14 Less Commonly Taught Languages: Issues in Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

A “Less Commonly Taught Language” (LCTL), a definition stemming out of educational policy, is a language considered important by the government, but unsustainable by the market. Political priorities drive a nation’s linguistic need, although developing the educational infrastructure to support this need presents serious challenges. While “LCTL” is predominantly a US term referring to languages other than French, German, and Spanish (Brecht & Walton, 1997), the concept exists globally and it is a nation’s current educational policy and political situation that determine what languages are classified as less commonly taught (LCT). For instance, in the US, languages such as Persian and Japanese have only recently become thought of as LCT, not because of the number of speakers of those languages, which has not changed significantly, but because those countries have come to play an increasingly important role in the global political arena and economy, whereas a language such as Dutch, which is equally, if not more, uncommon in foreign language curricula, is not classified as LCT. Furthermore, LCTLs are not universal, that is, a language classified as LCT in one country may be the predominant foreign language in another country. For example, Chinese is a LCTL in the US, but in many Asian countries it is offered, and often required, as part of the standard foreign language curriculum.

Brecht and Walton (1997) outline political, economic, social, and communication factors as playing a crucial role in determining a nation’s foreign language needs. Specifically, language is a political tool for people to assert their identity in territorial and cultural conflicts. For example, Kazakhstan has recently replaced Russian as a lingua franca with its own language, making Kazakh important not only in Russia, but also in countries with a political or economic stake in that part of the world. International trade drives economic relationships, which also has consequences as to what languages are considered important to a nation. Social issues such as humanitarian aid and environmental protection require international cooperation that relies on communication among more people from
different language backgrounds. And finally, ease of international travel and advances in communication technology facilitate direct interaction between people of different countries, necessitating extensive language skills.

However, identifying a language as critical does not automatically result in that language achieving popular status in a country’s foreign language curriculum, either from a financial or learner perspective. Often, the reason for teaching a language originates from historical circumstances, as is the case for colonial languages (e.g., French in North Africa) and autochthonous languages (e.g., Gaelic in Ireland). A language may also be considered “classical,” (e.g., Latin in the US) and remain prevalent despite its lack of political value. Therefore, because a country’s current language needs are not always addressed, government intervention is frequently necessary to support LCTLs and incorporate them into existing educational policy, which is met by challenges. First, developing the infrastructure necessary to support the teaching of LCTLs is challenged by the shortage of programs, materials, trained teachers, and access to immersion opportunities. Within the US, LCTLs are typically only offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels at major universities and elite liberal arts colleges, and even within these institutions they are largely supported by federal funding from Title VI of the Higher Education Act (Brecht & Walton, 2000), and more recently, the National Security Language Initiative. Second, developing programs for all the potential LCTLs is in many cases unfeasible. For instance, some 50 languages have been identified as relevant to worldwide security interests (The National Language Conference, 2004). It is not practical for any one country to invest in developing language programs to support this breadth of language capability. Finally, LCTLs are often genetically, typologically, and culturally distant from the native language of the learner, decreasing the language’s learnability and making it difficult for learners to achieve functional proficiency without a considerable time investment and often an extended immersion experience (Brecht & Walton, 2000). While this challenge attracts highly motivated language learners, it also results in low enrollments, making it difficult to justify maintaining the program financially. This chapter will look at LCTLs through the prism of research and theories in second language acquisition (SLA) and identify cognitive and linguistic difficulties inherently associated with learning a LCTL. It will then adopt a teaching perspective and address general problems and possible solutions to building a curriculum for teaching LCTLs.

Are LCTLs Difficult?

The reasons for languages being “less commonly taught” are many, as we note above. However, there is a prevalent attitude among educators in the United States that a major factor discouraging students from studying certain languages is their inherent difficulty. While this statement is generally correct, not everything about learning a given LCTL is problematic, and insights from SLA and several other disciplines are needed to develop a coherent framework to account
for the level of difficulty of various linguistic and cultural phenomena. Identification of these areas of difficulty is a first step in elaborating an efficient pedagogical approach.

On the one hand, the term Less Commonly Taught Language does not imply in its definition that a language is inherently more difficult. It is, instead, a cultural and political statement referring to the status of a given language’s position within a country’s foreign language curriculum. Therefore, the term LCTL, which encompasses the status of Norwegian, Japanese, and Avestan, refers to a politically motivated definition and makes no reference to the language’s difficulty. On the other hand, there is a general belief that were Norwegian, Japanese, and Avestan taught to a group of American students, those studying Japanese and Avestan would surely show a slower rate of acquisition than those studying Norwegian, all other factors being equal (i.e., teachers and resource availability). Indeed, the notion that some languages are more difficult than others has been supported by a National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) study assessing the impact of in-country study on language proficiency (Frank, 2000). Proficiency gains were measured for National Security Education Program (NSEP) study abroad fellows in China, Russia, and Spain. Entering the program at the intermediate–low to intermediate–mid proficiency levels on the oral proficiency scale adopted by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), learners of Spanish were most likely to achieve advanced proficiency, followed by learners of Mandarin Chinese, and finally learners of Russian. While the differences were not significant, due to a limited sample size, it appears that despite equivalent pre-program proficiency scores and comparable program duration, rates of advanced level attainment are higher in Spanish than in Mandarin Chinese and Russian.

The notion of language difficulty has been addressed by US government language training institutions in terms of “the inherent difficulty posed to native speakers of American English in learning the target language” (Frank, 2000). In this approach, languages are categorized into three levels of difficulty according to the number of hours of study typically required to achieve ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) level 3 proficiency, corresponding to Superior on the ACTFL scale. For example, Spanish, requiring relatively few hours of study (approximately 575–600) to achieve ILR level 3, is a Category 1 language, whereas Korean, requiring approximately 2,200 class hours, is classified as a Category 3 language (Languages of the World, 2007). Therefore, it appears that some LCTLS may be inherently more difficult for American learners. The question, then, is, why are certain languages more difficult? More specifically, what cognitive factors contribute to one language being more difficult to acquire than another?

A major factor that is likely to contribute to the difficulty of a LCTL is its non-cognate status to the learner’s native language. Traditionally, cognate languages are defined as related in origin, having descended from the same ancestral root. Accordingly, the term non-cognate language refers to those that are not genetically related and implies typological distance, primarily relating to the languages’ differing structures and lexicon. However, the term non-cognate may also be
applied to different writing systems, and, perhaps more significantly, cultural distance. While structural distance between languages is an attractive candidate for explaining language-learning difficulty, research shows that, first, typological distance does not translate directly into the level of difficulty, and second, there are other powerful factors at work in the acquisition of LCTLs, such as the lexicon, phonological system, writing system, and cultural distance. Thus, the level of difficulty of a particular LCTL is defined by a combination of factors, and while there is a practice of assigning levels of difficulty to particular LCTLs for American learners, which is driven by the needs of curricular planning, more research is needed to provide a sound theoretical and empirical foundation to this global, holistic scale. At the same time, SLA research provides insights into the operation of individual factors, or components, contributing to the overall level of difficulty. The following sections will, first, address the general approaches to language difficulty arising from theoretical perspectives on SLA, and then focus on individual aspects of language acquisition, which constitute sources of difficulty.

Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to LCTLs in SLA: Sources of Difficulty

Language typology, influence of the native language, and universal constraints

Second language acquisition research identifies two major factors shaping inter-language (IL, language of L2 learners): the influence of the native language, or transfer from the native language to the target language (L1 transfer); and universal constraints on language perception and production. In addition to these major forces, whose interplay shapes the course of SLA, processing constraints and properties of the input to the learner, in particular, input frequencies and the effects of practice, interact with working and long-term memory as the learner gradually achieves automaticity in speech perception and production. This section will briefly review the main claims and findings from these fields of inquiry, and draw implications for LCTLs.

L1 transfer implies that certain linguistic structures, patterns, or rules from L1 are transposed and applied to L2, which may lead to two possible outcomes: a facilitative effect when both L1 and L2 indeed share the structure (positive transfer, see Ringbom & Jarvis, this volume); and a negative effect, resulting in errors in L2, when L1 and L2 do not share the structure (negative transfer). Whether L1 transfer of either kind takes place depends on a set of conditions. First, there should be certain proximity between the two phenomena in L1 and L2 in order for this transfer to be possible. For example, when acquiring the Russian case system with numerous inflectional markers, native speakers of English have nothing to transfer from their native language, or in other words, there are no conditions for L1 transfer. Native speakers of Czech, another Slavic language with a similar inflectional system, however, have been observed to
substitute Czech case inflections for Russian ones (Duskova, 1984, cited by Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 74). This constraint on L1 transfer has received the name of “crucial similarity measure” (Wode, 1983), and is especially operative in L2 phonological acquisition (see below). Second, “perceived similarity measure,” a subjective assessment of similarity between L1 and L2 phenomena (Kellerman, 1978), appears to determine whether L1 transfer will be used as a strategy when L2 processing involves meaning and reaches the conscious level, as in the use of lexical items or idioms. And finally, there are factors external to the linguistic properties of L1 and L2 per se, which pertain to task and learner characteristics. For example, a study of L2 acquisition of Japanese progressive and resultative meanings of the imperfective aspect marker by L1 speakers of English, German, and Slavic languages demonstrated that both the task type, or rather, modality, production, and perception, as well as proficiency level, determined whether L1 transfer would take place (Sugaya & Shirai, 2007). In particular, lower proficiency was more conducive to L1 transfer, while higher proficiency relied more on universals in creating form–meaning associations. Considering what is known about L1 transfer, what role is it expected to play in the acquisition of LCTLs? Given that LCTLs are often typologically distant from learners’ native language, or are non-cognate languages, the role of L1 transfer should be rather limited, both on the level of linguistic structure and vocabulary. This applies to both positive and negative transfer. At the same time, lower-proficiency learners are more likely to apply L1 transfer as a strategy, especially, under communicative pressure, as this may be the only available resource for them in an attempt to repair a communication breakdown. The most “extreme” case of L1 transfer in such a case would be code-switching.

Universal constraints are defined in different terms depending on the theoretical framework, and they can either pertain to linguistic structures or to cognitive processing and memory. Several assumptions and empirical findings in cross-linguistic and SLA research underlie the notion of universal constraints. First of all, Universal Grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 1986), research on typological universals (Greenberg, 1976), and markedness theory (Jakobson, 1936/1972), while differing in scope and theoretical underpinnings, all point to the fact that languages share some general universal properties. At the same time, UG emphasizes innateness and specificity of language, while typological studies focus on how certain linguistic properties are distributed across all the languages, which ones are common, and which are rare. Typological universals may take the shape of implicational universals, when the presence of feature A in a certain language also implies the presence of feature B, but the presence of feature B does not imply the presence of feature A. For example, the presence of voiced consonants /b, d, g/, either in the individual language in general, or in a particular position in the word, word-initial, medial or final, implies the presence of voiceless consonants /p, t, k/, but the presence of voiceless consonants does not imply the presence of voiced ones.

Markedness theory assigns the marked status to one member of a binary opposition, as in voiced and voiceless consonants mentioned above, or organizes a set
of structures in a certain hierarchical order, as in the most researched implicational universal concerning relative clause formation, Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie, 1977). Markedness is usually associated with a cluster of properties, thus a marked item requires more effort, is more difficult, more complex structurally, less frequent, and less productive than its unmarked counterpart. It is not obvious what kind of causal relationship applies to this cluster of properties, but it appears that difficulty and complexity are at the core of the factors underlying markedness. If this is indeed the case, then it is to be expected that more complex or difficult linguistic structures occur less frequently across languages, but also that less frequent structures are inherently more complex and difficult.

Second, while typologically distant languages are likely to exhibit more differences than typologically proximate languages, some linguistic features are “scattered” across languages and do not follow a predictable pattern. For example, agglutination, a typological feature whereby words are formed of long strings of mostly unmodified affixes, occurs in genetically unrelated languages, such as Hungarian, Turkish, Korean, and Bantu languages. Third, universal constraints, whether they come in the form of UG, observations from typological studies, or markedness, imply that not every imaginable structure or combination of structures is possible in human languages. The question arises whether interlanguages are constrained in the same way, and researchers coming from different theoretical backgrounds espouse this view (Eckman, 2004; O’Grady, 2003; White, 2004). Eckman proposed the Structural Conformity Hypothesis (SCH), according to which “All universals that are true for primary languages are also true for ILs” (1996, p. 204). If this is the case, then markedness and universal constraints determine different patterns in SLA, as they do in native languages. Under the SCH, it is not the learner’s native language that affects the acquisition of certain L2 structures, but rather the universal markedness of the L2 structures. In other words, a learner may have difficulty learning a marked structure in the L2, even if that same structure exists in the learner’s L1. Conversely, a learner may not have difficulty in learning an unmarked L2 structure, even if that structure does not exist in the learner’s L1. Since LCTLs, at least in the American context, represent typologically distant and highly diverse languages, many features found in them are typologically marked, and likely to be problematic for L2 learners. Therefore, acquisition of many aspects of LCTLs can be predicted to pose difficulties for L2 learners. In psycholinguistic terms, acquisition of typologically distant or non-cognate languages requires control of numerous new concepts, structures, etc. This novelty effect leads to depletion of attentional resources and overload on working memory, which ultimately delays automatization of L2 processing.

Four likely candidates that contribute to the difficulty in acquiring a non-cognate language, in addition to linguistic structure, are the lexicon, the phonological system, the writing system and script, and cultural distance. The lexicon, if no part of it is shared with the L2, will create an additional burden on processing and make attention to and processing of new aspects of the language all the more difficult. The phonological system, if it contains novel sounds, features, or
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contrasts, may involve difficulties at the level of production and/or perception. The writing system and script may also add to difficulty in acquisition if they are different from that of the native language. For one thing, they will limit the opportunity for input, and in addition, they may contain ambiguities that lead to unpredictability in word recognition. Finally, a language of a non-cognate culture will likely consist of complex pragmatic and cultural references that are closely linked to linguistic performance. The following sections will address these four aspects of learning LCTLs.

The lexicon

The role of the lexicon in SLA has been thoroughly examined in the SLA literature, and specifically in the context of positive transfer between proximate and distant languages. Nation (2001) proposes that different words will have different “learning burdens” according to how much effort is required to learn the word. Specifically, Nation proposes that patterns and knowledge of an L2 word may be available to the learner from the learner’s L1, previous knowledge of the L2, or even other L2s. For example, similarities between the L1 and L2 in sounds and spelling patterns, the pairing of certain words together (e.g., collocations), and grammatical patterns will reduce the learning burden and thus facilitate acquisition of a particular word(s). The learning burden is likely to be less for vocabulary of a closely related, or cognate, language, than for a non-cognate language.

Ringbom (1992; Ringbom & Jarvis, this volume) examined this phenomenon in Finnish and Swedish learners of English pointing out that Swedish learners achieve higher scores, even with fewer years of study, than Finnish learners. Ringbom attributes the Swedes’ advantage to positive lexical transfer, which facilitates reading and listening comprehension (although more so for reading than listening). Ringbom argues that a learner of a related language can easily convert the L1-based lexical knowledge to the L2, “because the procedures for comprehending and using identical or very similar L1 words in L2 are already automatized” (1992, p. 102). For a learner of an unrelated language, however, the L1 knowledge is not accessible for automatized use in the L2, thus resulting in a heavier learning burden.

Furthermore, learning a non-cognate lexicon will impede learning other aspects of the language, in that a heavier learning burden requires cognitive resources that would otherwise be allocated elsewhere. Odlin (2003) summarizes the advantage of learning a linguistically proximate language: “the advantage that cognate vocabulary confers can allow learners to take advantage of positive transfer to increase their comprehension of the target language with far greater ease, thereby freeing many cognitive resources for other language learning tasks” (p. 441). Therefore, learners of an L2 that is lexically related to their L1, such as Swedish learners of English, will have more resources available, facilitating, and even speeding up, lexical, and subsequently, general L2 acquisition. Acquisition of LCTLs will show the opposite inhibitory tendency.
Phonological system

Phonology is always a major issue for adult learners, and few, if any, are able to overcome a foreign accent. Phonemic discrimination studies have shown that infants lose their ability to discriminate between non-native contrasts as early as 10–12 months (Werker & Tees, 1984), and SLA researchers have placed the close of the critical period for acquiring a nativelike accent around age 6 (Long, 1993).

The mechanisms underlying production and perception are asymmetrical, with some sounds being more difficult to hear, and others to pronounce. It is true, however, that perceptual difficulties usually constitute the core with articulatory difficulties superimposed on them, hence the focus on perception in the major models of phonological acquisition (see below). A rare exception is the /r/–/l/ distinction in English, which is difficult for Japanese learners to hear, yet Sheldon and Strange (1982) found that learners were able to accurately produce both sounds despite an inability to perceive the difference. LCTLs often have difficult sounds and sound contrasts (e.g., murmured consonants in Hindi/Urdu; clicks in Bantu languages; plain, tense, and aspirated consonants in Korean, etc.), making accurate perception and production challenging for learners of non-cognate languages.

Kuhl (1993), Flege (1995), and Best (1994) propose three separate models of language perception that attempt to explain non-native phonemic representation within the context of a learner’s native speech system. Kuhl’s Native Language Magnet model, focusing mainly on vowel perception, posits that native speakers develop acoustic prototypes for phonemic categories, which act as perceptual magnets. A non-native phoneme that is perceptually close to a native prototype will be drawn to and represented by that prototype, whereas a non-native phoneme that is perceptually distant from native prototypes will not be influenced by the magnet and will exist independently in its own space. Therefore, a non-native phonemic contrast that is drawn to a native prototype will be more difficult for learners to discriminate than a non-native contrast that is represented independently of native prototypes.

Flege’s (1995) Speech Learning Model also proposes that the distance between native and non-native sounds determines ease of acquisition. He argues that non-native categories will develop if there is no native equivalent, which will facilitate perception and production. Non-native sounds that are similar to native sounds, however, will be incorporated into existing native categories, making perception and production inaccurate.

Finally, Best’s (1994; Best, McRoberts, & Goodell, 2001) Perceptual Assimilation Model claims that non-native phonemes may be assimilated into the native system as a categorized exemplar of a native phoneme, an uncategorized phoneme, or a nonassimilable nonspeech sound. How a non-native phoneme is assimilated determines its perceptual difficulty. Sounds that are assimilated into a native exemplar may pose no problem for the learner if there is a good fit between the non-native sound and the native exemplar; however, a poor fit will result in perceptual difficulty. In the case of the uncategorized phoneme, the
native system will have less of an impact on perception, and difficulty will depend on perceived proximity to nearby phonemes. Finally, nonassimilable nonspeech sounds are not processed linguistically, and will, therefore, not pose a problem.

All three models have one point in common: non-native sounds that are easily assimilated into the native language phonological system are problematic (compare this conclusion to the concept of the “crucial similarity measure” discussed above). How do these theories apply to acquisition of LCTLs, which often contain sounds and sound contrasts not found in most common Indo-European languages, and do they account for the level of difficulty they present? First, phonological difficulties in SLA almost never involve only the perceptual level, which is the focus of all three models. Typically, phonological difficulties arise either both in perception and production or in production only. Second, while it is uncontroversial that similar sounds easily pass through the “phonological sieve” and are perceived as their native counterparts (often leading to a perceptual error), there are types of sounds that are difficult to perceive and/or produce, in the typological markedness sense. And third, the most challenging task in phonological acquisition is differentiation of sound contrasts when neither member of the contrast is found in L1, and they belong to a typologically marked domain. For example, tones found in Mandarin, Cantonese, Thai, and Vietnamese are difficult, as the learner needs to learn to perceive and produce four or more phonological tones accurately and be aware of the distinctions. To illustrate, consider the different facets of phonological difficulties involved in the acquisition of Arabic consonants. There are pharyngeal and laryngeal consonants in Arabic, and these sounds are difficult to differentiate both in perception and production, since pharyngeal and laryngeal articulations, typologically rare and marked, are notoriously problematic. Furthermore, Arabic has a phonological distinction between plain and emphatic consonants with additional pharyngeal articulation, the latter being difficult to perceive, but especially to pronounce. To summarize, the phonology of LCTLs is likely to present problems for L2 learners at the level of perception, production, or both. These problems will mostly be due to universal constraints, as learners are dealing with new and marked phonological units, features, and contrasts, and to a lesser degree to L1 transfer resulting from perceptual assimilation of L2 sounds (see Nguyen & Macken, 2008).

**Writing system and script**

The L2 writing system and script can also provide strategic support if similar to the L1 and, conversely, can create an obstacle if different from the L1 (see Koda, this volume). The writing system refers to the most general distinction between alphabetic, syllabic, and logographic languages, while script refers to the actual graphic symbols (e.g., Roman and Cyrillic scripts). Orthography, or the rules of graphic–phonological conversion, will have less impact when the writing system and script already differ, as is often the case with LCTLs. MacWhinney (2006) discusses recoding, a compensatory strategy strongly affected by the L1, that L2 learners may use to enhance language learning. Recoding, according to
MacWhinney, “involves the construction of alternative images of new words and phrases... the easiest way to do this is to represent the new word orthographically” (p. 151). He argues that orthographic learning provides learners with a “solid recoding of transient auditory input” (p. 151) and allows them access to input from additional sources, such as books, signs, and product labels. Recoding will be relatively easy for a learner whose writing system and script are the same in the L1 and L2 (for example, French–English), however, it will be quite difficult for a learner who has to learn a new script, and especially, a writing system. An English speaker learning Russian must map the Roman script onto the Cyrillic script. Because both of these scripts are alphabetic and rely on a grapheme–phoneme correspondence, this task can be accomplished with some difficulty. However, learning a logographic writing system (e.g., Chinese Hanzi characters) will create a major obstacle for older learners and may prevent them from taking advantage of the recoding strategy, making the language-learning process all the more difficult for learners of a language with a different writing system.

An additional complexity is present in languages with wide gaps between the written and spoken varieties, such as the numerous dialects of Arabic compared to written Modern Standard Arabic. A student learning Moroccan Arabic must not only learn the spoken variety, but also the written variety, which is significantly different structurally, as well as phonologically. In this case, access to written input requires substantially more work than if the student were learning Spanish, where the spoken language is closely represented by the writing system. Therefore, a student learning Arabic not only has to learn an L2 script that is different from the L1, but also an L2 writing system that is different from the spoken L2 system.

However, the importance of the writing system as a language acquisition tool may be debated in light of recent findings on the acquisition of Chinese. NSEP studies on the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese by American learners (Frank, 2000) have suggested that Chinese is a Category 2 language in speaking, despite its difficult writing system. That is, it seems that speaking can be acquired successfully independent of the writing system in an immersion-type learning environment with heavy emphasis on oral communication. Nonetheless, access to written media can be a rich and important source of both linguistic and socio-cultural input for language learners. An L2 with a different writing system may prevent a learner from taking advantage of written input, especially in the early stages of acquisition, and thereby slow the rate of acquisition.

**Pragmatics and cross-cultural communication**

Languages of non-cognate cultures are often characterized by very different pragmatic rules than those of the native language. While there is limited research on L2 pragmatics, these often subtle and complex linguistic aspects of basic communication, such as the speech acts of giving and receiving compliments, accepting and declining an offer or invitation, and apologizing or adhering to an honorifics
hierarchy, contribute to the difficulty of acquiring a typologically distant language. For example, the pragmatic strategies involved in Japanese honorifics are closely linked to linguistic performance; while the linguistic forms themselves are not necessarily difficult, knowing when and to whom to apply the proper address form is culturally foreign to native English speakers and, therefore, difficult to acquire.

Another component of pragmatics that is necessary for successful communication is what Kramsch (1991) identifies as sociolinguistic knowledge: “Background knowledge and shared assumptions have been shown to be a crucial element in understanding oral and written forms of discourse” (p. 217). For example, the ability to understand and employ literary references in languages such as Arabic and Chinese, whose literary culture dating back 1,500 years is incorporated into daily speech, presents a challenge for L2 learners. In other languages, such as Persian, there is an equivalent depth in the oral tradition that is still present in the language today. Again, these skills are not necessarily linguistic in nature, but rather require cognitive skills and cultural sensitivity that develop from cultural experience and education. Because they are manifested in language comprehension and production, they contribute to the practical difficulty of the language. It would be difficult to acquire this type of knowledge from studying LCTL in a foreign language classroom outside its broader context; a cultural immersion is most likely the only route to acquiring what Kramsch (2006) has termed symbolic competence.

To conclude, structural (typological) differences between non-cognate languages, as well as L2 lexicon, phonological system, writing system and script, and cultural distance are major inhibiting factors in the acquisition of certain LCTLs.

Teaching Less Commonly Taught Languages

Teaching LCTLs in the US presents numerous challenges, and while some of them are related to the inherent linguistic difficulty of many of the languages discussed above, others transcend the realm of linguistic debates and are grounded in the social and educational context. Despite fundamental differences between the principles underlying the grouping of LCTLs in the US and lesser-used languages in the European Union, some of these challenges are shared by both educational communities. This section will address the issues in teaching LCTLs, and for lack of space will be restricted to adult L2 learners, which will leave two major educational issues outside the scope of the present discussion: child L2 acquisition and K-12 instruction in LCTLs (see Brecht, 2007), and the special instructional needs of heritage speakers (see Montrul, this volume).

It is true that non-cognate status and typological distance of LCTLs from English create an additional level of difficulty in the acquisition of their linguistic structure, sound systems, writing systems and scripts, vocabulary, including idiomatic use, and socio-cultural and linguo-pragmatic aspects. What are the implications of these additional learning problems for teaching LCTLs? They
increase the need for appropriate pedagogical approaches and instructional techniques aimed at developing metalinguistic awareness and structural knowledge in L2 learners. Two aspects of instruction play a key role in addressing these problems: the type and amount of input (Gor & Long, forthcoming) and practice (DeKeyser, 2007). And indeed, developing metalinguistic awareness when dealing with novel linguistic concepts may require explicit input, while high quantities of structured input will ensure internalization of high-frequency items and structures. Koda (this volume) claims that both quality and quantity of L2 print are to a large extent responsible for the development of the metalinguistic awareness necessary for reading new writing systems and scripts (as well as orthography). Intensive practice in LCTLs will promote control and automaticity in the use of linguistic structures, and decrease overload on working memory, thus releasing L2 processing resources.

Automaticity refers to the way psychological mechanisms operate, with automatic processing often characterized as being fast, unstoppable, load independent, effortless, and unconscious (Segalowitz, 2003, p. 384). In other words, automatic processing is not affected by the load of information to be processed, nor does it require effort, leaving attentional resources free for other tasks. Research to date on automaticity in the field of SLA has focused mainly on word recognition and grammatical structure acquisition, where speed of processing is linked to fluency. According to Nation (1993), a certain degree of automaticity in basic vocabulary must be achieved before new vocabulary can be acquired. Considering LCTLs’ non-cognate status, developing automaticity for novel vocabulary and typologically distant grammatical structures will take time, delaying fluency and reducing the attentional resources, such as working memory, available for processing and subsequently acquiring additional aspects of the language.

What kind of teaching method would be most appropriate for LCTLs? In the last two decades, foreign language teaching in many countries has been dominated by the communicative approach, stemming from the construct of communicative competence (Hymes, 1974), which came to replace grammar–translation and audio–lingual methods. Communicative language teaching (CLT), closely associated with the influential proficiency movement, emphasizes the development of learners’ ability to communicate, express themselves, get their meaning across, and engage in social interactions. Pedagogical practices developed to accomplish this mission produce relatively quick results, empowering the student with a sense of gains made, and not just effort invested. This agenda, a welcome change from the teaching methods it replaced, is heavily geared toward speaking, even at the early stages of L2 learning. In recent years, communicative language teaching has become the target of criticism summarized below by Magnan:

Following most textbooks used in the United States, CLT encourages personalized activities through which students talk about themselves with their classmates (Magnan, 2006). This practice introduces three problems for language learning: (a) talk about self generally does not elicit the analytical language that collegiate language departments consider pertinent to their intellectual missions; (b) too much
talk about self perpetuates self-referential notions of language and culture, preparing students to present an egocentric view when abroad; (c) talk with U.S. classmates fosters a U.S. frame of reference and discourse, although the words to express them are foreign. (2007, p. 250)

In a discussion devoted to the future of CLT in *The Modern Language Journal* (volume 90(2), 2006), Kramsch advocated an alternative approach promoting the development of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006). The proposed shift of focus to the study of texts and culturally bound meanings (Larson, 2006) highlights the challenge of reading authentic texts in LCTLs, which provides a window into the target culture, but often stumbles at different writing systems and scripts, while understanding a new culture through language increases in importance with the greater distance between the native and target culture. The arguments raised against CLT mostly target lower-level instruction and as such are not in conflict with the core principles underlying this approach. Teaching and learning LCTLs need to address several goals: to provide explicit and abundant input and opportunities for focused practice required for learning language structure, to pay attention both to oral and written communicative competence, and to complement functional language ability with the development of cultural sensitivity.

Since the distance between L1 and LCTLs, linguistic and cultural, is often greater than for commonly taught languages, their teaching (as learning) requires additional effort and resources. Ironically, educational policy and practices, which were shaped by an interaction of academic and socio-political circumstances, led to the opposite outcome, with the lack of available resources exacerbating inherent difficulties in developing efficient curricula for teaching LCTLs. Indeed, academic programs offering instruction in LCTLs are plagued by the lack of a trained cadre of instructors, adequate and rich pedagogical materials for different learner levels, institutional support, and national and international infrastructure (see Al-Batal, 2007, about the teaching of Arabic). As mentioned above, based on the estimates of the number of contact hours needed to reach ILR level 3 proficiency by the State Department, all of the languages falling into Category 3 (exceptionally difficult, most time required), Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean, are LCTLs critical for US national interests. Consequently, in order to achieve the same level of proficiency in one of these LCTLs as in a language belonging to Categories 1 or 2, smaller classes and/or more coursework will be necessary. However, requests for limiting the number of seats per class may meet resistance from the administration of academic institutions, as small classes are often perceived as a sign that a certain language has low enrollments due to low demand or, conversely, they will be in conflict with the need to accommodate very high enrollments in some of these languages. One of the inevitable consequences of the fact that LCTLs typically require more time and effort to learn is decreasing learners’ motivation when immediate results and rapid gains in proficiency are lacking. Thus, to build successful academic programs, LCTL curricula need to stimulate student motivation. The ability to communicate from
the very start fostered within the paradigm of CLT is one of the means to boost learner motivation, engaging students in a new fascinating cultural experience being another one.

The critical role a number of LCTLs play in US national security has generated an enormous momentum, with an increasing demand for highly proficient speakers of these languages and public interest in learning them. Several organizations and research centers in the US focus on providing resources and teaching support for LCTLs: The National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL), the hub of the web-based network CouncilNet, The National Foreign Language Center (NFLC), whose LangNet offers support for several dozen LCTLs, and The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), as well as university-affiliated research centers, such as The Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) at the University of Maryland and The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. The European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL) performs a similar mission in the European Union. Only joint efforts of SLA researchers, instructors, and experts in language pedagogy and cross-cultural communication, administrators, and language policy makers will win a brighter future for LCTLs.

REFERENCES


