractive effect the presentation had on them. They said that when not focusing on words solely, but having somebody do some activities with the objects presented, they got distracted as they started thinking about the colours of the objects, the teacher's movements, etc.

Table 2_and Graph 7_show the difference in the acquisition between Chinese and English linguists and non-linguists.

Table 2 – Control & Test Group – Chinese Linguists Vs. Non-Linguists & English Linguists Vs. Non-Linguists Results

	chinese linguists	chinese non-linguists	english linguists	english non-linguists
test	24,5	27	23	29
control	19,5	16	25,5	18

Graph 7 – Control & Test Group – Chinese Linguists Vs. Non-Linguists & English Linguists Vs. Non-Linguists Results
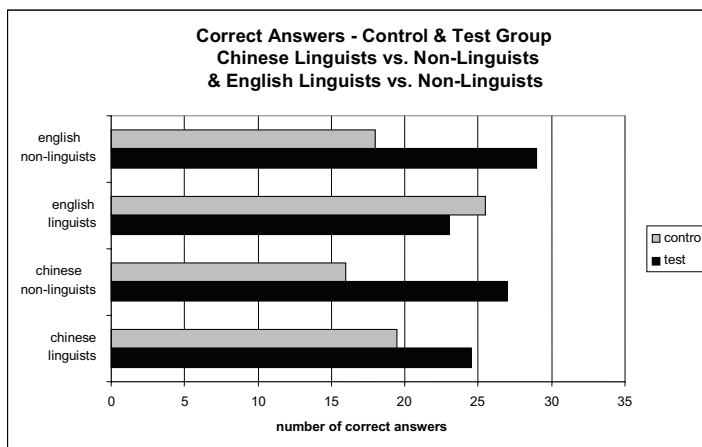
Aim 3 – Enhancing L2 Teaching Methodology

The author of this study has commented on the presentation of linguists who presented well regardless of the context, or even better when context

was not present. They seemed to have developed strategies of L2 acquisition. Therefore, in order to teach efficiently, a teacher should provide as much context as possible, but also teach non-linguists *how to learn a language* prior to teaching them the actual L2. In order to do this, a teacher can direct the learners' attention by announcing the aspects of language she would like them to pay attention to. Moreover, the similarities between the L2 and the learners' L1s should be pointed out.

It is also useful to encourage the learners to reason about the grammatical forms of the new L2. This gets the learners very much involved into the studying process (as presented in Test 6). However, as already noted, sometimes translations are necessary, particularly in order to help the learners acquire grammatical constructions correctly.

CONCLUSION

The author of this study has looked at the effect of context and the learner's linguistic background in the acquisition of a completely new L2 which is typologically unrelated to the learners' L1 or any L2 they might know. This research has been conducted with the aim of providing ideas for some acquisition strategies which can prove useful to all adult learners exposed to an L2 for the first time. These elements could be then incorporated in the L2 instruction in order to facilitate L2 learning process.

Providing *context* while teaching an L2 has been proven to facilitate learning. However, one should also always bear in mind *who* the learners are as their linguistic, educational and professional backgrounds will influence the way they learn a second language. Sometimes, a learner with a well developed language acquisition apparatus will be distracted by context. Learners who are not equipped with such an apparatus should be provided with context and should be taught which elements of input to focus on when learning an L2. It was interesting to see that sometimes a learner's mother tongue can be of little help despite the fact that some of its elements might be very similar to the L2 which is being acquired. In his *psychotypology of languages* Kellerman (1983) put forward the idea that L1 transfer and the possible facilitating effect of L1 (and any other L2s the learners might know) is possible and beneficiary only if the learners perceive their L1 and any L2s they know to be close to the new L2 and useful in learning it. The idea is not as much about the real similarity or distance between languages, it is about what the learners perceive it to be (Kellerman, 1983, as reported in Murphy, 2005, p. 5). He also claims that any L2 a learner may be familiar with can be used in a new L2 or rather L3 acquisition (Hendriks, 2005), no matter how well or little the learner knows it (Kellerman, 1995, as reported in Jessner, 1999, p. 6). Therefore, the teacher might want to point out some similarities between the L2 and the learners'

L1. This would activate the *selective attention* as defined by O'Maley and Chamot, 1990 (as reported in Mitchell and Myles, 1998).

A delicate question in L2 teaching is whether and when to provide translation. Aware of some very opposing opinions and findings concerning translation in L2 teaching, the author of this research has suggested that translation might be essential while teaching some aspects of grammar. This would help avoid wrong interpretations of some grammatical forms as well as overcome foreign language anxiety.

To conclude, language acquisition is always an individual process. However, providing real context while teaching an L2 is mostly beneficiary. Also, the teacher should teach L2 learners how to learn a language and point out some important elements of the L2 taught as well as its similarities with the learners' L1.

A number of similar and specifically controlled experiments should be carried out, which would carefully control for one factor influencing L2 acquisition at a time. Also, it must be emphasized that this research has been carried out on a very small sample. Any further researcher might decide to do a follow-up study which would involve a greater number of subjects. It would be interesting to see whether experiments carried out on a larger sample would back up the results of this research. The results of these experiments could be used to construct an efficient L2 teaching mechanism.

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ULOGA KONTEKSTA I LINGVISTIČKOG PREDZNANJA U USVAJANJU STRANOGA JEZIKA

Kristina Cergol

Sažetak - Autorica predstavlja eksperiment u kojem su izvorni govornici engleskog i kineskog jezika podučavani u hrvatskome jeziku. Ispitano je dvanaest ispitanika koji su bili raspoređeni u dvije grupe: kontrolnu i eksperimentalnu. U svakoj grupi su bila tri izvorna govornika engleskog jezika, od kojih jedan lingvist i dva nelingvista te tri izvorna govornika kineskog jezika, od kojih jedan lingvist i dva nelingvista. To je bio njihov prvi susret s hrvatskim. Proučavani su utjecaj konteksta kao i lingvističkog predznanja ispitanika na njihovo usvajanje hrvatskoga jezika. Rezultati pokazuju da oba ova faktora utječu na usvajanje stranog jezika. Istaknuti su neki aspekti usvajanja stranoga jezika na koje bi se trebala obratiti pažnja u unapređivanju metodike nastave stranih jezika.

Ključne riječi: usvajanje stranog jezika, kontekst, lingvističko predznanje učenika, odrasli učenici, prve minute hrvatskog jezika