

# “Is Native Language Decisive in Language Learning Results?”

**A study on acculturation and the effect of language distance: Finnish and Dutch migrants in Australia compared**

Saara Louko

---



*Up until 1979 when Australia introduced stricter language requirements for the new immigrants it was not uncommon for migrants to arrive in Australia with little or no knowledge of English. Yet most of these adult migrants acquired language skills that enabled them to lead an independent and full life in Australia.*

*However, for various reasons these migrants have achieved varying levels of proficiency. Naturally differences can be found between individual learners, but the different migrant groups also show divergent tendencies. Whereas the Dutch are generally considered to be successful English learners, the image of Finnish migrants is quite the opposite. The objective of this study was to explore this matter further by comparing two groups of adult migrants which in many respects seem quite similar, but differ in terms of native language.*

---

*Saara Louko is Master of Philosophy (since 1.5.2008) Pro gradu-research Learning English: Finnish and Dutch Migrants in Australia Compared (2007).*

## **The respondents and the hypotheses**

For the comparison I collected answers from native speakers of Dutch and native speakers of Finnish. The other criteria for choosing the respondents were that they would have to be first-generation migrants and that they had arrived in Australia in the 1950s, the 1960s or the 1970s. My working hypothesis was that the two migrant groups, the Finnish and Dutch speakers, would differ considerably in their level of acculturation, current proficiency in English, and attitudes concerning native language effect on learning English. I assumed Finnish speakers to be slightly more distant from the Australians due to their considerable ethnic vitality and difficulties with acquiring the target language, English. I believe the Finns' cultural introversion and the difficulties in English acquisition to be interdependent phenomena.

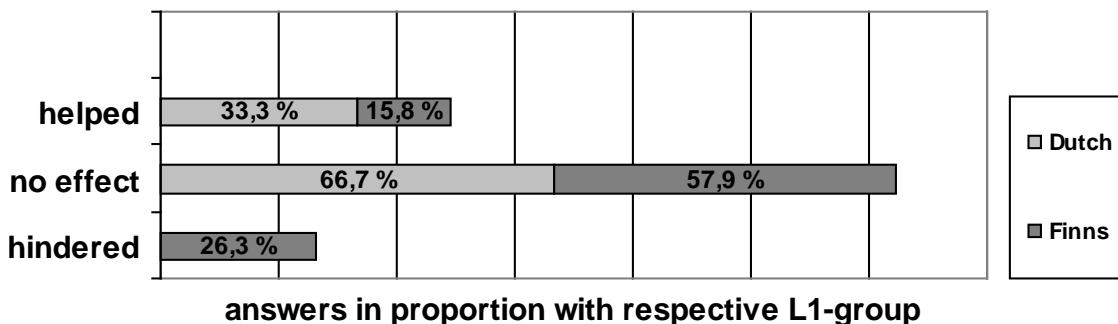
My second assumption was that for the most part learning English comes more easily to Dutch-speakers and that the cultural similarities between the Netherlands and Australia assist this acquisition process. I also believed that

the Dutch migrants benefit from the linguistic similarity between English and Dutch - an advantage the Finns lack as their language is unrelated to the target language. Dutch and English are both Indo-European languages while Finnish belongs to a completely different group of Uralic languages.

The empiric data was collected through two online questionnaires: one for the Dutch and the other for the Finnish speakers. I received altogether 46 responses, out of which 20 came from Finnish and 26 from Dutch speakers. The sex ratio in the answers from the Finns was balanced, but among the Dutch respondents the men were slightly overrepresented. In my study 72 percent of all respondents were now in their sixties or older, and on average they had lived in Australia now for 42 years. Altogether 15 percent of the respondents had prior migration experience. In my data a quarter of the Finns had lived in another foreign country before settling in Australia.

The questionnaires I prepared for this study addressed matters that are viewed to be central in second language acquisition (SLA) or indicative of the migrants' level of acculturation. I was particularly in-

## Opinions on L1 influence on SLA Finns vs. the Dutch



### Abbreviations

- SLA second language acquisition; the process of learning a new language
- TL target language; the language studied by the learner
- L1 native language
- L2 second language; typically a foreign language

terested in the subjects' social life and everyday communication. The respondents were asked to evaluate their current English proficiency and to estimate how difficult the SLA process had been for them. In one of the questions the respondents were asked whether they felt that their native language had hindered or assisted learning English.

### Integration

Social integration and second language acquisition among migrants are undoubtedly intertwined phenomena and this is essentially the idea that John Schumann bases his **Acculturation Theory** (1978) on. In this theory Schumann argues that migrants who have a desire to integrate with the dominant population are more likely to become fluent in the target language (TL). In other words, Schumann views acculturation as the key to successful second language acquisition (SLA).

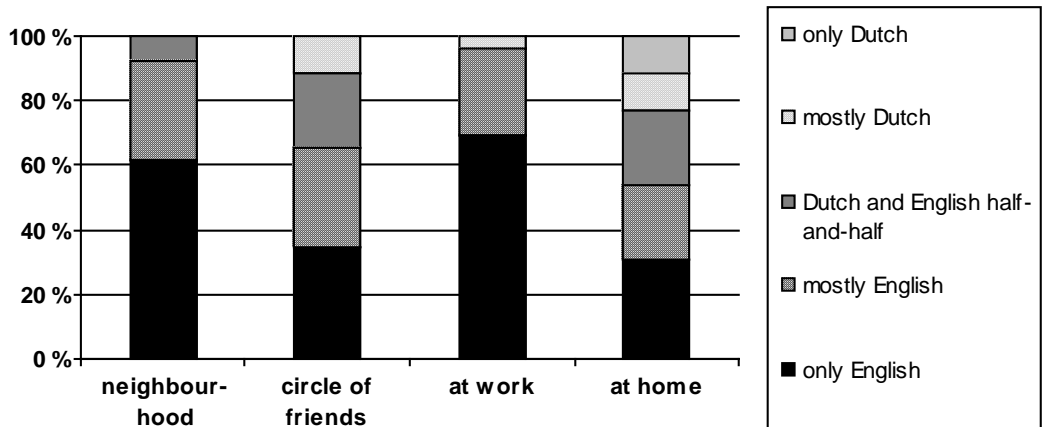
The acculturation process is often easier for migrants who come from a cultural background similar to that of the host society. This is because they are able to recover from the inevitable cultural shock faster, and after this recovery they can either assimilate with the host society or adapt themselves to it. When the cultural distance is small, adapting oneself to the new environment is relatively easy and the same applies to language learning and language distance. In a nutshell, the more similarities there are between the languages and the cultures the easier it usually is for the migrants to feel at home in the new country.

Views supporting this observation, that successful SLA and social integration go hand in hand, can be found in previous studies about Finnish Australians. Both Olavi Koivukangas (1975, 109) and Tuulikki Mattila (1985, 16-17) conclude that inadequate command of English has for the Finns

been the overriding difficulty in integrating. My own data also indicated that the Dutch were socially more integrated with the core-population than the Finns. A third of the Dutch reported that they speak only English with their friends, but none of the Finns gave a similar response. At work only 3.8 percent of the Dutch relied on communication in their native language either partly or wholly, against 15 percent of the Finns.

SLA is often also linked with attitudes and motivation. My study indicated that the Finns had very positive views about the Australian society, but their motivation for learning English was somewhat lower than in the comparison group. The Dutch held quite differing views on language: nearly all of them viewed it very important to become fluent in English. Their preference for using English is evident also in the language maintenance patterns (see e.g. Pauwels 1991; Clyne 2003). The Finns

## Language use among the Dutch speakers



on the other hand are famous for maintaining their native language.

Other factors considered important for *Natural Second Language Acquisition* (i.e. learning the target language in the environment where it is spoken) are age, social and psychological factors, length of residence and the learner's native language. Traditionally it has been assumed that younger people are better at acquiring new languages. The social factors which impact the language acquisition process include e.g. social integration, attitude and intended length of stay, and the psychological factors include among others language shock and motivation.

Length of residence can indicate if the language acquisition process is still at an active phase. Individuals do differ in this respect, but all learners will eventually cease learning the target language. When the average length of residence in Australia in my data (42 years) is considered, it is safe to assume that the second language competence among these respondents will no longer improve. And

lastly, on the impact of one's native language, most linguists agree that native speakers of a language closely related to the TL can learn the TL faster and become more proficient users than native speakers of an unrelated language. This juxtaposition means that in general the Dutch speakers should have a considerable vantage over the Finnish speakers in learning English.

The impact of age, native language influence, and social factors on adult second language acquisition results are further discussed in the following sections.

### Does age matter?

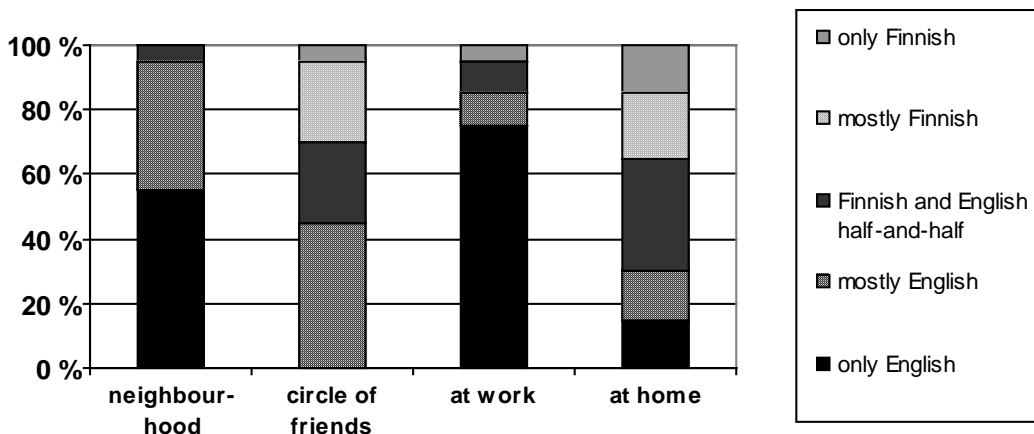
Most of the respondents in my study came to Australia in their late twenties, and although many of them had studied a little English before migrating, for the most part their English acquisition did take place only in Australia. Therefore the question about the role of age in SLA is quite central to this study.

Researchers have identified several biological and psychologi-

cal explanations for the differences found in language acquisition between people of differing ages. In his work *Biological Foundations of Language* Eric Lenneberg discusses individual language aptitude and various developmental stages which affect the way people process language. He suggests that the factors that impede SLA, the "language-learning blocks", increase after puberty. And therefore learning a second language requires a conscious and laboured effort from an adult while children are known to have acquired new languages from mere exposure (1967, 156, 176).

Similar findings were made by Stephen Krashen who suggests that at puberty our *affective filter* (which blocks language acquisition e.g. when the person is anxious or feels that s/he already has adequate TL competence) grows stronger and is very unlikely ever to return to the level of child learners, whose affective filter is rarely strong enough to prevent native-like language attainment (1985, 13). Older learners are better at

## Language use among the Finnish speakers



understanding the input they are exposed to when listening or reading, because of the advantages, greater experience and knowledge, brought to them by age.

Evelyn Hatch notes that children often learn a second language at the expense of their native language. The same is not true for adult learners – adults do not forget their mother tongue in the SLA process. She also points out that the impression people have of children as the ideal learners and the adults as the non-learners is not entirely justified as the range of different types of communication a child needs is very different from those an adult has to master in order to seem successful in SLA (1983, 191–192).

To summarise the relationship between age and second language acquisition: although it is far more common that children achieve near-native proficiency in the target language, modern-day research has produced the following three conclusions on this matter. Firstly, adult language acquisition can also bear comparable results;

and secondly, the first and second language acquisition processes are more alike than previously assumed; and lastly, contrary to popular notions, age does bring certain advantages for the adult second language learner.

### Transfer - Native Language Influence

All learning is based on prior knowledge - this applies equally to language learning. Intralinguistic knowledge increases as the learner becomes more advanced in the TL. Cross-linguistic knowledge is also important especially when the TL is closely related to the learner's native language (Ringblom 2007, 1–2). Most linguists agree with this view that it is easier to learn languages that are related to either the learner's native language (L1) or another previously acquired language.

This is because prior knowledge of a language similar to the target language enables **positive transfer**, which means that the

learners are able to *deduct* from their existing cross-linguistic knowledge how the target language is likely to “work”. Similarities in the vocabulary provide easy examples of positive transfer, but transfer is evident also in other aspects of language learning. Any linguistic knowledge that assists the acquisition of another language can be viewed as positive transfer. Native language influence can also have a negative effect on language acquisition. Håkan Ringblom and Terence Odlin have studied the transfer phenomenon with special reference to Finnish.

### Social factors

The data I collected also revealed something about the migrant's social life. I asked them to describe their communication in the following situations: (a) in their neighbourhood, (b) with their circle of friends / in leisure time activities, (c) at work and (d) at home. The differences between the two groups were clear in the answers

regarding communication with friends and at home.

One of my hypotheses was that the migrants from the Netherlands were culturally closer to the Anglo-Australian society than the Finns. The cultural distance is evident also in language and the way people communicate. Jaakko Lehtonen's research on Finns as foreign language users indicates that the Finns suffer from a collective feeling of inferiority. He suggests that this profuse self-criticism combined with Finnish socio-pragmatic rules may be the reason why Finns can appear less proficient TL users than they really are (1984, 76). In other words, Finns hesitate to speak in English for several reasons. The fact that some learners avoid communication in a foreign language can reflect on their language competence. Lehtonen offers the **mirror effect** as one explanation why non-native speakers hesitate speaking in TL, which means that people feel uncomfortable when they notice that the *subjective ideal self* does not match their actual performance. The disillusion may reduce TL communication significantly (1984, 75).

## Conclusion

The focus of this study was to explore how two groups of adult migrants with different native languages and cultural backgrounds have succeeded in learning English in a natural language acquisition setting in Australia. Essentially the study aimed at uncovering how strongly language acquisition and cultural integration are interlinked with the migrants' native language and culture.

The results of this study were in line with what I had anticipated: the two groups differed in their answers regarding attitudes, self-assessment of their English skills, experiences about SLA and different markers of acculturation. Also preferences in language use were notably different.

What my study revealed was that whereas the Dutch respondents preferred using English in all the four proposed situations (at home, at work, with friends and in their neighbourhood), the Finns' communication at home and with friends was native language dominated. At the time of arrival in Australia, 95 percent of the Dutch had viewed it very important to become fluent in English, but only 63 percent of the Finnish respondent had felt this way. As for the native language influence on SLA, 33.3 percent of the Dutch felt that their native language had helped them learn English and none of them viewed that the effect would have been negative. Over a quarter of the Finns felt that Finnish had hampered their English acquisition, but surprisingly many – nearly 16 percent of the Finns – stated that their native language had assisted English acquisition.

## References

Clyne, Michael G. *Dynamics of language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003.  
Gingras Rosario C. (ed.). *Second Language Acquisition & Foreign Language Teaching*. Virginia: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1978.

Hatch, Evelyn Marcussen. *Psycholinguistics: A Second Language Perspective*. Rowley: Newbury House Publisher, Inc, 1983.  
Koivukangas, Olavi. *Suomalainen Siirtolaisuus Australiaan toisen maailmansodan jälkeen*. Siirtolaisuustutkimuksia A1. Turku: Siirtolaisinstituutti, 1975.  
Krashen, Stephen D. *The Input Hypothesis: issues and implications*. New York: Longman Inc, 1985 (1987).  
Lehtonen, Jaakko. *Vaikeneva kulttuuri ja vieraan kielen pelko: miksi suomalainen vaikeenee vieraallakin kielellä*. In Sajavaara, Leiwo & Eloranta (eds.) 1984.  
Lenneberg, Eric H.. *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967 (1<sup>st</sup> corrected printing).  
Mattila, Tuulikki. *Report on Survey into the needs of the Finnish Community in New South Wales / Australian suomalaisten elinolot sekä sosiaali- ja terveystalveluiden tarve*. Turku: Institute of Migration 1985.  
Odlin, Terence. *Language Transfer - Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge Applied Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.  
Pauwels, Anne. Dutch in Australia. In Romaine (ed.) 1991.  
Romaine Suzanne (ed.). *Language in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.  
Ringblom, Håkan. *Cross-linguistic Similarity in Foreign Language Learning*. Second Language Acquisition 21. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 2007.  
Sajavaara Kari, Leiwo Matti & Eloranta Mervi (eds.) 1984.

*AFinLA:n vuosikerta 1984.*  
Jyväskylä: Turun yliopiston  
Offsetpaino.

Schumann, John H. The Acculturation Model for Second-Language Acquisition. In Gingras (ed.) 1978.

## Tiivistelmä

Tutkin äidinkielen vaikutusta englanninkielen omaksumiseen vertailemalla kahta kieliryhmää, suomenkielisiä ja hollanninkielisiä maahanmuuttajia Australiassa. Oletin, että hollanninkielinen vastaajaryhmä olisi oppinut englantia

helpommin ja nopeammin johtuen kielellisistä ja kulttuurisista yhtäläisyyksistä kohdemaan ja kotimaan välillä. Oletin hollanninkielisen ryhmän akkulturoituneen suomenkielistä ryhmää paremmin kohdemaan yhteiskuntaan. Vastajina toimi 46 Australiaan pääosin 1950–1970-luvuilla muuttanutta siirtolaista. Heistä 26 oli hollanninkielisiä ja 20 suomenkielisiä.

Tutkimuksessa ilmeni, että hollantilaisten kielitaito korreloi voimakkaammin myönteisten asenteiden kanssa paikallista väestöä ja yhteiskuntaa kohtaan. Suomalaiset puolestaan olivat kielitaidoltaan yhtäläisiä asenteista riip-

pumatta. Hollanninkieliset vastaajat olivat myös kielitaitoisempia kuin suomenkieliset, ts. he ilmoittivat osaavansa useampia vieraita kieliä ja arvioivat oman englannin kielen taitonsa vahvemmaksi kuin suomalaiset. Joka kolmas hollanninkielinen koki, että äidinkieli oli edesauttanut englannin oppimista, ja ainoastaan suomenkieliset vastaajat sanoivat äidinkielen hankaloittaneen kielenomaksumista. Suomenkieliset vastaajat käyttivät äidinkieltään huomattavasti hollanninkielisiä useammin: ryhmien väliset erot olivat varsin selviä etenkin ystävien kanssa ja kotona käytetyn kielen suhteen.

## Living Together Summit, Lontoo 12.–14.3.2008

Eturivissä toinen vasemmalta tutkimusjohtaja Elli Heikkilä vieressään Mrs. Fauzia Mohamed Hashi, The Immigrant Forum, Contact. Committee for Immigrants and the Authorities, Norja, British Councilin järjestämässä Living Together Summit-tapahtumassa Lontoossa 12.–14.3.2008.

