

# AN OVERVIEW TO THE ROLE OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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**Abstract:** *There have been many factors leading to successful second language teaching and learning, among which is sociolinguistic competence – people’s ability to use the second language (L2) appropriately in different cultural and social contexts. The paper presents an overview of sociolinguistics and analyses its importance in the L2 development and second language learning (SLL). A number of sociolinguistic issues then are discussed to provide further explanations for the critical role of sociolinguistics in SLL through an analysis of empirical studies in this field. The last part of the paper argues for the values of sociolinguistic competence to any language users and shows how to integrate sociolinguistic components into L2 teaching and learning to help students become effective language users in diverse, complicated social situations.*

**Keywords:** *First language (L1), second language (L2), sociolinguistics, sociolinguistic competence, second language learning (SLL).*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, research in second language learning (SLL) has been approached from different theoretical orientations. Each of them plays a certain role in our understanding and accounting for second language (L2) learning and learners, among which sociolinguistics – the study of language in relation to society - has made valuable contributions. Sociolinguistics, a branch of linguistics, is one of the theoretical orientations that are estimated to be most significant and productive since the 1990s. The outstanding feature of sociolinguistic orientation is its concern with language use in naturalistic contexts and its view of L2 learners as social beings, with a range of characteristics that are constantly reconstructed through social interaction with others in the target language.

The most important role of sociolinguistics in language teaching is to provide learners with appropriate instructions for both oral and written communication and to raise their sociolinguistic awareness, i.e. to improve their understanding of social and cultural differences between their mother tongue and the foreign language(s). In addition, this branch of linguistics plays a part in examining the relationships between language and society with the aim of better understanding the language structure and how language works in real-life communication (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Therefore, according to Shu and Radio (2019), the desired outcome of teaching and learning a language is that learners are able to achieve sociolinguistic competence.

Right from the early stages, sociolinguists have always paid attention to the natural use of language in the real life. This has led second language teachers to look at sociolinguistic research to develop their teaching methods and expand the range of language teaching objectives (Coulmas, 1997; Scarcella, Andersen, & Krashen, 1990). SLL is not only concerned with building a grammatical system but also includes the ability to use language as a tool of communication and exchange and the ability to use language appropriately in all the contexts.

With such significant roles of sociolinguistics, this paper will focus on the theoretical issues in this discipline which are believed to be underlying the discipline's accounts of L2 learning. The coming part of this paper introduces basic sociolinguistic concepts and the role of sociolinguistics in the context of second language learning. First, language variation on a societal level and on the individual level, based on factors like style, gender, etc. to explain the phenomenon of *variability in SLL*, will be examined, then the paper will continue with the discussion of the *influence of social factors* on L2 use and L2 learners. The last two sections provide a discussion of *sociolinguistic competence* as substantial knowledge and skills for L2 users and recommendations for SLL classrooms. The reason for this paper's focus on these theoretical strands is that they are among major concerns of sociolinguistics, and they have helped SLL researchers provide clear evidence of language use in educational systems.

## 2. CONTENTS

### 2.1. Overview of sociolinguistics

Homes (2002) defined sociolinguistics as a study of the rapport between language and society or a study of language in relation to social aspects such as regional, class, gender and occupational differences. The value of sociolinguistics, as stated by Hudson, "is the light which it throws on the nature of language or on the characteristics of some particular language" (1982, p. 5). Hence, being different from other perspectives on SLL, sociolinguistic approach characteristically focuses on depicting the ways in which people actually use languages in the community or in real-life situations. In other words, sociolinguistics concerns learners' linguistic competence and performance, while sociocultural theory, for instance, concentrates on learners' cognitive development and learning process. It should be also noted that sociolinguistics is a broad field of study, itself covering a variety of perspectives: for example, social and regional variation in language use; language identity; language attitudes; class, age, and gender as variables in language use; language as expression of solidarity and politeness; bidialectism, bilingualism and multilingualism. Furthermore, sociolinguistics has been applied to many research fields. For instance, Shuy's study (1981) illustrated the usefulness of qualities of sociolinguistics in three separate fields: literary analysis, reading and medicine.

Therefore, despite being 'a newcomer' in the field of SLL, sociolinguistics has played a significant role in and made substantial contributions to SLL and SLL research.

### 2.2. Key sociolinguistic components and their relation to SLL

#### 2.2.1. *Variability in second language use*

The phenomenon of variability has been subject to dispute over several decades in the L2 acquisition literature. As for Mitchell and Myles (2004), the aim of accounting variability is to define 'acquisition' and to enlighten why variability is such an outstanding and characteristic trait of L2 use. Scholars from different traditions have taken contrasting views on this phenomenon. Being approached from the sociolinguistic orientation, variability is viewed as a key indicator of how the context affects learners' language use, and sociolinguists are interested in studying variability. In other words, they are keen on "explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts" (Holmes, 2001, p. 1).

Researchers have focused on the issues of *language change/ language variation* and *pidginization* in order to explicate internal variability. Language, according to Holmes (2001), “varies in three major ways which are interrelated – over time, in physical space, and socially” (p. 195). This concept is crucial to both L1 acquisition and L2 learning. In the later field, it is suggested that L2 use is itself highly adjustable from learner to learner and even variable from stage to stage in one learner’s learning process. A grammatical rule can be ‘treated’ differently by different L2 learners; or, one sound can be pronounced differently by the same L2 learners in different phases of the process. The other sociolinguistic component is ‘pidgin’, characterized by Hudson (1982, p. 62) as a type of language “that it be as simple to learn as possible”. A large amount of research has indicated that SLL and pidginization share similarities, especially in the early stages of SLL. Both are typified by reduction and simplification.

Moreover, variability in SLL can be persuasively explained by *style variation*, *task-based variation* and *gender-based variation* (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Also according to the authors, “it is well established by sociolinguists that first language speakers vary their language use in regular ways, dependent on style, task, interlocutor, etc.” (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 227). Likewise, in SLL, Tarone (1988) discussed her work with Japanese and Arabic learners of English as a second language, who tended to use third-person singular verb ending with *-s* more in formal situations and concluded that L2 learners also control a number of varieties of L2 (as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Although there is some evidence of gender-based variability in SLL, it is admitted that this phenomenon is not as salient in L2 learners as in L1 speakers. This fact is understandable, especially at the beginning or pre-intermediate levels where L2 learners have little control over their L2 competence.

Other important sociolinguistic issues in SLL are *diglossia* and *code-switching*. The notion of diglossia, which was first developed by Ferguson (1959), described a situation where two languages or two language varieties occur alongside in a community. This language-use phenomenon occurs commonly in communities where more than one language is in use. For instance, in the Pakistani community, where all children learn Standard English in schools, and most books and newspapers are in Standard English, but the people continue to use the Urdu dialect on an everyday basis. This occurrence is also popular in the L2 classroom where standard L2 is likely to be used for formal communication, with teachers, for example, and L1 dialect or vernacular is reserved for informal communication among learners. Similarly, much SLL research has pointed out that advanced L2 learners are likely to use formal or neutral words in formal situations and to switch into colloquialisms or slang for informal ones, generating variability in language use. This occurrence can be traced to a sociolinguistic concept named ‘code-switching’, which is defined by Wardhaugh (2010, p. 100) as follows:

People [...] are usually required to select a particular code whenever they choose to speak, and they may also decide to switch from one code to another or to mix codes even within sometimes very short utterances and thereby create a new code in a process known as *code-switching*.

Overall, variability in sociolinguistics is examined with reference to both linguistic and social aspects. Thus, in the viewpoint of sociolinguists, frequencies of a specific variant are controlled not only by linguistic contexts, but also by the type of social context (job interview, or peer talk, for instance) and social characteristics of the speaker such as gender, age or status as well.

### **2.1.2. Social factors as influence on L2 use and learning**

Sociolinguists have always paid attention to relevant social factors to explain a specific variety utilized such as participants, setting, topic and function of the interaction, because in their opinion “speech plays many different roles on different occasions” (Hudson, 1982, p. 109). Since L2 acquisition and use also occur in a social context, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have, on the

whole, followed the methods of sociolinguists in order to answer questions in SLA such as ‘Why does a bilingual speak differently in different situations and with different people?’, ‘How does speaking a second language have influence on an individual’s sense of social identity?’, ‘What are the causes of miscommunication between people from different cultures?’, etc.

Tarone and Liu (1995) who did research adopting sociolinguistic tradition showed that the social context affects the way learners process L2 input and even affects the order of acquisition. In their opinion, like the native speaker (NS), the L2 learner possesses a variable competence and this variability is closely connected with how L2 acquisition takes place. For example, Siegal (1996) described how a Western woman in Japan negotiated her own identity by rejecting the linguistic and interactional features associated with feminine gender in Japanese society. Ehrlich (1997) supported this point, saying that gender, as well as other social characteristics, is not a given but is constructed by individual actors in specific social situations.

Apart from that concern, sociolinguistics is traditionally described as following the notion of the social meaning conveyed by languages and their use in ‘speech communities’. *Speech community* is an important concept in sociolinguistics that could be simply understood as a regionally or socially defined social group of which its members share a language variety. Its exact definition has been debated over years. Among definitions offered by sociolinguists, Gumperz (1971) provided the very first definition of *speech community* as: “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage” (p. 114). Corder, considering L2 learners, believed that a speech community is “made up of individuals who regard themselves as speaking the same language; it need have no other defining attributes” (1973, p. 53). Speech communities, in other words, are characterized by stylistic traits based on social factors such as the group’s common interests, socio-economic status, and level of formality expected within the group. Each speech community, therefore, possesses characteristics of language use that are different from those of another community. The notion of speech community has become the principal unit of analysis in the ethnography of community and is most generally employed as a tool to analyze language variation and change in both L1 and L2.

Extending *speech community*, a number of sociolinguists and SLL researchers have established a more flexible concept called *communities of practice*. Lave and Wenger (1991) maintained that learning itself is socially situated, and involves increasing participation in communities of practice, in which individuals participate by learning and using language [16]. This concept has helped to explain processes of interaction and development among groups and situations during L2 learning.

Another focus of sociolinguistic theory that has affected SLL research is *interaction*. From the sociolinguistic perspective, interaction is viewed as “a sociohistorically sensitive area in which language learner identity is socially negotiated” (Rampton, 1995, p. 293). In this view, language learner identity is seen as context-oriented and is constructed dynamically and quickly by the participants. In other words, the nature of learners’ identity and engagement with L2 learning are not permanent, but constantly constructed and reconstructed in the course of social interaction (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Thus L2 sociolinguists are primarily committed to characterizing social factors in SLL and particularly to offering detailed accounts of L2 social interaction. Sociolinguistic SLA acknowledges that many of the interactions that L2 learners take part in are with other learners rather than with NS. It also emphasizes L2 learners hold many different identities other than that of learner and these identities are dynamic.

To support the theoretical issues, Mitchell and Myles (2004) cited empirical studies by Toohey and Norton (2001) about two successful L2 learners of English in English-speaking environments as convincing evidence of how the rate of L2 learning can be affected by the learning context and the

learner's developing style of engagement with it. Mitchell and Myles argued out that the success of these L2 learners partially comes from their own behaviour, it is also due to the fact that "they both gained more and more access to the social and verbal activities of the target language community of practice" (2004, p. 243). This important conclusion implies the substantial role that a respective community plays in the success of L2 learners.

Particular influences of social context on the L2 development are also found in some other studies. A study about social aspects and their role in interlanguage development was carried out by Shea (1994), who compared interactions between Japanese students studying at an American university and four interlocutors. She reported that the Japanese students seem more proficient in English conversations in which they have equal access to the floor and take perspectives that are similar to those taken by their interlocutor. With a similar purpose, Regan (1996) measured the rate of *ne* deletion in the French negator *ne ... pas* of Irish university students acquiring French as a foreign language before and after their year in France. She found that, regardless of their overall proficiency in French, students' rate of *ne* deletion increased dramatically after their year in France. Also, Bayley (1996), in a study of final *-t/d* deletion in the speech of Chinese speakers of English in California, found that speakers whose *social network* (another way of describing a particular speech community) consisted predominantly of other Chinese delete final *-t/d* more often than speakers who report a mixed Chinese and American social network.

These empirical studies provide hard evidence of the influences of different social factors (learning situation, social network, social context, etc.) on the L2 learning process.

### **2.1.3. Integrating sociolinguistics in second language teaching and learning**

*Sociolinguistic competence*, which is defined as the capability to identify and produce speech appropriately in different social contexts (Lyster, 1994), is critical for any language learners. The study of sociolinguistic competence in second language acquisition started to gain attention of an increasing number of researchers in the late 1980s. In the last two decades years, several particular issues in international language journals have paid special attention to the development and necessity of sociolinguistic competence to L2 learners and L2 classrooms (Dewaele, 2004).

The concept of sociolinguistic competence is closely associated with Hymes' notion of *communicative competence*, which concentrates on socially-situated performance (1965). The justification for this notion came from Hymes's consideration of Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence as abstract and insufficient. Linguistic competence was defined as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" by Chomsky (1965, p. 4). In other words, linguistic competence refers to the understanding of grammatical rules, rather than the actual use of language (as concerned by sociolinguists).

Further, Hymes (1965) held that language users should be able not only to understand and produce grammatical speech, but also to attain knowledge about social and cultural norms (of that language community) in order to judge the situation properly and then produce appropriate utterances in that situation. In reality, sociolinguistic competence in a second language is important because L2 users with poor language skills can be tolerant in communication, while those with poor sociolinguistic skills may be regarded as ill-mannered, pushy, dishonest, rude, etc. If L2 users' grammar and pronunciation are excellent, they will probably be judged more harshly for sociolinguistic mistakes. Miscommunication may result in embarrassment, amusement, contempt, disappointment, shock, insult, or even ethnic stereotypes. Therefore, the integration of sociolinguistic skills into L2 programs as well as research into the development of sociolinguistic competence for L2 teaching improvements are essential.

So now the question is 'How could teachers integrate sociolinguistic aspects into SLL classrooms?' Shu and Radio (2019) emphasized the importance of sociolinguistics in SLL in three

aspects: attitudes towards the L2 or the foreign language, incorporation of the L2 culture into the lessons and contributions of curriculum and lesson planning. Therefore, first of all, SLL teachers can help their students have a positive attitude toward the L2 and its culture or nationality. The students should be aware that in order to become a proficient user of L2, they need to understand and learn about its culture and society. Second, teachers can incorporate sociocultural issues of both the L1 and L2 into their SLL lessons to help their learners not only grasp vocabulary and grammar but also suitable social contexts for use.

Also according to Shu and Radio (2019), the sociolinguistic theories provide social contexts for the L2 learning and practice, which significantly contributes to SLL classrooms and enriches the lessons. For example, the teacher introduces the context of a communication between teachers and students at a school, learners will be aware of the social interactions and use language functions appropriately. Therefore, the application of sociolinguistics can considerably contribute to second language teaching strategies. In any foreign language classrooms, students should always be instructed on how to use the foreign language appropriately in each social context. They are not only able to express or use the language but also to decide which expression can be used in which circumstance to make it appropriate with the situation, time, age, gender, class and other social settings.

Regarding the importance of sociolinguistics in SLL, Broersma (2001) asserted that if having a good sociolinguistic competence empowers the person who would know when to keep silent, when to talk, how to compliment or how to apologize appropriately because this competence leads the speaker to using the L2 in suitable contexts. Hence, it is critical that L2 teachers introduce sociolinguistic aspects in their L2 lessons and materials. By that way, their students will understand the relationship between the language and the social context, and they will not only speak the language fluently but also appropriately. If the teachers develop their learners' communication skills by teaching grammar and vocabulary only without considering the whole communication situation, the learners would never be really proficient in using this foreign language.

In summary, every language is usually utilised in different contexts by different persons and for different reasons, it is therefore very important to consider all these relating factors in both oral and written communication. Teachers can't hope to enhance their students' sociolinguistic competence just right after one night. Instead, they ought to contextualise the language expression and frequently consider social and cultural impacts on the language use in order to gradually raise the sociolinguistic awareness among the students. These can be introduced through exercises and examples about different contexts and sociocultural aspects.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This paper has proceeded to discuss three sociolinguistic strands that are believed to be fundamental to explaining SLL phenomena and to SLL classrooms: *variability, social factors and sociolinguistic competence*. Each of these theoretical issues has been backed up with empirical evidence provided by sociolinguistic SLL researchers. My argument has been that sociolinguistics is a powerful tool and has made certain contributions in SLL research and valuable recommendations for SLL process.

Because language use occurs in a social context, it is important for SLL educators to understand the ways in which social context and the use of a second language are related. It is also required that SLL teachers integrate sociolinguistic issues such as social norms, traditions and customs, cultural factors, gender, region, religion in their classrooms to raise social and cultural awareness among learners. By this way, they can enhance students' sociolinguistic competence, which is the key factor to become successful language users.

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## VAI TRÒ CỦA NGÔN NGỮ HỌC XÃ HỘI ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC DẠY VÀ HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ

**Tóm tắt:** Có nhiều yếu tố dẫn đến việc dạy và học ngôn ngữ thứ hai (ngoại ngữ) thành công, trong đó có năng lực ngôn ngữ học xã hội – là khả năng sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ hai của con người một cách phù hợp trong các bối cảnh văn hóa, xã hội khác nhau. Bài viết trình bày tổng quan về ngôn ngữ học xã hội và phân tích tầm quan trọng của ngôn ngữ học xã hội trong việc phát triển và việc học ngôn ngữ thứ hai. Tiếp đó, một số vấn đề ngôn ngữ học xã hội được thảo luận để đưa ra những giải thích sâu hơn về vai trò quan trọng của ngôn ngữ học xã hội đối với việc học ngôn ngữ thứ hai thông qua phân tích rất nhiều nghiên cứu thực nghiệm trong lĩnh vực này. Phần cuối của bài viết đưa ra các lập luận về giá trị của năng lực ngôn ngữ học xã hội đối với bất kỳ người sử dụng ngôn ngữ nào và chỉ ra cách tích hợp các yếu tố của ngôn ngữ học xã hội vào việc dạy và học ngôn ngữ hai để giúp người học trở thành người sử dụng ngôn ngữ hiệu quả trong các tình huống xã hội đa dạng và phức tạp.

**Từ khóa:** Ngôn ngữ thứ nhất (L1), ngôn ngữ thứ hai (L2), ngôn ngữ học xã hội, năng lực ngôn ngữ học xã hội, việc học ngôn ngữ thứ hai/ ngoại ngữ (SLL).