



NEW LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS

# Informal Learning and Institution-wide Language Provision

University Language Learners  
in the 21st Century

Denyze Toffoli

# New Language Learning and Teaching Environments

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# Informal Learning and Institution-wide Language Provision

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## About This Book

University students aged 18–25 or 30 today learn foreign languages as actors in a complex system where their roles as students, Internet users, employees, travellers, gamers, consumers and so on are played out, sometimes simultaneously, in a globalised context. Reinders and White (2016) observe:

we are currently entering a phase in educational practice and thinking where the use of technology is enabling a shift of focus away from the classroom – and indeed in some cases formal education – taking instead the learners’ lives and their experiences as the central point for learning. Our understanding of how learners design their own learning experiences and environments and the role technology plays in this design are starting to [e]merge, requiring a re-visioning of the role and shape of education. (p. 143)

The present volume seeks to explore this recent reality particularly in France, as that is where my practice is anchored, but also drawing on experience from other countries, examining the interplay between formal



education and informal learning,<sup>1</sup> targeting different levels of language and diverse technological practices and provoking encounters between theories that are sometimes opposed or at least divergent with regard to language acquisition. *Informal Learning and Institution-wide Language Provision* would like to draw attention to this new type of learner in higher education, digitally literate, familiar with Web 2.0 applications, and highly involved with their L2.

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- Reinders, H., & White, C. (2016). 20 years of autonomy and technology: How far have we come and where to next? *Language Learning and Technology*, 20(2), 143–154.

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<sup>1</sup>The European Commission defines informal learning as follows: “learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning may be unintentional from the learner’s perspective. Examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences. Examples are [...] languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country; ...[etc.]” (European Commission, 2012, p. 17). We will define this concept in more detail in Chapter 6, Sect. 2.

# Prologue

Language learning and teaching have evolved significantly over the past few decades. My own journey has seen traditional classrooms equipped with language laboratories morphed into open-access learning centres, themselves transforming with respect to informal language learning into what some have called the digital wilds (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Little & Thorne, 2017; Sauro & Zourou, 2019). While this may not be so easily perceived in countries where native English speakers make up a significant majority of the population, it has been glaringly present elsewhere and is starting to be noticed even in traditionally Anglophone countries, where the need to speak one of the other major global languages (such as Spanish, Chinese, Arabic or even French) is beginning to be felt. Administrators, teachers and learners have all seen major changes and made considerable adaptations to today's new environments and modalities of language learning.

Observing these trends, contemporary language learners can be seen as complex psychological beings, living their life in an equally complex social sphere, constantly adapting to their ever-changing environment. As we better understand how language development takes place for the L2

learner, we can attempt to adjust teaching to learning, creating learning environments propitious to effective, pleasant and perhaps even accelerated learning.

Although a historical view of knowledge sees it as a cumulative body of human effort through the ages, in many ways each and every researcher is required to rediscover fire or (depending on the metaphor chosen) reinvent the wheel in their own way. Knowledge in any particular discipline is neither part of a phylogenetic accumulation, nor some sort of Jungian collective unconscious and is (unfortunately) not transmitted as an inventory to each new generation of researchers. Each of us must build, deconstruct and reconstruct differently, by interpreting our own readings, choosing (or being subject to) the order in which we encounter them, comparing our own human and scientific experiences and processing the information thus accumulated with our own individual intellectual endowments, which are also the result of unique starting points and developmental paths.

While the progress of humanity through history is a source of amazement, as an individual I am nonetheless dissatisfied with this constant need to “keep re-inventing the wheel”. Of course each new beginning is not entirely new, yet it does often appear to be so. I am tempted to think that any approach to research in our discipline, applied linguistics or language didactics, is somewhat insignificant, except perhaps to satisfy some individual, even selfish needs, such as advancing along a semi-determined career path or achieving some degree of personal satisfaction. To that extent, the present book is both a source of satisfaction and admittedly a reiteration of insights of both those that have preceded me and of my contemporaries. It is nonetheless a personal view of the latest research in an exciting and developing field of applied linguistics and an attempt to draw together some previously separate threads of thought. To that extent, it is a contribution to the field and a unique piece of work.

In a book consecrated to foreign language learning and development and for which a previous version exists in rudimentary form in my main L2 (French), I also feel the need to comment in this preface on the extent to which the language of the writing process itself guides, constrains and determines our thought processes. One example of this is the use of gender-inclusive writing, which I first adopted as a student in a women’s

studies programme in Toronto in the 1980s. Attempting to pursue this in French, which is a gender-conditioned language, was a particular challenge, which brought with it a new lot of learnings about both languages. The approach in English, using the plural (they, their) to avoid gender conflict, seems simple and effective to me and, with some exceptions, I will adopt it here. I am aware that this approach does disturb some readers. I have also decided to avoid the use of acronyms as much as possible, in favour of repeatedly using the long form of various terms. The reading process does not appear to be overly burdened by this approach (although it would be interesting to find reference to specific experiments, perhaps using approaches from cognitive psychology, to support it), which has the advantage of supplying permanent access to the constituent parts of each term. Nevertheless, I have retained some acronyms for very long terms or those that have fallen into common usage, at least within the small community of applied linguists (e.g. “CEFR”). A third example, shared by most of my peers publishing in our field, concerns the non-modification of student quotations, especially when they write in their second or non-native language. My final example of the weight of language (and certainly the most significant one) concerns translation, a technical exercise with which I have never had to deal, except intuitively. The translations in this document are my own and I am solely responsible for any mistakes incurred, especially as I have often relied on initial drafts provided by the online translator *DeepL*.<sup>1</sup> As far as the activity of writing itself is concerned, my first scholarly publications and written reports for industry were produced in my second language (French) with all the limitations and defects that this implies. I must admit that it is both a liberation and a gratification to publish my research in my L1 (English) — the “royal road” to global scientific dissemination.

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<sup>1</sup>[www.deepl.com](http://www.deepl.com).

## Becoming a Researcher in Applied Linguistics

Commonplace “coffee table” psychology encourages us to see in children’s favourite games the beginnings of their future careers: as a child, I played “school” with my dolls and friends, and inevitably played the teacher. Thus, although the objective of this short biography is a retrospective of my research career, I do think that professional identity is built not only from the moment we begin to practice, nor even from the moment we begin our professional training, but well before that, in a profusion of personal events, haphazard discoveries and serendipitous encounters. This justifies, or at least perhaps excuses, the hiatus that will follow, especially when it comes to presenting a work wherein the psychological dimension is paramount.

My primary and secondary education took place in English-speaking Canada, in contexts where pedagogical experimentation was rife: multi-level, “open area” classes were the norm. I spent my two final years of primary school in the class of a teacher who was passionate about project-oriented pedagogy. From there, the integration of an experimental secondary school was a logical continuation. No bells, no homeroom by age or grade level, courses were individualised at the macro (choice of subjects), the meso (choice and ordering of sequences within a subject) and the micro (pursuit and completion of elements) levels. I found myself stimulated and happy, but also challenged and critical: Why would the fear of a mathematics teacher (a subject in which I previously excelled) lead me to drop this subject? How did the need to go through the mediation of a schoolmate to understand physics explanations say something about me and/or the teacher? How could the audio-lingual language laboratory methods used for foreign language learning (French and Russian) ever enable me to communicate with the families of my relatives, who still resided largely in continental Europe? How, moreover, could they allow me to become fully a part of this Canada whose recently decreed national bilingualism was to determine its identity? I am of the generation that recognises itself in the motivational assumptions proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), although my schooling began before the first “French immersion” schools were set up at local levels.

My roots in that multicultural, officially bilingual English-French (although functionally multilingual: dominant English, coexisting with the languages of the region's great migratory waves — Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Hindi, Greek, Italian, German) society gave me a different perspective when I arrived in France. Here, at least in the Paris region, official and functional monolingualism met a rich profusion of cultures and influences very different from those I had known previously, particularly from North and West Africa, cultures that are present but not recognised, often marginalised, undervalued or even disparaged.

These experiences aroused my interest in education, learning, and what favours or inhibits learning on the one hand and, on the other hand, encouraged my fascination with foreign languages, those “secret” codes that allowed my relatives to communicate with each other, without me being able to understand or intervene. The seeds to a research career in language learning and teaching had already been planted.

This career was initially marked by trial and error in teaching. As a professional English trainer in large companies, I mainly met people who had not learned English successfully at school; some felt no need to do so, but were constrained by their hierarchy or the exigencies of a changing job description. In this context, how was I to do my job? How can we help others to succeed in such a long and complex learning process? How can we reconcile the adult learner with schooling that often labelled them as failures? These questions then led me to more theoretical, academic and focused research: a Ph.D., collaboration on various research projects, publications, presentations in colloquia and conferences.

Working in the context of vocational training, then continuing education, has made me aware of the relative and evolving importance of English-language skills for employees in different professional sectors. From the all-English imperative in the professions of some sectors to the total absence of needs or multilingual necessities in others, exposure to this multiplicity of situations has also taught me restraint and mistrust with regard to a certain number of commonplace injunctions<sup>2</sup> concerning language teaching/learning. My integration into the academic community has somewhat modified this position: the education of young

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<sup>2</sup>For example: everyone needs English; learning a foreign language is essential nowadays, etc.

people must also integrate the moral, civic and cognitive aspects of education. In these circumstances, foreign languages can play their part in the teaching of tolerance, flexibility and openness to others.<sup>3</sup> The specificities of the long, nonlinear learning that constitutes language acquisition, the particular needs of the different worlds of initial, vocational and continuing education, have made it clear that I favour pedagogical and didactic options that no longer fall within these particular categories of training, but within the perspective of lifelong learning and therefore of training outside the usual institutional channels.

Since 2006, at the University of Strasbourg, I have invested considerable time and energy in responsibilities for projects I believe in: Franco-British dual degrees in teaching, the creation of a new Masters' degree in 2013 and the redesign of the courses that compose it, heading up a department of applied linguistics, fulfilling a mission identified by the university presidency to redefine and restructure institution-wide language provision (IWLP). My previous knowledge of audiences in various sectors allows me to better understand how individuals in non-language disciplines approach the learning of a foreign language, each in their own way and from their own point of view. It also allows me, as a teacher, to accept and take into consideration the fact that they may not consider language learning to be important, interesting or even useful.

I began this prologue by looking through a very personal kaleidoscope of still images representing different viewpoints related to the central themes of this book. This somewhat intimate narrative will be followed by a more objective account of my scientific production to date.

My research concerns various aspects of foreign language (L2) acquisition. I have explored this theme through psychological theories (motivation, goal-setting, self-determination, attribution or attachment), sociological theories (the socio-educational model, socio-constructivist approaches) and linguistic theories (construction grammar, usage-based models) of learning in general and language acquisition in particular, contextualising issues related to teaching and learning. By drawing on the global framework of complex and dynamic systems, my work can be considered part of a current in applied linguistics that emerged in the

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<sup>3</sup>See Claire Kramsch or Lourdes Ortega, among others.

wake of Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2007) seminal publication. I consider L2 acquisition to be an emergent phenomenon, resulting from multiple interactions between systems specific to each individual (self-determination,<sup>4</sup> agency,<sup>5</sup> autonomy,<sup>6</sup> attachment,<sup>7</sup> self-efficacy,<sup>8</sup> self-esteem,<sup>9</sup> motivation,<sup>10</sup> ...), those dependent on their social context (interactions, learning resources, various media, immersion, ...) and those related to a cognitivist understanding of language. However, my position refutes the Chomskyan notion of a *language acquisition device (lad)* as the seat of innate knowledge of a universal structural grammar (Chomsky, 1965). My conception of acquisition is based on rationality (frequency, salience and recency) and *exemplar-based* models such as those found in the emerging theory of construction grammar and usage-based acquisition (Ellis, 2006; Tomasello, 2005). Interdependent integration of these theories of language learning provides me with my own understanding of the ways in which an L2 is acquired in adulthood.

From a methodological point of view, I aim for robust results by relying on a strategic combination of diverse methodologies. At the beginning of my research career, I relied heavily on a particular type of interviewing, referred to in French as "*entretiens d'explicitation*" (Vermerisch, 1994), which involves obtaining detailed descriptions of behaviour by subjects who project themselves into familiar target situations. More recently, six of my studies have relied entirely or partially on survey approaches, which is particularly useful for gaining initial information about the types and extent of practices within a circumscribed population. Discourse analysis of student writings, examination of logbooks

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<sup>4</sup>The theory of Edward Deci, professor of psychology, and Richard Ryan, clinical psychologist, will be discussed in the chapter devoted to Self-determination Theory.

<sup>5</sup>Agency will be addressed in the context of Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and in relation to autonomy, as seen by David Little.

<sup>6</sup>Autonomy has been studied in particular detail in applied linguistics by researchers such as Henri Holec, David Little and Phil Benson and will be reconsidered in the light of their work here.

<sup>7</sup>Attachment refers to the theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

<sup>8</sup>The concept of self-efficacy refers to the work of Albert Bandura.

<sup>9</sup>Self-esteem refers to the work of Bandura, but also Ryan and Deci and more particularly Zoltan Dörnyei and Ema Ushioda in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

<sup>10</sup>Research on motivation in general and in applied linguistics in particular is extensive and will be the subject of many references and explanations further on.



detailing L2 activities outside the classroom and ethnographic observation are also particularly useful approaches in attempting a full understanding of the phenomena at work. It seems imperative today that research combine these and other methodological approaches, as it is the complementary dialogue between the emic and the etic that can lead to a more profound understanding of language development and acquisition (Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). From an action research perspective, the constant to and fro between research and activity in the field with teachers and learners, as well as the personal involvement of the researcher in an ever-evolving context, prevents the implementation of controlled experimental protocols (as might be obtained in a laboratory context). Mixed methodology permits a certain objectivity in the treatment of subjects which concern humans and human activity and which necessitate a certain theoretical “polytheism” (Block, 1999).

An approach using metaphor seems to be particularly meaningful and adapted to a researcher who began her career studying literature. The metaphor intended to guide me in my thesis research was that of the funnel (Narcy-Combes & Narcy-Combes, 2000), describing a broad body of knowledge, which could be reduced as time goes by, targeting a very specific research object and thus allowing it to be precisely framed and described. The metaphorical reference of the sieve is also sometimes used, implying the removal of elements (theoretical or field data) non-essential to the targeted end-product. These utilitarian and somewhat mechanistic images of research seem to me today to be far removed from the one I have built for myself, which is more like a neural network with its synaptic, electrical and temporary links, reinforced by use and weakened when neglected, as the neural points themselves multiply or decrease in number according to the nutritional intake they receive. Another metaphor that could represent my current approach would be that of a window opening onto starry infinity. Through this window, I see only a tiny number of existing stars and, depending on the moment, or on events that have nothing to do with the stars, I pay more attention to some of them; I draw constellations. I may even be able to project myself very close to one of them to have a different perspective and discover other previously unknown stars and thus design other new constellations by drawing

lines between them. I therefore conceive my research today not as something that is being refined in relation to an ever-more-distinct objective, but as something that is moving, expanding and enriching itself with new points, sometimes seeming very distant from this object, which itself is moving, redefining and reinventing itself. Perhaps my convocation of the theory of complex and dynamic systems is better understood as a metatheory (Dörnyei, Henry, & MacIntyre, 2015) capable of encompassing not only this diversity, but also this movement.

Fortunately or unfortunately, applied linguistics is not a unified field. Applied linguists constitute their epistemological frameworks from several disciplines, themselves multiple (language sciences, educational sciences, psychology, sociology and so on). We do not always share the same references. I therefore allow myself to explain, sometimes in some detail, the theories on which I rely. The objective is not to make the text overly academic, nor to infantilise the reader, but to allow them to follow my reasoning. My focus will be the L2 development of contemporary language learners in higher education and all of the arguments I develop will circle back to this point.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CRAL	Language Learning and Resource Centre ( <i>Centre de ressources et d'apprentissage des langues</i> ) — Strasbourg, France
CTL	Classroom-Trained Learners
ESP	English for Special Purposes
FASIL	Fully Autonomous Self-Instructed Learners
GA	General American
IDLE	Informal Digital Learning of English
IIEF	International Institute of French Studies (Institut International d'Études Françaises) — Strasbourg, France
IWLP	Institution-Wide Language Provision
L1	First Language or Mother Tongue
L2	Second or Foreign Language
LEA	Applied Foreign Languages ( <i>Langues étrangères appliquées</i> )
LLCE	Languages, Literatures and Foreign Cultures ( <i>Langues, littératures et cultures étrangères</i> )
LRC	Language Resource Centre
LSP	Language for Special Purposes
OCLL	Out of Classroom Language Learning



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OILE	Online Informal Learning of English
OILL	Online Informal Language Learning
RP	Received Pronunciation
SAES	Society of Anglicists in French Higher Education ( <i>Société des anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur</i> )
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPIRAL	Centre for Innovation and Resources in Language Learning ( <i>Service pédagogique d'innovation et de ressources pour l'apprentissage des langues</i> ) — Strasbourg, France

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# Part I

## Theoretical Views on the Contemporary L2 Learner

Language learners at the beginning of the twenty-first century are different from those at the end of the twentieth century, particularly in view of the technologies they can and do use to access language resources and the variety of ways in which they engage with these resources. Language learners of the 1980s and 1990s came into contact with their foreign language mainly during a language class or, for a lucky few, through immersion in the country where it was spoken. For those taking language classes, they would generally start with a group which had the same background (usually grade level), the same resources (a teacher, a textbook and the audio-visual resources to accompany it, sometimes an audio-active-comparative language laboratory) and that progressed at the same pace. For students particularly committed to their learning, they could supplement their language course with some activities outside the classroom, for example by listening to recorded music in the foreign language or finding a pen pal with whom to exchange letters once or twice a month. The arrival of the Internet at the end of the 1990s completely changed this situation and opened the door to a multitude of new activities for learning. The motivating factors behind individuals' desires to learn a new language were no doubt the same as those of the past, but

new resources and new ways of accessing them profoundly changed the game.

Language teachers who lived through these changes are aware of the entirely new language-related media their students encounter. They see students participating in various leisure-type activities in their L2, particularly when that L2 is English. They can sometimes catch them watching all types of videos in their L2 online, talk to them about gaming or singing songs in their L2 and hear about various other activities that they engage in to contact other learners or speakers of their target language.

As researchers, we are keen to know more: What exactly are they involved in? If looking at a specific group, such as students in higher education, how extensive and how intensive are such activities? Do these practices change over time, according to the age of the pupils or students, or simply from year to year according to trends or technical innovations? Are there measurable effects on the acquisition (or development<sup>1</sup>) of the language itself and if so, on which aspects: auditory perception, comprehension (of words, concepts), production of meaning, grammaticality, pronunciation, or something else? Depending on the results, what do we do with this feedback when returning to our role as teachers? How can learners' knowledge influence twenty-first-century language didactics? Several of my contemporaries (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Cole, 2015; Dressman, 2017; Kusyik, 2017; Schwarz, 2013; Sockett, 2014; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Vanderplank, 2016) have tackled these questions and my contribution should be considered in the light of their work and as a complement to published studies and ongoing research in this field.

When answering the above questions, I'd like to begin by situating a number of notions and debates that have shaped my own understanding of how an L2 is acquired and how individuals can position themselves in relation to learning in general and to learning an L2 in particular.

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<sup>1</sup>Larsen-Freeman (2015) urges the use of the word *development* as an alternative to learning or acquisition, as she considers it more neutral and inclusive of a variety of different factors.

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# 1

## Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST)

A number of the notions that have proven fundamental for recent second language acquisition research can be found within the global theoretical framework of complex and dynamic systems (CDS), as taken up and articulated around language acquisition by scholars such as Diane Larson-Freeman and Lynne Cameron (2007), Zoltán Dörnyei, Alastaire Henry, and Peter MacIntyre (2015), Jean-Marc Dewaele and Peter MacIntyre (2014), or Geoff Sockett (2012) writing in English and Jean-Claude Bertin (2012), Meryl Kusyk (2017) or Gregory Miras (2017) in the French context.

Systems theory is generally said to have originated with Henri Poincaré's Chaos theory, established around the end of the nineteenth century and concerning mathematical models explaining the stability of the solar system. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's work in biology in the 1950s and 1960s is also considered seminal in this area. It establishes the idea that a system consists of different elements participating in some type of central process, interacting with each other and organising themselves as a function of the process itself. The meteorologist Edward Lorenz is another important figure in the history of systems theory, known for his work on initial conditions in the 1970s. Examples of systems from



the physical and biological sciences include weather systems, solar systems and ecological systems. Developed by the French sociologist Edgar Morin in the latter part of the twentieth century as part of a general epistemology of the humanities and social sciences, the theory has expanded to include ideas of complexity, uncertainty and self-eco-organisation. Morin argues that a system is more than the sum of its parts (Morin, 2005).

Reference to dynamic systems theory in applied linguistics is relatively recent, with the first major work addressing the subject being published by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron in 2007. Around the same time, members of the University of Gröningen in the Netherlands also began publishing works in applied linguistics referring to complex dynamic systems (De Bot, 2008; De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Lowie, 2017; Verspoor, 2012; Verspoor, Lowie, Chan, & Vahtrick, 2017; Verspoor, Lowie, & Van Dijk, 2008; Verspoor, Schmid, & Xu, 2012). Bertin justifies the use of complex dynamic systems theory in the field of language didactics

insofar as its main objects (language, the learner, the teacher) and the process (language acquisition/learning) around which the system organises itself, are themselves complex constructed objects. (Bertin, 2012, p. 252)

Many aspects of complex dynamic systems theory make it an ideal candidate as an overall theoretical framework for understanding the phenomena of L2 acquisition and development (Dörnyei, Henry, & MacIntyre, 2015; Lowie, 2017). The emphasis on initial conditions, non-linearity, dynamism, attractors, emergence and coadaptation is eminently present in second language acquisition (SLA) research. In order to understand the overall theory in terms of SLA applications, a good starting point will be to look at each of these six parameters one by one.

## 1 Initial Conditions

Complex dynamic systems theory considers the initial conditions of a system to be decisive in determining the trajectories that will be followed

through the system as well as the results obtained at the end. The notion was initially described by the meteorologist Edward Lorenz (1972), with his presentation to the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences entitled *Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?* In this presentation, he discusses the fact that minimal changes to the initial data input into computer simulations of weather conditions could create maximal and often unforeseeable trajectories and results. His title was meant to be provocative and not literal, underlining how seemingly incidental initial conditions might have important effects on a system.

Considering contemporary language learning, the subject of this book, it is obvious that initial conditions are far from uniform. Only a generation ago, before the massive arrival of the Internet in our lives, many European students arrived at university with a seven- or eight-year background in school English (middle and high school) and few other experiences or encounters with this language, creating a certain homogeneity among students in general and even within each class group. In today's fast-paced and constantly evolving world, all language learners, whether they be students in higher education, children at school or adults in continuing education, come into the system (language centre, self-study software program, course, etc.) with their own specific background, composed of their own previous experiences of the particular L2 being learnt, but also of languages, language and learning in general. In the specific case of English, including English for specialists in non-linguistic disciplines (IWLP English, as I shall later call it), learners arrive with their school experience, but also with very diverse out-of-classroom language learning experiences (OCLL) (Benson & Reinders, 2011), often unknown to or unimagined by the teacher. Among these experiences, we might find, for example, a few trips or meetings with other (native or non-native) speakers of the L2. On the other hand, *all* these students (even the most reluctant) will have encountered English through the media, even if only isolated words or expressions in advertisements or displays. Even in France, where preservation of the French language

is considered to be a national priority,<sup>1</sup> some very French brands, like Renault, have taken to using English slogans, such as *the French touch*. The vast majority of students in higher education are in almost daily contact with English: watching American (or sometimes British) series, reading information on websites, interacting on blogs, forums or video games, communicating in either writing or speech with international players in multiplayer online games, etc. For some people, this exposure can reach several hundred hours of English per year (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012), a much higher number of contact hours than classroom exposure, even in the case of bilingual or immersive classes.

## 2 Non-linearity

Complex dynamic systems are considered to be fundamentally non-linear in nature. As opposed to simple mathematical equations, which result in single straight lines, complex systems, if they were to be plotted on a graph, would result in erratic, non-linear trajectories, with portions that are sometimes curving, sometimes straight and sometimes interrupted. Learning can likewise be pictured as a non-linear and unstable process. Moreover, the terrain through which the language learner progresses is multi-dimensional. Each of the (language) elements being acquired, whether grammatical, phonological or lexical, comprehension or production, can be seen as a separate dimension and none are acquired following a strict order or (as shown below) attained at a fixed pace.

The (language) learning of the students we are interested in is impossible to predict precisely upstream (or even downstream), regardless of context, yet it has become even less predictable because of its integration of what happens both within the university context (the education paradigm) and outside it (the development paradigm).

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, texts like the “Loi Toubon” of 1994, regulating the usage of languages other than French in French media and advertising.

### 3 Dynamism

A third important concept of complex dynamic systems theory for applied linguistics concerns the system's movement. Dynamism can be seen as a synonym for constant change and can be opposed to stability or lack of movement. Dynamism and stability are two manifestations of the same phenomenon. If we consider language learning as a system, we can see that learners go through more or less dynamic phases, where learning can be faster or slower paced, sometimes coming to a stop (when the learner ceases all activity in the L2) or even regressing (which is a dynamic movement backwards, so to speak), as during a long period of lack of practice or of no contact with the L2. The learners we are interested in, once at university, continue their language development at varying paces, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, but constantly evolving and in a state of flux. This is what we refer to as the dynamism of the process.

### 4 Attractor States and the Search for Stability in a System

The individual language learner and language user advances into this multi-dimensional territory of language development under the influence of various elements. Some, the attractors, offer paths of lesser resistance, often steering the learner away from their goal or bringing them to a dead-end or a more or less temporary state of stagnation (Lowie, 2017). The opposite of an attractor state, a "repulsor" state, requires considerable energy to get close to it and does not allow one to remain there. Metaphorically, it can be compared to a ball rolling up a slope to reach the top. More prosaically, it can be seen as a New Year's resolution somewhat remote from our daily habits. While it may represent a desired outcome, it may also be practically impossible to attain. Attractors are therefore elements that can often divert learning energy away from the most direct trajectory to the desired objective. Phil Hiver (2015) encourages us

to view states such as apathy, autotelia<sup>2</sup> or acquired helplessness as emerging and dynamic attractors, rather than as simple variables in language learning. Thus, the L1 can be an attractor that limits experimentation or restricts the search for variability in the L2 and leads to different fossilisation effects. In our 2017 article (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017), we put forward the idea that autonomy, L2 competence and digital literacy<sup>3</sup> can all function as positive attractor states, as can the attraction (or even fascination) of a video game, TV series or good novel.

## 5 Emergence

The concept of emergence is that of an open process of permanent self-renewal, without a predetermined or even desired end state. With regard to language learning, the long-considered ideal of skills identical to or comparable with those of a native speaker is now considered illusory (Council of Europe, 2000; Lowie, 2017) and even counterproductive (May, 2013). For researchers espousing emergence, it would be more productive to target the very process of learning or of language practice, rather than targeting a final state or objective. Some refer to this using the neologism “*linguaging*” or even “*translinguaging*” (Garcia & Wei, 2013), that is to say the creation of language through interactions between plurilingual individuals, their social contexts and various linguistic codes.

The complex development of language competence recognises partial skills emerging differentially in individual learners, in a constantly but irregularly changing context, both influencing and being influenced by innumerable factors, including other languages and people(s). (Toffoli, 2015, p. 26)

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<sup>2</sup>Or “flow” cf. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>We address this issue more specifically in the section on digital literacy in the chapter on self-determination.

Knowledge about a particular language and about language in general emerges from this process of interaction between the individual, language and the world, language practices and L2 skills.

## 6 Coadaptation, Self-Organisation and Phase Shifts

In a complex dynamic system, a change or modification in one system produces changes in other related systems or subsystems. The very interaction of subsystems produces changes that are self-organising (no influence other than the system itself is involved) and therefore unpredictable. This is both a cause and a product of emergence. The mutual influence of all these different subsystems creates non-linear trajectories. Lowie confirms that language development emerges from a complex history and continues in an unpredictable way:

Language development is not predetermined, but emerges from the complex history of all affecting factors, which include communication and input. Consequently, language development is essentially non-linear and difficult to predict. (Lowie, 2017, para. 9)

Learning trajectories are eminently individual and personal, but they do not take place in isolation, or as purely solitary endeavours, far from it. Students create interactive relationships (which require constant adaptation) with other learners, with native and non-native speakers of the language, with teachers and even with resources, both digital and analogue, thus creating interdependence and complexity in a permanent process of reconfiguration or reorganisation. This coadaptation can produce profound changes, or phase shifts, which fundamentally modify the qualitative nature of the system and make it possible to identify the parameters that control the system (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). An example of a phase shift from another area is that of the change from walking to trotting or trotting to running. Although each of these states is qualitatively different from the others, the precise moment of transition from one to the other is difficult if not impossible to determine.

Likewise, learners learn and progress without necessarily realising it and then, at some point, recognise that they have skills that they did not have before. These transitions between different phases are of particular interest to researchers, because they modify our vision of the learning process, which is no longer seen as just a replication or restitution of taught patterns (Sockett, 2012), but as the emergence of new and unique skills.

## 7 Complex Dynamic Systems Theory and Language Learning

The metaphor of complex dynamic systems was initially used in applied linguistics to qualify language (Verspoor et al., 2017). Kail (2015) traces this use back to “one of the most influential articles for cognitive science”, published in 1990 by Jeffrey Elman,<sup>4</sup> which introduces

the idea that language is a dynamic system and that language categories do not need to be defined *a priori* as discrete entities in mental representation, but can emerge from the interaction between the learner and the linguistic properties of the environment. (Kail, 2015, p. 79)

However, the learner and systems of learning themselves could also be considered from this perspective. As such, both of these complex dynamic systems, as well as the interactions between them, will be of central interest in the pages that follow: we shall be focusing on the one hand on learners and on the other hand on the learning environments in which their language skills develop and progress. If many researchers today consider that language learning functions as a complex and dynamic system, it is due to the six characteristics of these systems presented above: the importance and variability of initial states, their non-linearity and dynamic nature, attractor (and repulsor) states, emergence and coadaptation which are all manifest in L2 learning. We will see further on that these are also the defining elements of the contemporary language learner.

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<sup>4</sup>Elman, J. L. (1990). Finding structure in time. *Cognitive Science*, 14(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1402\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1402_1).

Although many aspects of complex dynamic systems theory seem to provide an excellent framework for an overall understanding of the phenomena of L2 acquisition and development (see above), it is neither a predictive tool nor a operational framework for instructional design. Marc Trestini (2016) reminds us that

a complex system is unpredictable in nature. It is therefore not possible to predict, through calculation, however advanced it may be, the outcome of the processes or phenomena involved, even in a probabilistic way. (p. 118)

Daniel Véronique (2017) doubts that emergentism, particularly in the form of complex dynamic systems, “can contribute to curriculum activities in language didactics, to the structuring of the subject to be taught, to the definition of teaching tasks or to the implementation of pedagogical conduct in language classes” (Véronique, 2017, para. 27), which is another way of saying the same thing and referring it specifically to the field of language teaching. Understanding the complex and dynamic system of contemporary language learners will not facilitate the design of a language centre, a learning app or any other device intended to support learning. On the other hand, it could provide a better understanding of how learners learn within their particular contexts today, how they seize the affordances of various resources (or not) and how their personal learning trajectory evolves.

Other theories, more specific to language acquisition, can also be seen as anchored in the global framework of complex dynamic systems and thus as proposing explanations of L2 development today, compatible with the current state of research concerning learners and contemporary contexts.

## 8 Methodological Considerations in Complex Dynamic Systems Theory

Research requires the use of methodologies that match the theoretical frameworks adopted and that allow the emergence of new perceptions or perspectives. The orientations recommended in the epistemological