

# **Third Language Acquisition: Cross-Linguistic Influence from L1 and L2**

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June 2015



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## **Abstract**

Third Language Acquisition (TLA) is a new topic of research that has drawn the attention of many scholars during the last two decades (Hammarberg 1998, Cenoz 2001, De Angelis 2007, Bardel & Falk 2010, among others). Researchers have had constantly to face many inconsistencies surrounding this subject of study. This paper firstly focuses on outlining some of the most frequent difficulties regarding TLA field. The second purpose of this paper is to give an up-to-date review of the research that has been done until now on Cross-Linguistic Influence (CLI) so as to know the roles that the background languages L1 and L2 play in L3 acquisition. Cross-Linguistic Influence deals with the prior linguistic knowledge that humans have and how this has an impact on the Target Language (TL). This paper centres on two main factors of CLI: (i) Typological distance and L2 status and (ii) how these factors determine the activation of L1 or L2 in the learners' mind when acquiring the L3.

**Keywords:** Third language acquisition (TLA), Cross-linguistic Influence (CLI), typological distance and L2 status.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Third language acquisition (TLA) is practically a new topic of research that has increasingly drawn the attention of many scholars during the last two decades. “After a few earlier contributions (Ringbom 1987, Stedje 1977, Vildomec 1963), research into L3 acquisition and use witnessed a boom towards the turn of the years” (Bardel and Falk, 2010: 185).

Some of the reasons why scholars have drawn their attention on TLA might be the boom of multilingual cultures around the world nowadays. Also the emphasis which some institutions have been making in keeping alive minority languages, as it is in the case of Catalan countries. Other reasons might be the growing immigrant communities in countries where the language of the host country is different. Or just simply by the fact that those people who speak more languages are more appealing to hold high positions in the labour market. The underlying principle in the research on multilingualism is that all human beings are capable of learning and speaking more than two languages, in other words, humans can be multilingual by default (De Angelis, 2007). This is why TLA has become such a fascinating area of investigation for multilingual matters, since it takes place in multilingual contexts.

TLA research has focused on different areas of the language acquisition process that embrace an intricate network of formal linguistic (Rothman 2010), psycholinguistic (Cenoz 2001), sociolinguistic (Bhatia and Ritchie 2013), educational or applied perspectives (Cenoz, Hufesein and Jessner 2001) that have developed theories, frameworks and approaches to learn and to understand better how a multilingual mind works when acquiring a foreign language. Yet, these studies have normally present

more non-answered questions that make of the TLA field still a much neglected issue that needs further exploration in many directions.

Research on Cross-Linguistic Influence (CLI), which emerges from a psychological strand, seeks to explain how and under what conditions prior linguistic knowledge influences the production, comprehension and development of a target language (De Angelis, 2007). Traditionally, CLI had as its focal point Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research in which it has arduously discussed how the learners' native language system influences/interferes in the acquisition of an L2, since the L1 is the only learners' knowledge of a prior language system, they transfer many features of the L1 until they are proficient in the L2 (Tremblay, 2006). Thus, in this line TLA is a more interesting subject of investigation for CLI, since it has to deal with two previous acquired languages and has to decide whether it chooses the L1 or the L2 system as language supplier (or source language) (Cenoz, 2001).

CLI studies have detected some factors influencing in the acquisition of an L3 so as to predict which background language/s (L1 or L2) might be more prone to be taken as a source language. These factors are: language distance, also known as psychotypology or typological relation, target language proficiency and source language proficiency, recency of use, length of residence and exposure to a non-native language environment, order of acquisition, and formality of context (De Angelis, 2007).

The research objectives of this paper are:

- To provide an up-to-date overview of problematic issues concerning TLA
- To re-examine the research done until now on two of the main factors of CLI:

Typological distance and L2 status factor. And how these factors determine the

activation of one of the background language over the other in the learner's mind.

This paper will be divided into three sections. The first one *Third Language Acquisition* deals with some confusing terminology surrounding the TLA research. More precisely, it provides a definition of TLA, Bilingualism versus Multilingualism, Third Language Acquisition (TLA) versus Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Bilingualism versus Second Language Acquisition. The following section focuses on *Cross-Linguistic Influence* and provides an overview of the concerns of Cross-Linguistic Influence and discusses the research of two CLI factors, namely Typological distance and L2 status. Finally, the last point is devoted to the conclusion and to some suggestions for further research.

## 2. THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (TLA)

As it usually happens in new areas of research, the boundaries of terminologies and areas of study surrounding the recent topic initially happen to be fuzzy and not well-defined. Normally scholars apply previous investigations of related fields that can be adapted to the new one that might successfully equate into it, but in most cases it might lead to overlap and more unclear concepts. Thus, the aim of the following sections is to point out some of the most recurrent difficulties that scholars face in the literature of TLA field.

### 2. 1. Towards a definition of TLA

The first problem that scholars detect when reviewing the literature on TLA is that there appears not to be a clear definition of TLA term. In addition, as García-Mayo (2012) points out there has been some controversy in using L3 acquisition as a field of study. That is to say, that TLA was not even considered an area of study until a few years ago. This is supported by the fact that TLA has been, historically, embraced by the second language acquisition phenomenon. Hence during decades there have no attempts to place third language acquisition as a separate trend.

Due to the increasing attention on TLA, the need of a much more accurate term is required, though there seems to be no general agreement on most definitions of TLA and its area of study. Cenoz (2003) states “[...] third language acquisition refers to the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages. The acquisition of the first two languages can be simultaneous (as in early bilingualism) or consecutive” (Cenoz, 2003 cited here from García-Mayo, 2012:130). This means that an individual might have sequentially acquired two languages (the native language firstly, and then a second and third non-native languages) or he/she might have learnt two languages at the same time as bilingual speakers, and later on an L3. Alternatively, De Angelis (2007: 11) proposes the term “*third or additional language acquisition* which refers to all languages beyond the L2 without giving preference to any particular language.”

Finally, the most suitable notion of TLA seems to be the one by Hammarberg (2010), who suggests that the terms L1, L2, L3, L<sub>n</sub> are often taken as a chronological, non-interrupted acquisition, which does not essentially embody most realities, since multilingual acquisition may be simultaneous and intermittent, involving various

language skills and proficiency levels. A *first language (L1)* is any language acquired during infancy (period from one month to twelve months of life), and a *second language (L2)*, any language encountered and acquired after infancy. “The term *third language (L3)* will be used for a non-native language which is currently being used or acquired in a situation where the person already has knowledge of one or more L2s besides one or more L1s. An L3 is thus a special case of the wider category of L2, and not necessarily language number three in order of acquisition” (Hammarberg 2001 cited here from Bardel and Falk 2010: 187).

## **2. 2. Bilingualism versus Multilingualism**

Within TLA research concepts such as multilingualism and bilingualism happen to be very frequent, since both refer to speakers who are able to speak more than one language. The boundaries of both terms are highly intertwined and might lead to confusion, though. The general understanding of bilingualism refers to those individuals who are able to perform two languages at a native level (in listening, speaking, writing and reading skills), but it is worth mentioning that these individuals might have better domain in one language over the other, or they might even not have acquired both languages at the same time, developing a late bilingualism. Conversely, multilingualism refers to those speakers who are able to perform in more than two languages. Yet, in most cases these terms are used as synonyms, as De Angelis (2007: 8) points out from previous definitions “The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, for instance, describes bilingual communities as having ‘two of more different languages’ (Matthews, 1997), a definition which effectively equates bilingualism with



multilingualism or Myers-Scotton (2002:1) states the term “bilingual refers to persons who speak two or *more* languages.”

Despite the fact that the concepts of bilingualism and multilingualism seem to be very self-explanatory by their own etymology prefixes, since *bi-* denotes *two* and *multi-* refers to more than *one*. Hence, bilingualism can perfectly be found as a variation of multilingualism, since it does not specify the number of languages. Bhatia and William (2013) propose *plurilingualism* so as to simplify the whole phenomena “the terms bilingualism and multilingualism have to come to be used, respectively, to refer to the knowledge and use of two languages and the knowledge and use of three or more languages [...] we will use the term plurilingualism to refer to both bilingualism and multilingualism” (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2013: xxii).

Thus, the categorization of bilingualism and multilingualism is still incomplete and needs further research. Regarding TLA terminology, this paper assumes TLA phenomenon as a case of multilingualism and plurilingualism, since these concepts embrace the knowledge of more than two languages. Therefore, it is clearly not a case of bilingualism, since this term is reduced to the exclusive knowledge of two languages. Nevertheless, most TLA studies do include cases of bilingual communities/people who aim to learn an L3, for instance, Spain is a great source of bilingual communities such as Catalonia or the Basque Country where the inhabitants speak Spanish (national language), their regional language and take English (L3) as a compulsory subject at school, so this is why is important to mention the notion of bilingualism concerning TLA.

## **2. 3. Third Language Acquisition (TLA) versus Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

Throughout the recent history, most linguists (Singh and Carroll 1979, Mitchell and Myles 1998, among others) have defended that there is no difference in the acquisition of an L2 or L3 or  $L_n$  and that all the languages that come after the native language are second languages. The assumption of “no difference” relies on the fact that most of TLA research was primarily based on SLA studies, therefore, SLA theories and approaches were applied to TLA as a starting point.

Third language (L3) acquisition was once subsumed under the field of second language acquisition (SLA) in which a ‘second’ language meant any non-native language acquired beyond the first. In recent years, a number of researchers have started to look seriously at the phenomenon of L3/multilingualism as a separate domain of inquiry. (Leung, 2007: 95)

Other researchers such as Hufeisen and Marx (2004) also defend that TLA should not be considered equal to SLA and not a sub-topic of it. They encourage scholars to work harder on developing theoretical frameworks regarding TLA or a wider SLA model.

The term TLA represents the prototypical concept of the acquisition or learning of any language after the second language, whether the L3, L4, or even L7, as there is not merely a quantitative difference between SLA and TLA, but also a qualitative one. This difference is so fundamental that it needs to be covered by a new and different theoretical framework, or a substantially extended SLA model. (Hufeisen and Marx, 2004: 142)

Finally, De Angelis (2007) states that scholars that take the L3 or  $L_n$  as extensions of SLA will clearly miss some potential knowledge related to language acquisition and the multilingual individual, since it is not the same to have access to two, three or more language systems. What is more, SLA scholars, who insist in the “no difference” assumption, rarely mention the many ways how third or additional languages can be influenced and be influential in the previous acquired languages (De Angelis, 2007).

## **2. 4. Bilingualism versus Second Language Acquisition: paths to the acquisition of an L3**

A final point of discussion will be the paths through which the learners have come across with L3. That is to say, whether through L1 (monolingualism) → L2 (SLA) → L3, or bilingualism (two languages in the same individual's mind) → L3.

Firstly, regarding the first path (L1→L2→L3) there are many studies (Filatova 2010, Pinto 2013) that have reported individuals who have acquired one native language (L1) and two foreign languages (L2 and L3) chronologically. This learning path seems to be the most common one (L1→L2→L3), since it tends to understand L3 acquisition as the sequential learning of three languages, but as it will be discussed later, this is not always the case. Secondly, we can find a range of TLA studies (Cenoz et al. 2001, Cenoz 2003) that include bilingual speakers targeting an L3 (two L1s→L3). For instance, Cenoz (2001) illustrates a case of Basque and Spanish (L1s) individuals who have learnt English at school and the author considers English to be the learners' L3, not L2.

Furthermore, Cenoz et al. (2001) try to shed more light on these two learning paths as vehicles to the L3 in the school environment by stating that SLA refers to the teaching of second language as a subject, while bilingualism refers to the use of two languages as languages of instruction. Though, these scholars stress that “this distinction cannot be taken as a dichotomy, but rather as a continuum because there are approaches such as content based teaching that uses the L2 as the medium of instruction (as well as bilingualism) of different types of content but very frequently within the L2 subject classes” (2001:2-3).

Finally, Butler (2013) also comments on early trilingualism in relation to TLA and determines four variables of acquisition by including monolingualism, bilingualism and second language acquisition. Trilinguals might acquire three different languages consecutively (L1, L2 and L3), or might acquire two languages at the same time after having some prior knowledge in their L1 (one L1 and two L2s), or might start a synchronized bilingualism and, later on, add an L3 (two L1s and an L3), or might have contact with three languages immediately from birth (three L1s). Thus, the ways through which individuals acquire a third language might be multiple and diverse. Yet, TLA research seems to generally agree on so as to have a case of TLA there must be at least three languages in the same individual mind.

### **3. CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE (CLI)**

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is a term that was first coined in the mid-eighties by Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman (1986) so as to include all concepts concerning the phenomena of language influence “‘transfer’, ‘interference’, ‘avoidance’, ‘borrowing’ and L2 related aspects of language loss (Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman, 1986: 1)”. Yet, CLI is barely a new area of investigation, and in many regards it is still in its infancy (Cenoz, 2001). Historically, CLI research, as it has already mentioned, has focused mainly on second language acquisition and how the native language influences the L2, so the equation is  $L1 \rightarrow L2$ . Yet, when studying the acquisition of an L3 the equations can be multiplied, since it could not only be  $L1 \rightarrow L3$ , but also the variant  $L2 \rightarrow L3$ . The acquisition of an L3 can take as a source language the L1 or L2, by source language or language supplier it is understood that a learner activates one of the

previously acquired language systems he/she has access to and passes this knowledge to the language he/she is currently acquiring. This is why TLA is such an appealing topic of research for linguists and for CLI which sees TLA as a potential source of data in order to advance in the study of language acquisition. Besides, some scholars (Van Hell and Dijkstra, 2002) have also discussed the possibilities of mutual influence between the  $L1 \leftrightarrow L3$  and  $L2 \leftrightarrow L3$ . However, this paper will not go further on the line of mutual influence, but only on the influence of previous acquired languages in the L3.

Finally, CLI study has two kinds of impact on the target language: Positive and negative transfer. The first one occurs when some of the previous languages act positively in the target language, for instance, a person whose L1 is Spanish and is learning Italian will find that Italian as well as Spanish allows null-subjects, so this learner will not have to learn this parameter, since he/she has already acquired it. Yet, CLI can also be dressed with negative transfer, for instance, Spanish and French are both Romance languages, so a Spanish learner might at first stage drop the subject when learning French, since Spanish is a null subject language, but French is not. The next point will discuss the most important factors regarding CLI research on TLA: Language/typological distance or L2 status. The reason why I focus on these two factors is because they are the most consolidated and investigated ones concerning CLI in TLA research. Consequently, they can provide the most complete picture of what CLI phenomenon is. As a final remark, in spite of the fact that this paper deals primarily with studies on these factors, it does not mean that in the same multilingual context more than one factor can be at play, since they are actually highly intertwined.

### **3.1. Language distance or typological distance**

Language distance or typological distance is the CLI factor most investigated in the TLA research. It might be encountered in the literature with a range of different terms such as psychotypology or typological proximity (Kellerman, 1977), relatedness distance (Jarvis, 2000), similarity distance (Odlin, 1989), or language distance (Ringbom, 1987). Yet, this paper will use interchangeably the terms language distance, psychotypology and typological distance.

It is quite sensible to take into consideration language distance or typological distance as a potential phenomenon in the acquisition of foreign languages, since it is reasonable to think that multilingual speakers will be prone to transfer knowledge from their previous languages and mainly from that or those background language/s which is/are typological closer to the target language. Yet, Language distance might take more than one interpretation. De Angelis (2007:22) states that language distance refers to the “distance that a linguist can objectively and formally define and identify between languages and language families.” For instance, the Cenoz’ study (2001) on bilinguals of Basque and Spanish targeting English equates in formal similarity, since the linguists identify Spanish and English as closer languages because they belong to the Indo-European family and Basque is classified as more distance in relation to Spanish and English, since its origin is not Indo-European. Yet, “sometimes the term formal similarity refers to a relationship of similarity between the features or components of two or more languages without necessarily implying a genetic relationship between them” (De Angelis 2007:22). That is to say, learners can find similar linguistic features in languages that do not belong to the same genetic group, for example, Ringbom (Ringbom 2003 cited here from De Angelis, 2007: 26) states “if you know Finish as L2, there will be no major problem learning Swahili.” Despite the fact that these languages

do not belong to the same genetic family, Finish is a Finno-Ugric language and Swahili a Bantu language, they share many formal similarities. For example, they are both agglutinative languages, so they present vast morpho-phonemic variation. On the other hand, Falk and Bardel (2010) suggest a different classification of language distance that has three different connotations: (a) language proximity/distance based on genetic relatedness, e.g. Romance or Germanic languages, (b) typology in the sense of Croft (1990), e.g. typological similarity of particular structures, the formal similarity mentioned before, and (c) psychotypology, as coined and defined by Kellerman (1983), e.g. the learner's perception of similarity of languages.

The vast majority of studies concerning CLI have focused on the lexicon (Cenoz et al. 2003, Pinto 2013). For instance, in a recent study by Pinto (2013) on Moroccan universities students, who have Arab as their L1, French or Spanish as L2 and Portuguese as a L3, showed that the source language was frequently the L2, in this case French or Spanish, since they both are Romance Indo-European languages, consequently, they are typologically closer to Portuguese.

However, language distance can also be found at bigger scale of distance, for example, as it has already mentioned, Cenoz's research (2001, 2003) on bilingual speakers of Basque and Spanish (L1s) targeting English (L3) showed that the learners usually rely on Spanish as a source language, particularly in the lexicon, due to the great amount of Romance borrowings that English has. Even though Spanish and English come from different genetic families (Romance and Germanic), they are both Indo-European languages, while the origin of Basque is unknown, but clearly not Indo-European. There are plenty of similar evidence to what Cenoz (2001) has presented, but they are usually

cases of Asian or African speakers that have learned a European language (L2) and who are aiming another European language (L3) (Ahukanna *et al.* 1981, Bartelt 1989, Ringbom 1987). These cases confirm the importance of the typological distance and prior language knowledge in the selection of language supplier.

On the other hand, language distance has recently drawn its attention to studies of L3 acquisition at the morphosyntactic level by taking basically a generativist point of view. Researchers have traditionally centred on providing empirical evidence of universal grammar (UG) in L2, (whether it is still debatable). UG by Chomsky (1965, 1986, 1995) is the linguistic theory that defends that the human brain has a limit set of rules organizing the language, implying that all languages have a common structural basis, consequently, speakers only have to learn those structures that vary from one language to another (parameters). TLA scholars have also raised their interest in searching UG presence in L3. There are basically two recent models that dominate TLA research regarding morphosyntax: the Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM) by Flynn, Foley and Vinnitskaya (2004) and the Typological Primacy Model (TPM) by Rothman (2010, 2011). Both models analyse the initial state of L3 learners so as to test learners' previous knowledge in the non-native language, as a result, to prove whether the L3 learners have access or not to UG (Chomsky 1965, 1986, 1995). The CEM (Flynn, Foley and Vinnitskaya, 2004) states that transfer into the L3 can come from any other previously acquired language. Conversely, the TPM (Rothman 2010) claims that typological distance plays the most important role in the selection of one language over the other when learning an L3. García-Mayo (2012:137) points out:

“[...] like the CEM, the TPM argues that transfer in the L3 initial state can come from any previously acquired language (L1 or L2/Ln), but unlike the CEM, the TPM hypothesizes that the process will be constrained by either actual typological



proximity or perceived typological proximity (psychotypology) between the three systems.”

Rothman (Rothman 2010, 2011) has undergone several studies so as to prove the validity of his model. However, some investigations have not concluded on the importance of this factor. More recent work (Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro 2010, Rothman 2013, 2014) has demonstrated that Rothman is in the right path given such priority to language typology.

Finally, phonology has been scarcely researched concerning cross-linguistic influence. Still, there are some studies mostly regarding non-European speakers who have already acquired a European language (Ahukanna *et al.* 1981, Bartelt 1989, Ringbom 1987). In these cases the subjects usually rely on the European L2 as language supplier. For instance, Rivers (1979) reported a case of a learner of Spanish (L3) that has English as L1 and knowledge of French as L2, and little knowledge of Italian. It is not surprising that the learner transfers knowledge from the Romances languages so as to acquire Spanish phonetics. Rivers (1979) observed the use of French vowels, consonants and stress pattern in the production of Spanish (extracted from De Angelis, 2007). Nevertheless, as Ringbom (cited here from Cenoz, 2001: 59) states “practically all learners, even at an advanced stage of learning, retain a foreign, L1-based accent in their speech.” The next section will review some interesting insights on more recent studies regarding phonology.

### **3.2. L2 status**

L2 status phenomenon was first perceived by Meisel (1983) who called it *foreign language effect*. Yet, the *L2 Status* term was coined by Hammarberg (Hammarberg and Williams 1998) so as to talk about the L3 learners’ tendency to use the L2 as a source

language over the L1. Hammarberg and Williams (1998) studied Sarah Williams' case (the second author). She has English as L1, German as L2 (high proficient) and Swedish as an L3. They analysed William's vocabulary oral production of Swedish and discovered that she relied on the L2 as a source language, mostly. Still, Hammarberg's findings show that Sarah Williams' tilt towards the L2 was more notorious at the initial state of the L3. Later on, she also relied on her L1. In addition, Hammarberg (2001) sheds more light on Sarah Williams' study by stating that she employed her L1 mainly for pragmatically functional language shifts (instrumental role) and her L2 for lexical construction attempts in the L3 (default supplier role). Thus, Hammarberg (2001) defines the L2 status factor as "a desire to suppress the L1 as being 'non-foreign' and to rely rather on an orientation towards a prior L2 as a strategy to approach the L3" (Hammarberg 2001, cited here from Bardel & Falk, 2012: 62), implying that learners activate either consciously or unconsciously the L2 as language supplier due to its *foreignness*, which has the same status as the L3.

In this line, other researchers (Leung 2002, De Angelis 2005, Bardel and Falk 2007, 2012) have tried to provide more evidence for the L2 status as a main factor influencing the acquisition of an L3. At the lexical level, there is an interesting study by Filatova (2010) on speakers of Russian (L1), English (L2) and Spanish (L3). Filatova took data from the forum of a university course where the learners had to post commentaries in Spanish. She found out that most times the learners favoured the L2 over the L1, even though the similarity between the L1 lexical forms was closer to the target language, for instance, "Spanish *arquitectura* sounds much more like Russian архитектура [arhitektúra], than English architecture ['ɑ:kitektʃər] (Filatova, 2008: 87)." Filatova suggested that the reason why the learners used the L2 as a source language might be

attributed, as Hammarberg (2001) pointed out, to the *default supplier theory* already mentioned. Furthermore, De Angelis (2005) studied the use of non-native function words in the written production of learners of Italian as a L3 (or L4 in few cases) with English, Spanish, or French as L1 or L2. The results showed that English and Spanish speakers (L1) with knowledge of French (L2) frequently insert the French subject pronoun *il* (he). “This suggests that (a) prior exposure to a non-native language informs learners’ choices of surface structures to a significant extent and (b) learners with the same L1 but different prior non-native languages develop some significant differences in their target language knowledge (De Angelis, 2005: 379).” In the case of English speakers it might be due to the fact that French is typologically closer to Italian and also because English is a non-null subject language. However, in the case of Spanish speakers, it is surprising that learners rely more on French as a source language, since Spanish is also a Romance language, and same as Italian, allows null-subjects. De Angelis (2005) pointed that the typological distance has new challenges that must face, since in some instances, even though the learners’ L1 comes from the same genetic family, learners still favour the L2 as a source language.

On the other hand, many scholars (Bardel & Falk 2007; Bohnacker 2006; Falk & Bardel 2011; Williams & Hammarberg 2009, 1998) have also focus on the acquisition of L3 syntax concerning the L2 status factor as language supplier. Bardel and Falk (2007) carried out a study of the initial state on the placement of the negation in the sentence. The data was taken by two groups of learners, one of the groups aimed Swedish and the other aimed Dutch as L3. In Swedish and Dutch the negation is post-verbal in the main clause due to raising of both lexical and non-lexical verbs to a complementizer (C) head, this is known as verb-second (V2) rule, this word order rule is shared by all

Germanic languages except English. One of the groups had a V2 native language but the L2 was not, and the other group a non-V2 native language but the L2 was a V2 language. The results indicated that syntactic structures were more easily conveyed from the L2 than from the L1 in the initial states of L3 acquisition in both cases. They concluded that the L2 status factor played a more important role than typological distance, since it was the one that determined the transfer source. In a later study, Falk and Bardel (2011) tested the L2 status factor hypothesis in a larger number of intermediate L3 learners' proficiency and found out the same tendency.

As far as the acquisition of morphology is concerned, turning back to Hammarberg and Williams' study (1998) that reported a few instances of German (L2) influence in the morphology of Swedish (L3), for example, Williams wanted to say the Swedish word *tälta* (English = camp), but instead she produced *tälten* influenced by the German word *zelten*, which also means *to camp*, so she relied on this German word and adapted it to Swedish. Hammarberg concluded that Williams' morphology mismatches were due to a low level of proficiency in the target language, since these instances did not last very long. There have been some few other studies regarding morphology (Ó Laoire and Sigleton, 2009), but they do not have reached any conclusive evidence so as to prove the L2 status as a dominant factor in the learners' activation as a language supplier.

Finally, the acquisition of phonology, similarly to the acquisition of morphology, has been scarcely researched. Returning to the case that puts under scrutiny the L2 status factor (Hammarberg and Williams, 1998), Hammarberg (2001) states that Williams in the initial stage of her Swedish had a prominent German accent. However, this accent was gradually fading and being replaced by a slight English accent. Hammarberg

suggests that the L1 phonology persists due to “the fact that articulatory patterns have a basis in neuro-motor routines that have been established according to L1 requirements, and are evidently difficult to control at will or modify” (Hammarberg, 2001:35). This is why we might encounter cases of foreign adult language learners that attain excellently the non-native language grammar, but there are fewer cases that they equate so well the foreign accent making it almost undetectable. For instance, Williams herself had such a good level of German that German speakers could not detect that she was actually a non-native speaker of this language. Yet, there is a recent study by Llama, Cardoso and Collins (2010) on two groups of learners aiming Spanish as L3. One group had English as L1 and French as L2, and the other group had French as L1 and English as L2. Both groups were recorded reading word lists containing voiceless stops in onset, stressed position. The rates of presence or absence of aspiration of both groups of learners were compared and the results showed that L2 was favoured over the L1. Llama, Cardoso and Collins concluded that linguistic distance was not a factor that could explain this language interference, since in both groups the L2 seems to stronger influence the phonetic production. Thus, the L2 has been proved to be the determining factor in the selection of source language (Llama et al. 2010).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, this paper has shown that TLA has definitely gained the category of a field of study, since there is much empirical evidence that supports the fact that L3 acquisition must be regarded as an area of research itself and be set as a separate phenomenon from Second Language Acquisition. In the same vein, the TLA field is

complex and incomplete to a certain extent, since the literature of TLA that has been reviewed shows that there is some ambiguous terminology concerning TLA, which should be revised. Therefore, all these mentioned complex issues surrounding TLA aim to emphasize the fact that there are many neglected areas regarding the TLA research, which need to be clarified so as to fully comprehend what it is meant by TLA, but also other trends in the research of language acquisition. Thus, TLA is crucial for the study of language acquisition, regardless of the number of languages. TLA research has implications in SLA, bilingualism and multilingualism and its investigation can help to theory building or to amend well-established acquisition theories and the creation of new approaches that can be applied to educational settings.

Finally, to date, there is no conclusive evidence whether the language distance has greater impact than the L2 status factor on the process of L3 acquisition. Yet, it seems to be the case that both factors can be involved in the same multilingual cases. In addition, there are other factors such as proficiency and recency of background languages that have not been dealt with in this study. However, they definitely play a role in the acquisition of L3. Moreover, there are also many neglected areas in the TLA research such as the morphology and phonology that need further research as well, so as to reach more fully conclusions.

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