

“Study the L2 Performer”:

A Review of Lennon's “Introspection and Intentionality in Advanced Second-Language Acquisition”

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This article critiques Lennon's (1989) study and generalizes upon the current justifications for and use of introspective techniques in second language research. There are shortcomings in Lennon's write-up of his study in his failure to define terms, explain his methodology adequately, and present corroboration from his four informants' written and audiotaped introspections for his own assertions concerning their learning experiences and approaches. Nevertheless, Lennon's work offers the strength of much exploratory case study work in generating rich, complex data which can suggest factors (such as sociolinguistic context) to be considered in hypothesis-testing research or included in less open-ended surveys, and which can remind researchers of the viewpoints of the learners themselves. This article discusses the ways in which Lennon's work can illuminate current debate on such topics as learners' allocation of limited attention and decisions to monitor their output, planned versus unplanned discourse, tradeoffs between strategies for successful language use versus successful language learning, and the limited learning opportunities in foreign language classrooms.

Lennon's (1989) article is an attempt to “enrich understanding of L2 <second language> acquisition at the advanced level” (quite a broad research question!) through following four German learners of English as they experience and report on their “initial extensive exposure to the L2 community”; six months spent at a British university. While performance data from the four subjects were also analyzed, they receive but brief mention in this article since the focus here is on drawing generalizations from the written introspections and interviews.

Lennon devotes his five-and-a-half-page literature review to justifying the use of introspective techniques with advanced learners, rather than reporting results of other studies of advanced learners venturing into the land of L2. Introspective studies employ as their data the informants' own statements concerning their approach to language learning or language use. Lennon states that “studies of L2 acquisition have until recently been reluctant to use learner introspection as data,” but it seems that is not so much the case any longer (Færch & Kasper, 1987) as

that when they *do* use introspection, researchers feel they must defend their decision in a way that users of either naturalistic or experimentally-induced performance data would not bother with. In a sense, this study is less an exploratory study of advanced learners than it is a “demonstration study” (Brown, 1992) akin to those which seek to demonstrate the value of a new statistical technique by applying it to authentic data. Perhaps this study actually has not only a research question but also a predictive research hypothesis, which shows up in the closing sentence of Lennon's introductory section, which reads:

It is the premise of this paper that granted that caution should be exercised in the elicitation and interpretation of introspection-based protocols, such investigation can complement analysis based performance data and enrich understanding of L2 acquisition at the advanced level. (Lennon, 1989: 381)

Lennon's most interesting argument for introspective techniques is that while we must not be monolingually ethnocentric and only look for causes of failure to progress in L2 learning, truly

balanced bilingualism, with no functional differentiation, is enough of an unnatural state that even as automatization proceeds, "the learning process by which such reduplication of systems is acquired and maintained is likely to be highly organized, intentional, and therefore conscious" (p. 377). His point is that if a process is conscious it can be reported on. However there is quite a gulf in proficiency, and probably also in metalinguistic sophistication, between the professional conference interpreters studied in the work by Thiéry (1982) which Lennon cites and the four university students experiencing their first prolonged immersion in the L2 environment whom Lennon himself studies.

The five pages of Lennon's article which are devoted to a justification for introspective methodology seems overly long because it leaves only twelve pages to describe the design, the results, and the conclusions of Lennon's study. And the true justification or validation of any semi-ethnographic study such as this, with an open-ended question explored through the researcher's subjective interpretation of his or her informants' reports, lies in the reader's comparison of the data submitted with the interpretation advanced. Lennon's article would have been strengthened had he provided more direct quotes by the informants for the reader to evaluate. The problem also lies in the points Lennon chooses to illustrate with quotes. He provides a quote from each of the four informants to illustrate the commonplace idea that because the informants lived with native speakers, their fluency improved more than their grammar. But then no illustration or explanation follows more uncommon assertions, such as that subjects sometimes sought out feedback, or experimented with more elevated English, that they emphasized linguistic experimentation in production, and that they "were also aware of the gaps in their knowledge and in some cases had hunches about how certain things might be expressed in English, hunches as yet unconfirmed by input" (Lennon, 1989 : 391). I must admit that after reading the

article several times I could link these assertions with informants' quotes included elsewhere in the paper to illustrate other points, but Lennon did not make it easy to locate corroboration for his assertions.

Lennon tells us that not only "the learning process", but also some L2 learner strategies can be "to some degree both conscious and intentional" (Lennon, 1989 : 380), but we are never told what "intentional" means in this study, let alone what the difference between "conscious" and "intentional" is, nor how we are to distinguish four factors he says produce L2 performance; "human intentionality, strategies, attentionality, and conscious endeavor" (Lennon, 1989 : 390). Without any careful definitions provided by Lennon one can only suppose as Ellis (1992, comments on an earlier version of this paper) did, that intentional behavior is that which has been deliberately chosen as a way of achieving a goal, and conscious behavior is that which learners know they are performing. Intentional behavior is always conscious but conscious behavior is not always intentional.

The paragraph which describes the subjects appears to tell us the essentials concerning the background of these four female German university students aged 20 to 24. That is until we read the Chomskian jargon in Dorothea's comment written six weeks into her six months of taking classes at the University of Reading (England). (we know they *were not* English as a Second Language classes but don't know what they *were*) : "The 'performance' increases in relation to the 'competence'" (Lennon, 1989 : 383). A linguistics student or language-teacher-in-training may well view her own language learning experience from a different perspective than an engineering student (as has been noted by both writers and reviewers in the case of diary studies carried out by SLA <second language acquisition> specialists by keeping a journal of their own language learning experiences). In order to judge how far one may generalize the findings of this study one must know the majors and

career aspirations of these students. Neither does Lennon report how these particular informants were selected, introduced to the researcher or the purpose of the study, and persuaded to participate.

Still in the DESIGN section of his article, Lennon next reports the *results* of written and oral tests performed weekly throughout the six months, and concludes that although performance levels fluctuated considerably, the overall result was improvement. He suggests "that each subject seems to have been developing her own linguistic style...and that in performance, subjects seemed to adopt particular strategies in terms of focus on particular dimensions to the neglect of others." (Lennon, 1989 : 382) yet Lennon had just spent five pages arguing that such inferencing of strategy choice from examining performance data is of doubtful validity if not accompanied by introspective commentary. And the very general introspective reports collected from his informants bear no relation to the performance tasks, although it turns out the subjects *do* report variability in what they focus on when using English, mainly according to whether they perceive their interlocutor as valuing fluency, accuracy, or elevated register most highly. The performance data was analyzed in terms of "productivity, syntactic complexical range, fluency, and error". I would like to know what productivity is and how it differs from fluency, but operational definitions are presumably to be found in Lennon's (1987) unpublished dissertation, and "productivity" may well refer to the quantity of speech produced during a task. We are next told the question that elicited the written reports :

Say, if you can, how much and in what ways your stay in Reading is helping your English. What is most useful about being here? Is there anything missing in your exposure to English here? (Lennon, 1989 : 382)

This seems an excellent general prompt. While of course a case study cannot truly be replicated, it will be through the gradual accumulation of such studies that they begin to "triangulate" each other. And for meaningful comparisons,

exact wording is helpful. Informants might have recalled different key experiences if, in the question, "your exposure to English" had been replaced with "your use of English". But were the informants writing on the spot or answering at home at their leisure?

Neither does Lennon report under what conditions the 20-minute "largely unstructured" interviews were conducted towards the end of the stay, nor what specific question or questions were used by whom to prompt the students to "reflect on their language learning experience in Reading" (Lennon, 1989 : 382).

I also wondered if the interviews were used to expand upon or clarify the written reports, which contain a few confusing remarks by the informants, such as the comment that English-speaking surroundings are "useful for the ability of understanding spoken English as well in word as in meaning" (Lennon, 1989 : 383).

In the FINDINGS section two written reports are included in their entirety while two have omissions. How much was omitted, and did the author omit portions that echoed other reports and were therefore deemed redundant, or unique portions from which he could not generalize and therefore deemed less relevant? Since his first conclusion is that the reports are remarkably concurrent one wants to know. (And were the informants acquaintances who might have discussed their experiences together?)

The question of agreement among the informants arises even more insistently as Lennon lists eleven observations he has culled from the interviews. Two of these "main points" have no illustrative quotes, three have quotes from one informant, five points have quotes from two informants, and one has all four informants making the same point on grammar vs. fluency. Yet Lennon always writes "Subjects were..." "Subjects saw...", etc., in the plural. It would have been possible to have said (although perhaps not easy to decide definitively) "Two subjects..." for one point and "All four subjects..." for another so the reader is privy to the degree of concu-

rence. There is, after all, no methodological rule stating that exploratory case studies are to avoid quantification whenever possible!

Lennon's Conclusions are well-taken and interesting. He claims that SLA researchers are apt to forget that interlanguage, L2 learner's language, is not simply spewed out of a black box (see Long, 1980), but is created in a social context of use by a total personality making moment-to-moment choices on allocation of attention. Lennon's focus is on interlanguage as it is manifested in a product rather than on interlanguage as a system of rules existing in the learner's mind. But Lennon often points out the interest of his informants in linguistic experimentation, and states that they distinguish between different kinds of knowledge and degrees of certainty underpinning different production items. One would therefore suppose that Lennon would agree that the strategic choices his informants make influence not only their variable interlanguage *production*, the degree to which they successfully accomplish their aims in a given moment, but also the development of their interlanguage *rules*, the knowledge they will have available to call upon on a subsequent occasion.

On reading Lennon one notices the great difference between the plethora of variables informants given free rein to express themselves can bring into a study, versus the simpler distinctions and cleaner lines of models constructed by researchers who wish to invite empirical testing of their theories. For example, Ellis' (1984) Variable Competence Model of SLA proposes that unplanned discourse makes use of relatively automatic and unanalyzed knowledge while planned discourse makes use of relatively non-automatic and analyzed knowledge in "secondary processes" such as monitoring. Yet Lennon's informants report that they fairly often monitor when conversing spontaneously with interlocutors they don't know well or particularly wish to impress. (Although the point the informants themselves make is that monitoring spontaneous conversation is so difficult that it often worsens their perfor-

mance, i. e., they are producing "planned discourse" in a context calling for "unplanned discourse".)

Another case of individual examples culled from a case study presenting more complexity than generalized models can be found by comparing Lennon's belief that it is "highly probable that the advanced learner possesses a variety of styles in L2...sensitive to situational influences" (Lennon, 1989: 392) with the theory of Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981), which granted that L2 learners lie along a continuum, but still claimed that they can be meaningfully grouped into two types, according to whether they exhibit an integrative orientation marked by production strategies of elaborative simplification that lead them towards relative conformity to the target norm, or whether they exhibit an instrumental orientation which leads to production strategies of restrictive simplification which result in more obviously non-native production. Lennon studied four advanced learners, who may have more choices in their repertoires than the subjects in Meisel et al (1981), but probably most, if not all, learners choose between these two strategies in different situations. Whether analyzing cross-sectional or longitudinal data, Meisel et al (1981) drew all their data from sociolinguistically similar settings, and this may account for their not having observed much strategy variation for any one subject.

In fact, in arguing that we cannot infer psycholinguistic causes of error from performance data, in his literature review, Lennon cites Kohn (1982), whom he says "argues that learners will differ individually in their demands for making their performance accurately reflect their competence. Some will focus on correctness and some on communication, and most learners will shift position on this spectrum according to the situation" (Lennon, 1989; 380). One of the values of exploratory case studies such as Lennon's is that they can point up potential intervening variables, such as relationship to interlocutor, which may have to be taken into account before

we can meaningfully compare across several more controlled, hypothesis-testing studies.

Very open elicitations of extended answers, such as Lennon uses, allow informants to illustrate their varying approaches to different types of situations. Compare Lennon's wide-open questions to a typical question asked by the interviewer in Naiman et al's (1978) prototypic "Good Language Learner study": "Generally speaking, would you prefer to be relatively passive or rather active in the early stages of language learning?" (Naiman et al, 1978 : 108). And Lennon's informants were also free to contradict themselves or to gradually clarify their beliefs as, they might not have been able to had they been surveyed in a short answer or multiple choice format. One informant, Elke, writes "As for talking, I cannot say yet whether I am improving or not, but I know that I've still got a lot of problems", then nine lines down the page (with some intervening ellipses edited by Lennon) continues "So I think that this stay helps my talking and especially my listening and understanding because I'm in an English-speaking environment" (Lennon, 1989 : 384).

A real strength of Lennon's report is that he can let differences and complications be, or even highlight them, rather than artificially simplifying a complex reality to fit it into one easily digested framework. His approach can be contrasted with that of any number of views of learner strategies which have been generated in the "Good Language Learner" tradition, which feature taxonomies which fail to distinguish clearly, if at all, between strategies for learning and compensatory strategies for performance.

Lennon also seems much more realistic than those (Wenden, 1991, Oxford, 1990) who simply present a great range of performance and learning strategies and advocate the teaching/learning of them (all) without discussing the issue that there may be tradeoffs between them. Or see, for example, Wenden, who quotes her learners' evaluations of their *performance* at an earlier time in their language careers, evaluations

elicited by the interview, and then claims that the learners were at that earlier time monitoring their language *learning* (Wenden, 1991 : 27). Are "learners" (who, especially if they are living in the L2 culture may actually experience themselves more as "users") usually as aware of "learning" as teachers and researchers are? Saville-Troike et al (1982) write of their observations of ESL learners in a U. S. elementary school who seemed to have been such gifted compensatory performers that their learning rate was depressed, but one doubts that those learners themselves would have considered their ability to outperform their competence a problem. Lennon takes the *emic* perspective of his informants, and instead of observing that focusing on communicative production may delay acquisition, he speaks from the immediate priorities of these four Germans living in England, and thus sees *learning* goals as potential obstacles to *communicative performance*. He says that L2 speakers

mobilize available linguistic resources to accomplish communicative goals while improving linguistic proficiency by practice in performance. Other goals may intrude, which may be at least to some extent at odds with the communicative goal: the need to save face by not making mistakes; the need to demonstrate ability to handle particular varieties or registers of the language: the need to try out newly heard or read vocabulary, to obtain feedback on a construction by venturing it in production; the need to identify linguistically with a particular subgroup of the L2 community by selection of linguistic forms; and so forth. (Lennon, 1989: 390)

Lennon asks us to consider and investigate what many have failed to: "Is the sort of behavior that is most effective for communication also most effective for learning?" (Lennon, 1989 : 393). This truly is a key issue, and Lennon's longitudinal case study approach is one means to investigate the issue, while another typical approach is that of those who have devised quasi-experimental task designs (e. g., Tanaka, 1992) to investigate claims of the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983, Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987)

that negotiation of meaning facilitates second language acquisition.

Lennon has examined four learners who operate in two different modes, accessing more of one sort of knowledge in one situation and more of the other in another: "Knowing what is correct in terms of 'rules' and relying on whether something 'feels' or 'sounds' correct" (Lennon, 1989: 391). Rules predominated in Germany and over time in England they relied more on feeling, as they learned that they wouldn't be sanctioned for breaking the rules, and as they became more used to operating in the feeling mode. Lennon doesn't *assume* that teaching of strategiss would hasten the switch, but he does ask *if* "there is an effective strategic behavior for learners...that could and should be taught to them in the classroom in preparation for their stay abroad" (Lennon, 1989: 393). Unfortunately, we don't know if there was any history of communicative language teaching methodology nor any use of native or authentic conversational materials (videos, etc.) in the English-learning careers of these four informants in Germany. But the informants themselves suggest that neither the *knowledge* of what native-speaker English feels like, (especially relaxed, mundane conversational English) nor the *experience* of operating out of a feel for the language rather than from rules, nor an authentic communicative motivation for use, are to be had in a non-English-speaking country. Do learners need training in strategies, or do they actually need something Lennon doesn't discuss: the sociolinguistic variety of purposes, registers, and content seldom found in classroom discourse?

If indeed Lennon's hypothesis is that "introspective techniques can profitably be employed with the advanced learner to tap knowledge of strategic approach" (Lennon, 1989: 375), then I would say his study's results have supported the hypothesis. The weaknesses of this study are largely in his decisions as to what to include in the article and at what point in his presentation. One *does* feel that he has adequately

distilled some of the most interesting experiences and insights of his informants and commented on them in a manner that can enrich SLA research and pedagogy.

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