



## The Advanced-Level Second Language Learner as a Multicompetent Language User

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**Abstract-** The paper aims to clarify the cognitive and communicative status of the advanced-level second/foreign language learner and contribute to describing the multicompetent complexity emergent in him/her in the process of language learning. The linguistic multicompetence approach and the cognitive approach to the second language acquisition research are used as the framework to describe the specifics of the advanced-level second language learner's cognition, metalinguistic awareness, and communicative competence with the emphasis on its pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects. A focused review of the second language acquisition research and an in-depth account of the relevant theories framing the field of advanced-level language learning investigation allowed to highlight the synergic nature of bilingual cognition and show that the dynamic construal of meaning in advanced second language use is mediated by the emergent dual-language functional system and the synergic effect of two languages inter-functioning. Metalinguistic awareness in advanced-level language learning is analyzed from the knowledge-reflection-control-nexus perspective. Sharpened metalinguistic awareness of advanced-level language learners is presented as performance-driven and reflecting the underlying changes in cognitive abilities of the emergent bilingual. Advanced learners' pragmatic and sociolinguistic development is viewed as dependent on cross-linguistic transfer and requiring a deliberate continual effort for maintenance. Gaining the advanced-level second language proficiency is concluded to be a driving force for the complex cognitive-communicative changes in language learners and acquiring a unique status of language users at their own right.

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition, Emergent Bilingualism, Bilingual Cognition, Plurilingualism, Metalinguistic Awareness, Pragmatic Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence

### I. INTRODUCTION

Multilingual communication in the globalized digital world requires advanced levels of knowledge and skills, which will allow using non-native languages in a variety of sociocultural and professional contexts [1,2]. Given such social demands, explicit descriptions of advanced-level foreign/second language (AL2) use and AL2 learners are needed not only for understanding the social and communicative requirements of today's plurilingual interaction, but also for providing educators with necessary methodological frameworks in organizing the AL2 teaching programs.

According to Heidi Byrnes [3, p.36], AL2 learners are able to express themselves by addressing numerous concrete and abstract topics "with only minor infractions against accuracy, with few violations of an expected level of fluency, and in a sociolinguistically appropriate fashion". Byrnes states that such learners are likely to use AL2 in diverse professional contexts requiring greater quality of expressiveness, greater cultural appropriateness and personal confidence (ibid.). Current second language acquisition (SLA) research [4,5] puts language capacity and proficiency of such learners directly in focus and attempts to present a multiple perspectives analysis of the advanced learners' situated language use and multilingually mediated meaning construction.

Previously [6], the construct of levelled proficiency in the foreign/second language (L2) was rooted in

research and assessment practices, which related the actual language performance to an idealized native-like norm and profiled the L2 user in relation to an idealized monolingual native speaker. Since the 1990s, research in SLA has experienced a paradigm shift expressed in promoting a new attitude to L2 acquisition and putting the emphasis on the complexity and dynamicity of bilingual cognitive and communicative development. Vivian Cook [7] proposed the multicompetence approach to bilingual cognition and L2 acquisition and presented the bilingual perspective of seeing the L2 user as a bearer of the compound state of a mind with two languages, “each language potentially different from that of someone who speaks it as a monolingual” [8, p.1]. Cook defines multicompetence as “the overall system of a mind or a community that uses more than one language” [8, p.2] and analyzes the language transfer as a two-way process that leads to the L2 user’s acquiring a set of characteristics which drastically differ him/her from a monolingual language user. Nowadays the multicompetence approach to understanding L2 use and L2 learning is enhanced by the sociocultural and educational status of multiculturalism in the world where bilinguals (multilinguals) have come to outnumber monolinguals. Cook [9, p.26] characterizes the multicompetence approach as “a liberating process for SLA research” and notes that it “establishes SLA not only independently of the language of native-speakers but also as the core case of language acquisition” (ibid.).

The multicompetence approach opens numerous possibilities in characterizing salient features of the L2 advancedness as the highest degree of L2 precision, ease, and appropriateness in highly successful language learners. Current SLA studies tend to describe the AL2 learners by foregrounding the multicompetence-driven peculiarities of their cognition and their language use mode. Thus, the idea that the higher level of L2 proficiency reorganizes the L2 user’s conceptual system operated through two language channels is highlighted by Istvan Kecskes [10], who presents “the dual language approach” to multicompetence. This approach focuses “on the process of language system construction as a result of conceptual changes, bidirectional influence between languages, and movements up and down in the developmental continuum” [10, p.8]. James P. Lantolf [11,12] redefines advanced language proficiency in the light of the concept of “languaculture” and describes AL2 learners as the ones who have developed new ways of perceiving, thinking and talking about reality through internalization of conceptual knowledge encoded in L2 conceptual schemas, metaphors, lexical networks, etc. Heidi Byrnes [13, p.511] proposes the concept of the dialogical nature of AL2 expertise and sees advanced forms of language use as “multivoiced language performance”.

Despite being supported by the studies, the AL2 learner’s multicompetence lacks a clear comprehension in terms of its manifestation in the learner’s conceptualization and communicative functioning. A fundamental contradiction exists between the necessity to promote the value of AL2 learners’ communicative repertoire of two inter-related languages (as for example proposed in the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” [14]) and the absence of clear metalanguage for describing the cognitive-communicative complexity emergent in L2 learners on their achieving the level of mastery. The AL2 learner’s multicompetence needs to be clarified and summarily presented as an integrative property emergent in the L2 speaker as the result of cognitive-communicative changes in the course of language development. To achieve such clarification, we rely upon the following methodological approaches: (1) the cognitive approach in SLA research, which puts the concepts of bilingual cognition and emergent bilingualism in the center of the L2 learning and teaching discussion [10,15,16]; (2) the multicompetence approach foregrounding the particular status of the L2 user [8,17,18]; (3) the concept of plurilingualism as presented in the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” [14] and the communicative competence approach with its common practice to describe language proficiency as real-life language use, grounded in four modes of communication (production, reception, interaction, mediation) and three aspects of communication (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic competences) intertwined in any language use [5,14,19]. From such perspectives, we address the current SLA research findings trying to answer the following research questions: (1) In a what way are the AL2 learner’s conceptual system, mental lexicon and metalinguistic awareness described in SLA research with regard to the effect of the advanced-level knowledge of L2 and its interaction with the first language (L1) knowledge? (2) How can the AL2 learner’s communicative competence be conceptualized from the L1–L2–interaction perspective with the account of effects produced by learners’ relying on their plurilingual skills and experiences? Answering these questions will lead to a more transparent account of the AL2 learner’s cognitive and communicative repertoires, which is necessary for a better understanding of him/her as a multicompetent language user. This paper seeks to advance the concept of an AL2 learner as a multicompetent user by conducting a focused review of the state of the art in L2 proficiency research and providing an in-depth account of the most relevant theories framing the field of AL2 learning investigation.

In this study, we follow the established pattern of emphasizing the unique nature of the AL2 learner’s multicompetence and aim at clarifying the cognitive and communicative status of the AL2 learner as the

multicompetent language user. We mainly focus on the specifics of the AL2 learner's cognition (namely, the relationships of language system with two subsets (L1–L2) providing access to the conceptual system), metacognition (in particular, metalinguistic awareness, which is metacognitive in its nature) and communicative competence (with the emphasis on pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences).

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### **AL2 Learner's Bilingual Cognition and Metacognition: The Effect of Second Language Learning on Conceptualization and Sharpened Metalinguistic Awareness.**

Cognitively oriented SLA research is focused on the problem of identifying neurophysiological, psycholinguistic and cognitive-communicative characteristics of bilingualism/multilingualism formed in the process of L2 acquisition and learning. In analyzing L2 cognition researchers rely on the premise that L2 capacity cannot be regarded as some kind of a monolingual's "additional" ability to speak L2 [8,20]. It is agreed that the L2 user differs from a monolingual speaker in (1) the mode of language use [19,21], (2) the knowledge of both L2 and L1 [8], (3) the content of the conceptual system and the quality of language operating of this conceptual system [10,22].

The assumption that the bilingual memory does not differ from the monolingual memory in terms of organizational principles of conceptual processing [23] is widely relied upon in the SLA theories. At the same time, SLA experts state that the conceptual base of a bilingual differs from the conceptual base of a monolingual in its scope and content, the uniqueness of which is determined by the specific interaction of conceptual features [22]. According to Michael Paradis [23], the cognitive architecture of the bilingual mind contains at least four systems involved in verbal communication – implicit linguistic competence, explicit metalinguistic knowledge, pragmatic abilities, and motivation. All these systems are affected by the complex interaction of L1 and L2, which provides the learner's communicative and cognitive activity. Considering such effects, we find it necessary to highlight the importance of the holistic approach to analyzing the L1–L2 functional system, involved in the AL2 learner's meaning construction.

The problem of the so-called "reverse transfer" (L2 effect on L1) remains less studied than the problem of the L1 effect on the L2, which has traditionally been given much attention to in analyzing cross-linguistic interference. However, SLA research conducted from the perspective of a cognitively oriented multicompetence approach brings the problem of emergence in L1–L2 functional system to the forefront of SLA theoretical discussion [24].

It is believed that as the level of the learner's L2 competence increases, the influence of L2 on the conceptual system rises [10]. Studies show that not only early bilingualism and the simultaneous acquisition of two languages from infancy, but also the later study of L2 against the background of the acquired L1 leads to the formation of a common conceptual base (Common Underlying Conceptual Base, CUCB), access to which is provided through two language channels [22,25]. According to Istvan Kecskes and Tunde Papp [25, p.249], starting to learn L2, an individual internalizes L2 by "assigning" new (L2) forms of designation to the L1 concepts available to him/her ("new labels for existing concepts"). Gradually, as the number of semantic and conceptual cross-linguistic transfers increases and the system of verbal associations is reorganized, a unique conceptual base is formed in the mind of a bilingual, which includes lexical and grammatical concepts of three varieties: (1) shared and partially shared concepts and categories simultaneously associated with units of both L1 and L2; (2) concepts specifically related only to L1 units; (3) concepts specifically related only to L2 units [26]. Kecskes and Papp [25, p.249] summarize the conceptual effect of L2 as follows: "The greater the fluency in the foreign language, the less the learner has to rely on L1 word association because the growth of foreign language proficiency brings about changes in the conceptual system, which starts to accommodate knowledge and concepts gained through the foreign language".

We see the conceptual fluency and the reliance on the conceptual base operated through two language channels as a crucial cognitive characteristic feature of AL2 learners. In describing the nature of the semantic and conceptual organization of the AL2 learner's long-term memory, we turn to Kecskes's [22, p.36] "synergic-effect-in-the-bilingual-mind" hypothesis and his cognitive pragmatic framework presenting the concept as "a construct that blends knowledge gained from actual situational contexts in an individual-centered way". According to Kecskes [22], the bilingual mind contains synergic concepts, which provide access to conceptual contexts that differ to a particular extent both from the L1 concept and the L2 concept. Information coming through two linguistic channels undergoes conceptual integration (blending), and thus synergic concepts can arise as novel conceptual formations comprising elements of knowledge mediated both by L1 and L2. We can conclude that the synergic concept formed in the AL2 speaker's mind is verbalized by means of both languages and correlates with a broader

conceptual background (domain), the configuration of which differs from the configuration of the corresponding domains of the L1 concept and the L2 concept. If we view the meaning-construction capacity as being mediated by the quality of resources language makes available, the symbiosis of L1–L2 should have consequences for the executive control on the language user's conceptual system. Speech production and speech comprehension both rely on dynamic construal of meaning; and in the case of the AL2 learner such construal is mediated by the emergent L1–L2 functional system and the synergic effect of L1–L2 interrelations.

Another research question is how this emergent L1–L2 functional system and the AL2 proficiency are interrelated to the learner's metalinguistic awareness and contribute to his/her ability to control L2 use. We use the notion of metalinguistic awareness in a broader sense as referring to the sphere of metacognition and comprising AL2 learner's (1) knowledge about language as an object in itself; (2) skills of reflection on language and its use; (3) abilities to consciously monitor and control her/his strategies of language processing. Being an emerging property of bilingual/multilingual proficiency metalinguistic awareness is supposed to be a cognitive advantage of L2 users [27]. According to Ulrike Jessner [27, p.31], in bi- and multilingual speakers, "due to the interaction between all languages in the multilingual system, new qualities, such as enhanced level of multilingual awareness, are developed".

The role of explicit linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge in language learning is vigorously debated. Current SLA research welcomes a compromise view upon the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge and learning. Having reviewed the relevant literature on the weak-interface position, Karen Roehr-Brackin [15] describes the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge as dynamic, situated, contextualized, happening during conscious processing, but with an enduring influence on implicit cognition. According to Roehr-Brackin [15], conscious processing provides scope for long-range associations and brings about a new level of potential learning outcomes. Considered from such perspective, metalinguistic awareness of the AL2 learner should not be directly understood as a means of improving his/her language proficiency, but should be regarded as a characteristic feature of a language user who has achieved the best possible learning outcome and has gained an enhanced ability to make use of his/her knowledge about language.

Emergent metalinguistic abilities are known to reflect underlying changes in cognitive abilities [27]. We state that metalinguistic awareness is developed in AL2 learners as a result of long-lasting and cognitively consuming language learning. Being either instructed or self-instructed learners, AL2 users are exposed to acquiring language through communication focusing both on meaning and on form and tend to operationalize metalinguistic knowledge as part of their extensive practical use of L2. In this regard, sharpened metalinguistic awareness emergent in AL2 learners is performance driven. It represents itself as the reflection of an underlying development of learners' L2 proficiency and accumulation of actual language use experience. On the other hand, metalinguistic analysis and control may contribute to advances in L2 proficiency because they are responsible for structuring linguistic knowledge and monitoring strategies of language use. Such dialectical relationship between metalinguistic awareness and language performance results in the change of quality of AL2 learning and maintenance of L1–L2 functional system emerging as the consequence of such learning. Viewed this way, performance-driven metalinguistic awareness clearly distinguishes AL2 learners from both monolingual language users and less proficient L2 learners. What is more, AL2 learners themselves directly point at their metalinguistic awareness as the characteristic feature of their L2 advancedness, distinguishing between metalinguistic awareness of L1 and L2 similarities and differences [28]. According to Hilde Hasselgard's [28, p.114] findings, "learners and teachers benefit from positive transfer and identify features that are prone to negative transfer".

To conclude, we find the notions of bilingual cognition synergism and performance-driven metalinguistic awareness useful for qualifying AL2 learners as multicompetent language users. Such focus aims at highlighting the unique status of such learners, which is defined by Blake Turnbull as "the emergent bilingual status" [21]. According to Turnbull [21], acknowledging L2 learners as emergent bilinguals at their own right can contribute to promoting an epistemological change of current teaching practices and reframing language education by the attainment of cognitively oriented translanguaging practices.

### **AL2 Learner's Communicative Competence: Pragmatic and Sociolinguistic Expertise as Competences-in-Development.**

Jean-Marc Dewaele [29] states that the effect of L2 learning extends beyond the purely cognitive level. L2 learning is known to have a marked impact on learners' self-identity [30] and on their sociocultural awareness [31]. Sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions of language communication have been the focus of SLA and language pedagogy studies, gaining importance from the late 1950s.

Pragmatic competence (knowledge and skills in production of language functions and speech acts) regarded



as one of the core components of the communicative competence is usually presented as comprising several domains of L2 awareness and performance referring to effective pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic use of L2 in a contextually appropriate way [5]. One of the interdisciplinary objectives of applied linguistics and language pedagogy is to facilitate a common reference framework for describing and evaluating the AL2 learner's pragmatic competence. Considering the complexity involved in professional-level L2 communication, we find it necessary to model the AL2 learner's pragmatic competence at different levels of abstraction. Following the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" [14], we identify the most general macro-level of pragmatic competence including (1) discourse competence – knowledge and skills of applying L2 conventions of turntaking, thematic development and coherence maintenance within a particular discourse genre; (2) functional competence – ability to adhere to norms and conventions of communication for particular functional purposes, which are specific to L2 culture, e.g. norms of imparting factual information, expressing and finding out attitudes, structuring functional modes of speech (description, narration, argument), etc.; (3) design competence – ability to follow patterns of social interaction, e.g. patterns of establishing common knowledge, agreeing communicative roles, etc. [14].

Naoko Taguchi [5] stresses the importance of advanced L2 proficiency for the development of pragmatic skills in both the indirect meaning comprehension and speech acts production. The researcher concludes that "more advanced-level learners can process a larger number of cues simultaneously and go through a greater degree of inference to derive a correct interpretation" [5, p.512]. As far as the production of speech acts is concerned, Taguchi's findings show that AL2 learners use a wider range of conventional indirect strategies of communication and skillfully use a variety of linguistic resources for speech act performance [5]. Thus, AL2 learners are proved to be skilled in dealing with discourse and functional aspects of language communication. Nonetheless, in spite of being able to maintain appropriate interaction within a wide range of dynamically transforming communicative situations, AL2 learners, like any other language users, face the necessity of refining and adapting their pragmatic decision-making and functioning to the unfolding discourse circumstances and emergent communicative demands. Moreover, we suppose that AL2 learners' multicompetence and reliance on a complex functional system of two (or more) languages make their L2 pragmatic decision-making more extensive, which leads to greater cognitive effort needed for regulating their communicative activity. Viewed this way and given the multidimensionality of pragmatic skills contribution to meaning construction and meaning exchange in communication, L2 users require a continual enhancement of their pragmatic competence.

Another domain of expertise requiring extensive development and continual maintenance from AL2 learners is their sociolinguistic competence. "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" presents a broad understanding of social dimension of language use and conceptualizes sociolinguistic competence in its relevance to a vast range of pluricultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills [14]. According to CEFR [14, p.137], sociolinguistic competence narrowly defined comprises the skills to appropriately use linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk-wisdom, register differences, dialect and accent. The broader context of pluricultural knowledge and skills includes, among other components, the capacity to deal with 'otherness', the willingness to act as an intercultural mediator, the capacity to respond in a sociolinguistically appropriate way for communication purposes [14, p.157].

Although such broad framework of sociolinguistic competence provides a clear scope of AL2 learning objectives, nowadays, in an era of globalization, learners and teachers might face huge difficulties in defining the points of reference in L2 culture comprehension. Claire Kramsch [32] formulates the problem in the following way: "Communities in an era of globalization have become too hybrid and too complex to have well-defined rules of behaviours that need to be observed if communication is to proceed smoothly. Pragmatic appropriateness must now be negotiated on a case by case basis" [32, p.409]. The researcher concludes that "FL learning today is caught between the need to acquire 'usable skills' in predictable cultural contexts and the fundamental unpredictability of global contexts" [32, p.409].

In the current situation language pedagogy experts find it too simplistic to treat L1 and L2 cultures as homogeneous ones [32]. Instead, they propose a multilingual approach to language learning and teaching and foreground the idea of intercultural transfer as the key notion for profiling domains of L2 learners' sociocultural expertise [32]. Among such domains Kramsch [32, p.412] identifies "heteroglossia (or the ability to use multiple voices, registers, and styles), multiliteracy (or the ability to use various genres and create new ones), and multimodality (or the ability to make meaning not just through language but also through visuals, music, gestures, film, and video)". The researcher also highlights the necessity of systematic practice in the transfer of meaning "across linguistic codes, discourse frames, media, and modalities" [32, p.412]. What is more, in social interaction AL2 learners are supposed to benefit from relying on their whole linguistic resources and making use of the whole L1 and L2 repertoire [33].

To conclude, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences provide AL2 learners with functional

meaning-driven orientations in a variety of language use events. Acquiring social meanings of the L2 symbolic system and learning how to utilize them in linguistically mediated human interaction contribute to shaping language identity of the AL2 learner and his/her pluricultural worldview. However, it should be born in mind that the AL2 learner's pragmatic and sociolinguistic development is dependent on L1-L2 functional system and cross-linguistic transfer. Maintenance of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences at a high level of proficiency requires from the AL2 learner a large amount of motivation, metacognitive awareness and deliberate long-running effort. This becomes more challenging today when the meanings of communication and culture are redefined under the influence of globalization and its ambivalent effects manifested in stimulating intercultural dialogue and transcultural exchange, on the one hand, and deteriorating cultural identities and promoting a conservative return to cultural segmentation, on the other.

### III. CONCLUSION

The primary objective of SLA research is to understand the actor of the L2 development process and describe this actor in terms of complex ecologies of multicompetent language use. The multicompetent L2 user perspective plays a decisive role in promoting the learner-centered language teaching. The increasing need for AL2 users causes the requirement for designing language programs based on AL2 learners "generic diagnosis" and further specification of an individual learner's needs, attitudes and strategies. We consider the following characteristics of the AL2 learner to be crucial for understanding him/her as a multicompetent language user: (1) the increasing influence of the L2 interiorization upon the learner's conceptual system and the emergence of L1-L2 synergic functional system providing access to the common conceptual base; (2) sharpened metalinguistic awareness reflecting vast experience in the use of L2 and the underlying changes in cognitive abilities of the emergent bilingual; (3) reliance on a complex L1-L2 functional system of cognition and the whole L1-L2 communicative resource in pragmatic decision-making and pluriculturally mediated meaning construction; (4) the dialectical tension between the enhanced ability to maintain pragmatically and sociolinguistically appropriate interaction within a wide range of communicative situations and the necessity of constant refining and adapting this ability to the requirements of dynamically transforming pluricultural communication in the globalized world.

Achieving an advanced level of L2 proficiency is usually a time and effort consuming process requiring from a learner the capacity to optimize well-being, cope with crisis and overcome mental and organizational barriers in language learning. Language departments at colleges and universities as AL2 teaching providers are to develop a learner-centered educational environment and offer AL2 learners individualized learning paths taking into account the nature of their linguistic multicompetence and characteristics of their bilingual (multilingual) cognition. What is more, AL2 instruction must give precise consideration to the meaning-construction potential of language as a social phenomenon and the role of AL2 multicompetence in profiling the language user's worldview.

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