

## **Multicompetence and First Language Attrition: Where Do We Draw the Line?**

**Erica Won-Jing Lowe**  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

Cook's (1992) model of multicompetence not only contributes to our understanding of second language learners as *L2 users*, but also offers one of the first attempts in looking at how a speaker's L2 affects the L1. Before the notion of multicompetence emerged, almost all changes happening in the L1 of a fluent L2 user were regarded as attrition. For example, competent L2 users sometimes find themselves struggling with finding the right words in their L1, or using L2 syntax when speaking in their L1, and they often are regarded as individuals undergoing first language attrition. However, according to Cook, *multicompetent* individuals, that is, those who have two or more languages in their minds, have different knowledge of their L1s than *monocompetent* individuals, that is, those who only have one language in their minds. How, then, can we categorize the changes in the proficient L2 users' L1? Do we regard these changes as natural results of multicompetence, or do we regard them as signs of first language attrition? In light of Cook's multicompetence model, I will examine studies of multicompetent individuals whose L1 (English) is undergoing changes.

In the field of language attrition, there have been several studies of native speakers of American English teaching EFL abroad. Major (1992) and Porte (1999, 2003) used different methodologies to elicit data from the teachers and found that their English was not in accordance with the linguistic norms of American English. The longitudinal study by Major (1992) explored the stylistic variation between formal (FOR) and casual (CAS) forms of the subjects' first language, and examined how the L1 was affected by the subjects' proficiency level in their L2. The researcher hypothesized that the higher an individual's L2 proficiency, the more first language loss s/he would suffer. Major also hypothesized that the higher an individual's L2 proficiency, the more the CAS form of the first language would be affected when compared to FOR. The subjects were a group of five American English speaking females who moved to Brazil for an extended period of time. The control groups were five Americans and five Brazilians who had never traveled to other countries extensively. The study was conducted by recording the subjects in two distinct settings: in a casual conversation (CAS) and reading a word/sentence list (FOR) designed to elicit voiceless stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ in both Portuguese and English. The researcher compared the voice onset time (VOT) of the bilingual teachers with the VOT in the native speakers' performance in both languages. The results supported the researcher's hypotheses: (a) the subjects with a higher L2 proficiency performed poorer in their native language, and (b) the subjects with better command of the L2 showed greater loss of CAS in their first language.

Porte (1999, 2003) also conducted two studies of EFL instructors in private language schools and universities in Spain. All of the subjects spoke English as their first language and Spanish as their second. They were described as fully acculturated to the host country and integrated into the Spanish-speaking community having Spanish spouses or partners as well as bilingual children. In Porte's 1999 cross-sectional study of 50 participants, a daily language use survey was employed. The participants reported that the first language areas that were most

affected by their second language were nouns, verbs, punctuation, and spelling. The subjects also expressed concern that they were becoming less and less sensitive to student errors. They also started to doubt their identity as native speakers. Porte's 2003 longitudinal study involved three subjects who were English-speaking university EFL lecturers in Spain. Porte investigated the patterns of code-switching in conversations among the three lecturers. Conversations were taped without revealing the real objective of the study to the participants. The researcher hypothesized that the participants would talk freely without closely monitoring their linguistic output. In the conversations among the three lecturers multiple instances of code-switching were observed. Believing that code-switching is done consciously, Porte concluded that his subjects were comfortable code-switching because they knew each other well and were able to assume shared knowledge among themselves. It is not certain as to whether such instances of code-switching suggest language attrition in these individuals.

In examining the results of the L1 attrition studies in light of Cook's (1992) multicompetence model, an important factor emerges. Even though all of the studies revealed deviances of the subjects' speech from native speakers' speech, the results were measured based on the standard of a monolingual native speaker. In Major's (1992) and Porte's (2003) studies, the performance and the norms of monolingual native speakers of English were used as the scale to judge the degree of deviance of the bilingual/multicompetent subjects' L1s. The results of self-reports in Porte's 1999 study suggest that his participants probably judged themselves against a monolingual native speaker of English as well. According to Cook (1992), multicompetent individuals as opposed to monolinguals have a different knowledge of the L2 as exemplified by their metalinguistic awareness and cognitive processes. Thus, making comparisons between the two groups' language production (i.e., the L1 of the multicompetent individuals and the L1 of the monocompetent individuals) might not be a valid method of research. As a remedy, Cook observes that a lot of research is now comparing learners' language vis-à-vis the language of balanced bilinguals, instead of monolingual speakers. The results and conclusions drawn from such studies may yield more convincing results.

In considering Cook's (1992) model, a key question remains: How much of each language does an individual need to know to be said to possess multicompetence? According to Cook, the L2 user, who does not necessarily have a native-like knowledge of the L2, is qualified to be called multicompetent. Cook claims that speakers who show a difference in the grammar of their L1 and L2, that is, speakers who have different parameter settings for the two languages, should be considered as possessing multicompetence. The researcher illustrates the point by saying that even though a multicompetent individual does not function with 100% knowledge in her L2, she is functioning at levels between 100%-200%, because she has 100% knowledge on her L1. However, that example assumes that the individual under discussion has the ability to function at 100% in her L1. In the cases of the American EFL teachers that showed attrition, or changes, in their L1, can we be sure as to whether or not they still possess multicompetence? Where should the line be drawn?

Theoretically speaking, Major's (1992) and Porte's (1999, 2003) participants could be said to still possess multicompetence, because they still have two distinct language systems, even though minor changes in their L1 have been documented. Realistically speaking, however, changes in the L1 of the American EFL teachers resulting in a deviation from the norm were probably neither welcomed by the teachers themselves, nor by their colleagues or students. Language change in the teachers can be assessed based on two distinct perspectives: descriptive and evaluative. From a descriptive perspective, the teachers could be viewed as undergoing some

changes that are common to other multicompetent individuals. However, from an evaluative perspective, the teachers, found to experience difficulties in judging the correctness of their L1, could be viewed as losing authority in their first language. Such research shows that interpreting multicompetence in individuals that show L1 attrition remains somewhat problematic at best.

## REFERENCES

- Cook, V. (1992). Evidence for multicompetence. *Language Learning*, 42, 557-591.
- Major, R. C. (1992). Losing English as a first language. *Modern Language Journal*, 6, 90-208.
- Porte, G.. (1999). English as a forgotten language. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 53, 8-25.
- Porte, G.. (2003). English from a distance: Code-mixing and blending in the L1 output of long-term resident overseas EFL teachers. In V. Cook (Ed.), *Effects of the second language on the first* (pp. 103-119). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Erica Lowe is an MA student in TESOL at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include adult first language attrition, teaching English pronunciation, and code-mixing in Hong Kong Cantonese-English bilinguals.