Third language acquisition and its consequences for foreign language didactics: the case of Italian in Flanders

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Abstract

The present study examines crosslinguistic influence (CLI) from L1 and L2s in two groups of multilingual learners of L3 Italian. The two groups share their L1, which is Dutch, and an elementary proficiency in French and German, but they differ regarding other L2s: one group has high proficiency in English and Spanish, while the other group has low intermediate proficiency in English and no knowledge of Spanish. Earlier research has shown that typological proximity and proficiency level are the most important factors explaining the source of CLI, together with the L2 status factor. The results of our study confirm that learners with the same L1 can behave in a substantially divergent way, when learning an L3, if their linguistic background is different. This is especially true when typologically close L2s in which learners have a high proficiency level, such as Spanish in the present study, are involved. In this paper we will discuss the outcomes of our experiment and highlight didactic consequences.

Introduction

In recent years, an exponential increase in interest towards the concept of multilingualism has been witnessed. Multilingualism can be defined as "the presence of more than two languages either in individuals or in society" (Stavans & Hoffmann, 2015, p. 2), and it undoubtedly represents a phenomenon which can be studied through different methodologies and in different disciplines.

In contemporary Europe multilingualism is becoming more and more desirable to promote and facilitate intercultural communication. Consequently, multilingualism is also seen as an essential tool not only to bring people from different backgrounds and cultures together, but also for individual (cultural) enrichment.

In this context, the role of foreign language teachers becomes particularly relevant, conveying knowledge and facilitating the learning process. At the same time, teachers face new enriching ... s involved in their didactic projects, taking advantage of and exploiting to the maximum the intrinsic potentialities of multilingualism itself.

Teachers of Italian all over the world almost always encounter students that, when starting the process of learning Italian, already have some knowledge of at least another language (L2) beyond their mother tongue (L1).

This is true also in the teaching environment where the present study took place, namely Flanders. More specifically, we focused on students taking Italian courses in the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication of Ghent University. These students are inevitably multilingual, with Dutch as their mother tongue, while also having had the chance to get acquainted

with languages such as French (since the age of 6), English (since the age of 11), and German over the course of their primary and secondary education.

In some cases, in their linguistic repertoire we can also find Latin, and increasingly more often Spanish (a language studied both at school and as a heritage language). The advantages of such multilingualism are nowadays unquestionable, and it is widely accepted that multilinguals develop more specific abilities connected to language learning when compared to monolinguals and bilinguals (see Klein, 1995).

In this learning context, more and more questions arise concerning the role of the previous linguistic knowledge (and not only of the mother tongue) of an individual in his or her learning path of a foreign language. In the last 20 years, this passage has been marked, at least in the academic world, by the progressive development and autonomy reached by the (sub)field of Third Language Acquisition, henceforth TLA, with respect to the consolidate discipline of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Discussing in depth the terminological and theoretical questions related to the field goes beyond the scope of this contribution (for these aspects see Hammarberg, 2013), but it should be sufficient to remember that TLA is generally used to refer to a learner who has already acquired two or more languages, among which at least one foreign language (Hammarberg, 2013). The term 'L3' is thus used to indicate a language acquired after, at least, a second one (L2), which therefore highlights the existence of differences between L2 acquisition and L3 acquisition (Cenoz, 2013). Thus, as a matter of fact, an increasing number of authors underlines the necessity, both from a theoretical and practical point of view, to delimit the use of the SLA 'label', too anchored to a monolingual native speaker norm which is less and less observed in real life situations.

Cross-linguistic Influence

One of the most studied topics in TLA is cross-linguistic influence, abbreviated to CLI. The term CLI was already in use in the 1980s, in an attempt to clarify the vast and sometimes obscure terminology of the field, and has been defined as follows: "the term 'cross-linguistic influence'[…] is theory-neutral, allowing one to subsume under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss and thus permitting discussion of the similarities and differences between these phenomena" (Sharwood-Smith & Kellerman, 1986).

Until recently, CLI research traditionally focused on the influence exercised by the native language (L1) and on L2 learners' linguistic behaviour (De Angelis, 2007, p. 132). In the past few decades, however, the concept of 'multilingualism' gained prominence, causing as such a change in perception on how the native tongue and, more importantly, other formerly acquired languages can mutually influence each other in language acquisition. An often-studied topic in this respect are the determining conditions for CLI. Combining the main factors mentioned by Williams and Hammarberg (1998), Bardel and Lindqvist (2007), De Angelis (2005; 2007), Letica and Mardešić (2007), we can summarise the following seven factors:

1. (psycho)typology (the actual or perceived distance between languages),
2. recency of use,
3. proficiency level (in both the source and recipient language),
4. L1/L2 status,
5. the duration of permanence and exposure to a setting where the FL is spoken,
6. order of acquisition,
7. the formality of the context.

On a theoretical level, there are three main models that try to capture the dynamics of crosslinguistic influence between background and recipient languages in the initial acquisition stages: the Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM), the L2 Status Factor Model (L2SF), and the Typological Primacy Model (TPM). The CEM (see Flynn, Foley & Vinnitskaya, 2004) maintains that morpho-syntactic transfer can derive from either the L1 or L2, and that any prior language knowledge can have a positive or neutral influence on the recipient language. In other words, the CEM posits that transfer only occurs when it has a facilitative effect, whereas non-facilitative transfer is neutralised. According to the L2SF (see Bardel & Falk, 2007) the L2 status factor is stronger than the typology factor in L3 acquisition, and the L2 plays a significantly stronger role than the L1 in the initial stages of L3 morpho-syntactic acquisition due to the psychological and cognitive prominence of its structure (Bardel & Falk, 2007; Falk & Bardel, 2010). The L2SF model claims that in L3 acquisition, the L2 acts like a filter, making the L1 inaccessible for CLI. In the TPM (see Rothman 2011; Rothman, 2013; Rothman, 2015) the determining CLI factor shifts from 'L2 status' to '(psycho)typology', and therefore Rothman claims that initial L3 development is constrained by the actual or perceived structural similarity between linguistic systems. The term 'structural' similarity specifically refers to linguistic properties that overlap cross-linguistically at the level of mental representation, whether at the lexical or grammatical levels.

Research questions

As clearly emerges from the brief presentation of the theoretical background concerning the TLA research field, all three reference models assign an important role, at least in principle, to the entire linguistic repertoire of the multilingual learner when he or she is starting to learn a new foreign language.

The research questions that we want to explore are therefore the following ones:

   I.   To what extent does the linguistic background of the learner determine his/her difficulties in the first phases of learning?
  II.   Is the number of CLI quantitatively relevant or are we dealing with a negligible phenomenon?
 III.   How does CLI evolve in time while the learning process is developing? What are the possible didactic consequences of these results?

The study

The present study analyses a corpus of oral productions in Italian. The corpus has been examined through an error analysis approach, with the long-term aim of extracting tendencies concerning cases of CLI and using these observations to develop didactic paths and materials appropriate for this specific student's target. Two groups of multilingual students, who are beginners of Italian with Dutch as their mother tongue, constitute the participants of this study. The first group is formed by 6 students, with a low proficiency in French and German, and a low intermediate proficiency in English (Group A). The second group (Group B) is formed by 5 students, with a low proficiency in French and German, but with a high proficiency in English and Spanish.

Table 1. Linguistic profile of the two groups of learners.

	Group A	Group B
Dutch	L1	
French	Low proficiency	
English	Low intermediate prof.	High proficiency
German	Low proficiency	
Spanish	No knowledge	High proficiency

As shown in Table 1, the main difference between the two groups is their proficiency in Spanish, which is advanced in Group B, while Group A has no knowledge of Spanish at all. At the same time, the two groups share their L1, which is Dutch, and an elementary proficiency in French and German. The order of the languages in Table 1 reflects the order in which they have been learned by the participants.

Each student was recorded during three conversations with native speakers of Italian at three different moments of their learning path: after a couple of weeks from the start of their study of Italian, therefore at an A1[1] level, then once they reached the A2 level, and finally when they reached level B1. Our general hypothesis is that CLI would be very frequent at the beginning of the learning process and then would progressively diminish with the students' increasing proficiency of Italian. We expect to observe CLI from Dutch L1 in both groups, because Dutch is the instruction language and is shared by the speakers. We believe that French L2 will be a source of CLI in both groups, because of the typological proximity with Italian (our target language) and because of its L2-status. We also presume that differences between the two groups will be found. For instance, in Group A we expect more interferences from French L2 than in Group B. At the same time, we assume a greater influence of Spanish in Group B, since learners belonging to this group have mastered Spanish at an advanced level and this language also shows a strong typological similarity with Italian. Moreover, we think that this stronger influence could restrict the possible interference of Dutch L1 and French L2.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of CLI on the total number of words produced by the learners of the two groups in the three different recording sessions: when the students are at their A1 level (T1), when they reach an A2 level (T2), and finally when they are at their B1 level (T3).

From a quantitative point of view we can observe that the knowledge of Spanish L2, even more so at an advanced level, constitutes the most determinant/distinctive element to distinguish the linguistic behaviour of the two groups. Group B, indeed, produces many more instances of CLI when compared to group A, and this is because of the interference from Spanish L2. Additionally, from the data it emerges how the interference of French L2, despite its typological proximity to Italian, appears relatively low in both groups. This seems to indicate that the learners do not have the possibility to retrieve French L2 because of their low proficiency in this language. Interestingly, CLI in English is present marginally in the collected data, independently of the learners' proficiency in English. The typological distance between Italian and English, and the presence of other Romance languages in the repertoire of the students which are nearer to Italian L3 appear to make the use of this language unnecessary. Instances of CLI in Dutch L1 are present in both groups, but in a rather limited number of occurrences.

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[1] The proficiency levels are based on the Common European Framework of Reference

Within Group B we observed more instances of CLI from various source languages, probably because the learners belonging to this group, due to their higher expertise in different foreign languages, show a tendency to exploit their knowledge of various L2s, for instance by making use of the so-called "international words", i.e., words that are similar in several languages, meaning that those words have been borrowed from a single source in many languages.

Since instances of CLI from German have not been retrieved in the data, this language has not been inserted in Figure 1.
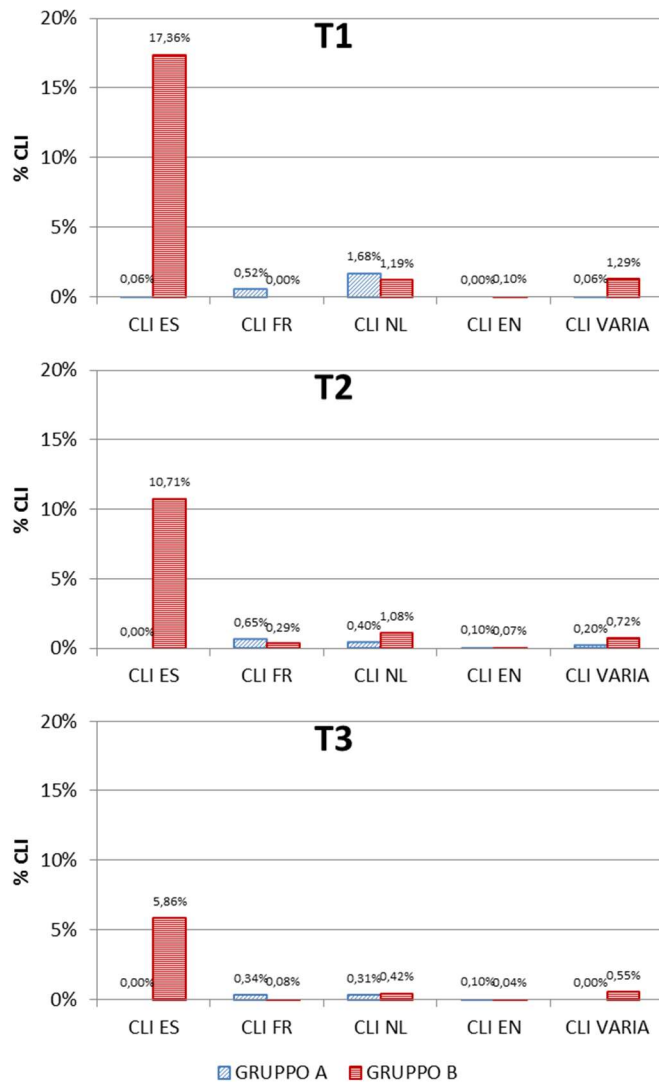

FIGURE 1. Percentages of CLI in L3 Italian during the three recording moments (T1, T2, T3)

In the following sections we will discuss the results within a more qualitative approach, providing some examples extracted from the data.

Group A

CLI from French L2

In Group A, French L2 functioned in some cases as source language of interference, albeit less than what we could have expected, considering its typological similarity with Italian. In the data we observed the following cases of CLI from French L2:

- CLI functioning as a language switch, without pragmatic purpose, of very frequent words which are known to the learner in the L3.

1. Native speaker: È solo per questo?
                          [Only because of this?]
      Learner: No *mais* non so perché
                          [No but (French L2) I don't know why]

2. Native speaker: Vorresti fare qualcosa con le lingue?
                          [Would you like to do something with languages?]
      Learner: *Oui...* Sì
                          [Yes (French L2)]

3. Native speaker: Mi spieghi perché?
                          [Can you explain me why?]
      Learner: *Il est*...È partito dall'ospedale
                          [He's (French L2)... he left the hospital]

Cases (1), (2), and (3) are also representative of the types of words that are transferred: indeed, most of the times, it concerns highly frequent grammatical function words (such as conjunctions, certain adverbs, pronouns).

- Instances of CLI functioning as attempts at formulation in L3, which are morphologically and/or phonetically adapted.

4. Il ragazzo *tombe... tomba* nell'acqua
   [The boy falls (French L2, adapted) in the water]

5. Non penso che non sia così... sì… *agreabile*
   [I don't think that it's not so... yes... nice (French L2, adapted)]

In (4), the learner does not know, or does not remember, the verb 'cadere' (fall) in Italian and creates a form of the verb *tombare based on the French verb 'tomber'. In (5) the same happens with the French adjective 'agréable' (in Italian 'gradevole' or 'piacevole') modified in *agreabile

6. soprattutto... ehm... ehm le donne giovane che sone... *qui* sono laureate
   [especially young women who (French L2) are graduate]

The case exemplified in (6) is particularly frequent in our corpus: the word produced by the learner exists in Italian L3, where however it has other functions. Indeed, the French pronoun 'qui' shares various uses with the Italian homophone pronoun 'chi', but in this case in Italian the correct option would be 'che'.

CLI from Dutch L1

The use of Dutch, the L1 of all our participants, is relatively frequent, but when compared to French L2 its use seems to be principally a conscious one. In the data we observed the following cases of CLI from Dutch L1:

- CLI functioning as language switches used to introduce a self-repair and interactive feedback signals.

7. quando lavorano là devono... eh... devono anche eh... lavorare per anche... eh... *wacht hé*... devono anche fa- fare delle cose che non sono così buono b- buone buoni buone per per... eh... la loro famiglia
   [When they work there they must also work for... wait (Dutch L1)... they must also do things that are not so good for their family]

In (7), the learner uses one of the most frequent fillers present in the corpus, namely 'wacht' ('wait'). Other fillers frequently used are 'ja' ('yes') and 'nee' ('no'). Even though these fillers are quite recurrent in the early stages of learning, we would like to highlight that these elements tend to disappear soon from the students' production during their learning process/path. As a matter of fact, already at a B1 level, students hardly ever use these fillers anymore.

- CLI functioning as language switches which are used to elicit the Italian word from the interlocutor.

8. Learner: gli agriturismi non... non hanno dei... *ja, vergunningen*
   [Agritourisms have no... yes (Dutch L1), permissions (Dutch L1)]
   Native speaker: Per...
   Learner: *permissioni*
   [permissions (French/English L2, adapted)]

Example (8) exemplifies the metalinguistic function of Dutch, which assumes the instrumental role of signalling a lexical gap to the interlocutor. It is interesting to note that when native speakers help the learners and pronounce the starting part of the needed word (per….), the learner answers without hesitation *permissioni, accessing one (or both) of its L2s (English and French *permission*) and adapting the word phonetically and grammatically to Italian. In Italian the correct word would be 'permesso', but the use of the L2 is immediate.

CLI from English and German L2

The use of English, both regarding word construction attempts and with a metalinguistic function is very limited. No CLI from German has been detected.
        We will now proceed to a discussion of the results concerning Group B.

Group B

CLI from French L2

Despite the typological similarity with Italian, French is highly inhibited by learners in Group B, who appear to use French very seldom. The only cases identified in the data concern high frequency words phonetically similar to Italian (such as the adversative conjunction 'mais', in Italian 'ma').

CLI from Dutch L1

As observed in Group A, Dutch L1 is also used in a very conscious way in group B.

- CLI functioning as language switches which are used to introduce self-repair and interactive feedback signals.
9. No, dipende... dove... dove c'è... c'è molta... *ja*, gente
   [No, it depends, from where there are many... yes (Dutch L1), people.]

We would like to underline, however, that this type of CLI has been observed in Group B much less frequently when compared to Group A, presumably because the subjects of group B are more expert language learners, having already reached a high proficiency in two L2s, and are thus able to control these types of insertions more.

- CLI functioning as language switches which are used to elicit the Italian word from the interlocutor.

10. Non conosco la parola ma... *Doornroosje*, la favola di *Doornroosje*
    [I don't know the word but... Sleeping Beauty (Dutch L1), the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty (Dutch L1)]

Also in Group B, the learners' mother tongue is a language known by the interlocutor, and therefore it is used to ask for help during the conversation, signalling a lexical gap.

CLI from Spanish L2

Among learners of Group B, Spanish undoubtedly assumes the role of 'default supplier' and intervenes in several and varied occasions. We observed the following cases of interference from Spanish L2:

- CLI functioning as language switch, without pragmatic purpose, of words (and sometimes even forms) which are known to the learner in the L3.

11. Sì, mi piace fare *cosas* con *mi* sorella *porque mi* fratello è... ha minori anni
    [Yes, I like to do things (Spanish L2) with my (Spanish L2) sister because (Spanish L2) my (Spanish L2) brother is younger]

Example (11) highlights some of the typical cases of CLI in Group B, in which the students insert highly frequent Spanish words in an Italian sentence, such as possessive pronouns ('mi') or conjunctions ('porque'). This strategy occurred especially in the first phases of learning. Furthermore, in the first

recordings we note the occurrence of transfer of inflectional forms from Spanish ('cos-as') not adapted to L3 Italian.

- CLI functioning as attempts at formulation in L3, which are morphologically and/or phonologically adapted.

12. puoi lavorare con *estudianti y* formare *estudianti*
    [you can work with students (Spanish L2, adapted) and (Spanish L2) form students (Spanish L2, adapted)]

In example (12) we observe the presence of the word *estudianti twice, in which the plural of the Spanish word 'estudiante' is formed following the rules of plural formation in Italian.

- CLI functioning as lexical transfer of function words.

13. Ma Francesca staveva dormien-, dormendo in *tren* e Hans staveva, penso, *bebendo in altro* vagone
    [But Francesca was sleeping in the train (Spanish L2) and Hans was, I think, drinking (Spanish L2, adapted) in another (Spanish L2, adapted) car]

In (13) we can observe similar examples to the ones presented above, namely Spanish words not adapted ('tren') or adapted, as the two gerunds, which are formed with the required suffix from Italian, through an autocorrection in the case of 'dormendo' and, despite the phonetic uncertainties, in *bebendo (in Italian 'bevendo and 'bebiendo' in Spanish). In (13), however, there is an additional aspect which is worth paying attention to, namely the construction 'in altro vagone', which seems to mirror the Spanish expression ('en otro vagón'), while in Italian it would be 'in <u>un</u> altro vagone', and in Dutch 'op <u>een</u> andere wagon' one would have preferred to insert the indeterminate article.

- CLI functioning as language switches which are used to elicit the Italian word from the interlocutor.

14. Ho uno *broer…hermano*, no, *y* ha diciotto anno…anni
    [I have a brother (Dutch L1)…brother (Spanish L2), no, and (Spanish L2) he's eighteen]

Cases as the one presented in (10), in which the learner asks the translation in Italian of a Dutch word are quite frequent in Group A, but rare in Group B, where Spanish also assumes the role of instrumental language to solicit the help of the interlocutor. In this sense, (14), in which the learner is looking for the word 'fratello' (brother), is quite illustrative. Despite its similarity with the Italian word, the French word 'fraire' (brother) does not pop up in the search: the learner seems to at first manifest his gap by using the L1, then he tries with the Spanish word, but he is apparently aware of the fact that the Italian word is not etymologically related to the Spanish one. French, therefore, does not seem to be immediately available for a transfer, and Spanish is preferred.

15. *Mi...* mio fratello, sì, ha trentadue anni, *es...* è il... *mayor*, *ja*, *de oudste y* è *casato* con... no, ha due *kinderen...* bambini
    [My (Spanish L2)… my brother, yes, he is thirty-two, he is (Spanish L2)... he is the... older one (Spanish L2), yes (Dutch L1), the older one (Dutch L1) and (Spanish L2) he is married (Spanish L2, adapted) with... no, he has two kids (Dutch L1)... kids]

Sometimes, as it clearly emerges in (15), in order to convey the message in an efficient way and at the same time stimulate support from their interlocutor, the learners show a continuous and parallel use of both Dutch L1 and Spanish L2. In (15) it almost feels as if we are able to witness the 'journey' of the linguistic information, which has to go through various 'filters', first the L1 and the L2 of reference, before reaching the desired 'finish line', namely Italian L3.

CLI from English and German L2

The use of English, both regarding word construction attempts and with a metalinguistic function, is very limited. No CLI from German has been detected.

Conclusions

The differences that emerged between the two groups of students, both consisting of native speakers of Dutch, confirm that their different L2 repertoire partly determines the type of mistakes and difficulties they face, but also the opportunities/advantages they encounter.

Quantitatively, the observed CLI is not negligible. In the first phase, the interference of L2 Spanish on L3 Italian of Group B in particular assumes a relevant role. Learners of group B draw from their Spanish L2 as much as possible, i.e., the typologically closest L2 in their inventory, producing some mistakes but at the same time obtaining great advantages, especially from a communicative point of view. The fact that in Group B Spanish L2 assumes a very similar role to Dutch L1 for the learners of group A seems to confirm the results presented in Lindqvist and Bardel (2013), which underlined how a high-proficiency L2 may be activated for both code-switches and word construction attempts if it is similar enough to the target language.

At the same time, the idea according to which unconscious CLI is determined by typological (structural) proximity also seems to be confirmed. As predicted by Rothman (2013; 2015), complete or holistic transfer takes place in the initial stages after the learner has determined which of the two (or more) languages is likely to be typologically (actual similarity) or psychotypologically (perceived similarity) closer to the target L3 (Rothman, 2015).

In the present case study, the predominant role of Spanish L2 seems to promote the inhibition of CLI in French. There are two possible explanations for this linguistic behaviour. Firstly, Spanish L2 seems to be perceived as more similar to Italian L3 when compared to French L2. Secondly, in Group B, Spanish enjoys various advantages: it is phonetically closer to Italian, it is better mastered by this group of learners, it is used more often by learners in their daily (academic) life (recency of use), and it is the last language learned (order of acquisition). All these factors appear to promote the use of Spanish L2 as primary source of transfer, even when French L2 could be an equally valuable source.

As concerns the development of CLI in time, our results confirm the outcomes of previous studies (Bardel, 2015; Falk & Bardel, 2010; Leung, 2006: Williams & Hammarberg, 1998): an increase in the L3 proficiency brings to a constant decrease of CLI.

In conclusion, the results of the present study contain valuable implications concerning the teaching of a foreign language to multilinguals. It is indeed evident that learners who share the same L1 can linguistically behave in a very different way if their L2s are different, if they have a different proficiency in their L2s, and even if their L2s were learned in a different chronological order. Furthermore, in various cases, the study confirms that it is not possible to examine CLI presuming that all instances of CLI stem from a single source language, but it is necessary to account for all available sources, "whether used or unused by the learner" (De Angelis, 2007, p. 136).

Another notable CLI aspect that emerged in our experiment is that not only can lexical items be transferred from an L2 to an L3, but grammatical structures can be transferred too.

A better understanding of the nature of multi-competence and on the conditions influencing CLI phenomena is necessary for foreign language teachers and language textbook writers. In our opinion, this does not mean that (foreign) language teachers should know all the languages known by their students, but we believe that it could be highly advisable to facilitate positive transfer and raise awareness of negative transfer through cross-linguistic comparison (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

"One of the most difficult aims of future work on language teacher education will be to make sure that all language teachers are experts on multilingualism, even if they teach only one language." (Jessner, 2008, p. 45). Indeed, a language teacher should actively promote the development of metalinguistic awareness and metacognitive skills in her/his classes, in an effort to stimulate learning strategies that allow the learners to transfer the knowledge already acquired in other languages.

As a matter of fact there are various factors that make multilinguals better language learners than monolinguals, with regard to learning strategies, metalinguistic awareness, and communicative ability. Therefore, a foreign language teacher should be ready to make use and take advantage of all the linguistic repertoire of the learners, elaborating activities and didactic materials which keep into account their previous linguistic notions. Cross-linguistic comparisons should not be limited to the L1, but can be fruitfully extended to the L2(s) of the learners.

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