

Success in L2 – from a linguistic point of view

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Successful L2 acquisition and, ideally, stable bilingualism, is both more and less than a return of investment. Problems with the latter typically arise from a lack of prestige or symbolic value of linguistic codes or their speakers. If there is no symbolic market for specific linguistic skills, direct financial benefits are unlikely.

Fortunately, from a linguistic point of view we can appreciate linguistic abilities for others reasons beyond what they buy us in the symbolic market. Success in this sense means that a second language learner is given the opportunity to do what his or her brain excels at, namely acquiring and living with, more than one language. In the ideal case, the child would be allowed early exposure to a second language, i.e. during a particularly sensitive phase when those optimal acquisition strategies which make L1-acquisition very robust still appear accessible. Both bilingual L1 acquisition and speedy L2 in young children also show that – at least in principle – we need not worry about negative effects for children's L1 due to the exposure to an early second language.

My presentation deals with different types of acquisition (L1, the simultaneous acquisition of two L1s, early L2 acquisition of German by children with different L1s) and a range of data (including code-switching/mixing in adults and children), drawing attention to the creative way learners and speakers of all ages deal with their linguistic resources.