# Specifying the Norms of Successful L2 Users for Developing Theories on the Learning Potential in SLA

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In the plenary talk of the 2005 SLRF, Vivian Cook (2005) reiterated the concept of *successful L2 users* that he proposed earlier in 1999, and contended that the norms of successful L2 users, rather than native speaker norms, should be used as the standards for L2 teaching and learning. Although the above claim is theoretically appealing, specification of successful L2 users still depends upon further research and needs to be empirically established.

Specifically, Cook argued that as a result of interlingual interaction and transfer, L2 learners, including those who have reached the ultimate attainment stage in the L2, are not equivalent of two monolinguals in one brain. Instead, Cook maintained that L2 learners possess an integrated cognitive system, called multicompetence, which processes information (both in the L1 and in the L2) differently from that of monolingual native speakers. The resulting linguistic competence of a bilingual L2 learner is therefore qualitatively different from the one possessed by monolingual minds. Under the above view, the typical outcome of SLA is non-native-like competence.

Given the likely outcome of non-nativeness in second language acquisition, Cook urged not to perceive L2 learners as deficient learners of the TL (i.e., L2), but instead, recognize L2 learners as competent language users who possess more flexible and enriched linguistic resources in comparison with monolingual native speakers. Following the above view, Cook posited that the goals of second language teaching and learning should be based upon successful L2 users whose language development in the L2 has reached asymptote, that is, near-native levels (see also Cook, 1999). On the other hand, native speaker norms should simply be used as a ready benchmark for purposes of describing the learning potential of L2 learners, rather than as a goal or a measuring yardstick (see also Birdsong, 2005b). However, what remains unclear in Cook's talk is the lack of specification of the so-called successful L2 users. For instance, what does it mean to be a successful L2 user? If the norms of successful L2 users are to be used as the goals for L2 teaching and learning, what are the norms of successful L2 use in various L2 linguistic domains? As much as we need to further untangle the concept of a native speaker, specification and portrait of successful L2 users in various linguistic domains are warranted.

In recent years, a growing body of L2 acquisition research has started to establish empirically the description of the end-state language proficiency of successful L2 users (e.g., Birdsong, 2003; Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, & Moselle, 1994; Marinova-Todd, 2003). Birdsong (2005a) contends that such line of research will provide insights into the learning potential in SLA. It must be noted that the notion of language proficiency should include, but not be limited to, *grammatical competence*; it should also include the ability to process acquired grammatical knowledge. Indeed, the fundamental difference between a native speaker's and a non-native speaker's proficiency may either involve under-specification at the level of *knowledge representation* and/or involve *processing* difficulties of the acquired knowledge (Juffs, 2004; Sorace, 2004; Sorace, Pickering, & Pulvermuller, 2004). Addressing the L2 ultimate attainment of successful L2 users, Sorace et al. (2004) strongly contends that at the L2 end-state, the

fundamental differences between native speakers and successful L2 users often reside in their processing abilities rather than in underlying grammatical representation *per se*. Similar to Sorace's contention, Birdsong (2005) also points out:

> With respect to certain language *processing tasks* (e.g., lexical retrieval, parsing strategies, detection of fine acoustic distinctions inherent in syllable stress, consonant voicing, and vowel duration, etc), *native-like* performance is *not* observed [even] among high-proficiency late L2 learners (italics added). (pp. 183-184)

The possibility that L2 end-states can be constrained by representational problems and/or by processing deficiencies highlights the need to examine successful L2 users both at the level of knowledge and at the level of processing. However, according to Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003), a problem with SLA researchers' investigation of successful L2 users has to do with a tendency "to equate 'language' with 'grammatical competence' " (p. 576), thereby focusing on the description of L2 end-state grammar (see also Hulstijn, 2002; Marinova-Todd, 2003). Consequently, despite recent advances in research on successful L2 users' end-state competence, much remains unknown about their end-state processing ability in the L2. If we aim to gain further insights into successful L2 users, as strongly advocated by Cook, an integrative account of how (second) language acquisition may proceed, plateau, or stagnate on the path to native-like competence and of end-state processing ability is warranted.

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