Fact or Fiction? Exploring Assumptions About ESL Writers

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But first, a few definitions:

- **ESL**: English as a Second Language
  - Multilingual students
  - Second language students/writers
  - Emergent bilinguals

- **L1**: First language
- **L2**: Second language
- **SLA**: Second Language Acquisition
Assumptions about Language Learning in Legal Contexts
2008 law journal article: “Can successful lawyers think in different languages?”

“Over time their brains will transition into mainly formulating their sentences in the native language of the country in which they are studying instead of their native languages. Their vocabularies will grow and they will slowly be liberated from language-related limitation of expression. [...] If they are able to do so, their professional communication will likely become indistinguishable from attorneys who are native speakers.”
2008-2009 law review article on teaching international students:

“These kinds of exercises [e.g., storytelling] accomplish something linguists and other theorists advocate as necessary — immersion, via which acculturating individuals avoid using their native language dictionaries, or even communicating in their native language during their period of conversion to proficiency in a new language.”
Language Learning as Behavioral Conditioning
Language Learning as Input Processing
Balanced Bilingualism, or the “Two Solitudes” Model

Figure 1.
The Separate Underlying Proficiency Model

(Cummins, 2005)
“Two languages in one head? No one can live at that speed!”

-Eddie Izzard, “Dress to Kill”
Assumptions about Language Learning

- Languages (and cultures) are discrete cognitive systems that cannot be activated simultaneously
- SLA is an automatic, internal, purely cognitive process in which the learner is largely passive
- SLA is triggered by exposure to sufficient amounts of L2 input
- Use of the learner’s L1 interferes with this cognitive process
- The goal of language learning is to become indistinguishable from a monolingual speaker of the target language
Current Metaphors in SLA
Language Learning as Ecology
Flexible Bilingualism
The Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2005)

Figure 2. The Common Underlying Proficiency Model

Figure 3. The Dual-Iceberg Representation of Bilingual Proficiency
Assumptions in These Models

- Languages (and cultures) are not discrete, independent systems but build instead on a shared underlying proficiency
- Language learning is both cognitive and social
- Learners have agency and orient to the affordances in the environment that they recognize as consistent with their own learning goals
- Both L1 and L2 resources are valuable affordances for language learning
- The goal of language learning is to broaden the range of contexts in which a learner can participate effectively
Illustration: Interdependence and Genre Knowledge

(Tardy, 2009)
No silver bullet, alas.
Interested in reading or talking more?

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