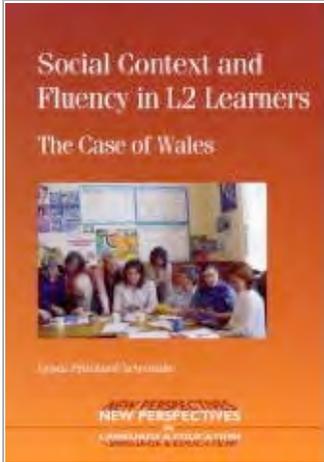


<i>Social Context and Fluency in L2 Learners: The Case of Wales</i>		
Author:	Lynda P. Newcombe (2007)	
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Most of us are familiar with the expression, "Use it or lose it," which suggests that language learners should constantly use the target language to maintain or increase fluency. Even though the language classroom is a very important starting point, learners should experience target language use in communication beyond the classroom walls. A particular social context within which to negotiate meaning with native speakers is the main theme of Newcombe's book. In it, she explores adult Welsh learners' opportunities to practice the target language with native speakers in Welsh communities in the U.K. The book suggests that native speakers' behavior in communicating with adult learners influences learners' attitudes, motivations, and success in their language learning.

Newcombe, an experienced teacher of Welsh, provides a comprehensive overview of the adult learning programs and social contexts of Welsh based on a range of studies she was involved in for four years. Although the main location of her study is Cardiff, she supports her claims with studies conducted in other Welsh cities. The data presented in the book are collected from a range of sources: questionnaires, diaries, interviews, journals, dialogue journals, focus groups, observations, and follow-up questionnaires.

If we look at the book's table of contents, it appears, though it's not explicitly stated, that Newcombe discusses adult learners' acquisition of Welsh from the perspective of Krashen's SLA model (1981) because she operationalizes the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. She also takes

a sociolinguistic perspective, discussing both language and identity, and language maintenance and shift. In eight chapters Newcombe covers:

1. Learners' attempts to acquire Welsh outside the classroom by exposing themselves to authentic target language use
2. Affective factors influencing adult learners' success
3. Issues related to Welsh culture and identity
4. Recommendations for instructors and native speakers of Welsh

In Chapter 2, Newcombe enthusiastically discusses the growth of Welsh instruction in the U.K. and the world. Although the title "Adult Language Learners" leads one to assume that adult language learner characteristics will be the central subject, this chapter instead describes the various institutions and programs that encourage Welsh language learning by offering language instruction, exposure to Welsh media, and contacts with Welsh native speakers.

Despite government attempts to provide optimal conditions for learning Welsh to maintain its use, Newcombe, in Chapter 3, cites "barriers [that] adult students of Welsh experience as they attempt to consolidate their learning in the community" (p. 37). Some of the barriers mentioned are language switching (as opposed to code switching and mixing), speed of natural conversation, and dialect differences. She found that Welsh native speakers may completely switch to English if they realize that the learner is experiencing difficulties expressing herself or himself in Welsh; or they may insert English words, phrases, or sentences if they seem more appropriate for the topic, context, situation, or linguistic domain. It is well known that fast speech and dialect differences are problematic for language learners because the classroom provides more standardized forms of the language, so learners are not used to the abbreviations and omissions of the dialectal varieties (Derwing, 1990; Dunkel, 1991). For instance, many of my adult English students, international graduate students in the U.S.A., have complained that the local dialect, coupled with the rapidity of native speakers' English, impedes their listening comprehension. However, Newcombe claims that dialectal differences also pose problems for native speakers (of Welsh); they sometimes refuse to use Welsh with learners because their Welsh vernacular may be overly informal when compared to the formal and literary variety used by learners.

In the following chapters, Newcombe creates a relationship between the obstacles learners face in the community and the different personal factors that influence language learning, including identity, affect, and time. Identity as a function of language and culture is the main issue in Chapter 4. Newcombe explains that one's 'Welshness' is strongly associated with his or her ability to speak Welsh. Newcombe's findings can be related to some sociolinguistic research showing that the self is constructed entirely through discourse, making our language choices tools for identity construction. Goffman (1963), for instance, states that personal identity is defined by how others identify us, not how we identify ourselves. This construct corroborates Newcombe's statement that even though becoming recognized as Welsh is a driving force for Welsh language learners, some Welsh speakers feel reluctant to allow

wannabes and newcomers into their circles--certainly problematic for learners of Welsh.

The importance of affective factors in adult language learning is the central focus of two chapters in Newcombe's book. In Chapter 5, Newcombe discusses the negative influences of anxiety and lack of confidence on language learning success. Such negative affective factors particularly short circuit the adult language learning progress because adults closely monitor their speech for possible mistakes and fear appearing ridiculous when communicating in the target language. In Chapter 7, on the other hand, Newcombe uses Gardner and Lambert's instrumental/integrative dichotomy (1972) to explain various motivating factors that positively reinforce the language learning process. Her findings suggest that most learners of Welsh are motivated by an impulse to integrate: they want to (1) feel a part of the Welsh community, (2) communicate with their Welsh-speaking children or partners, (3) understand Welsh media, or (4) simply because they like the language and want to keep it alive.

In Chapter 6, Newcombe reiterates that the lack of time and opportunities to practice Welsh with native speakers affects the pace of target language learning, a claim infused into every chapter in the book. She has found that adult learners' busy lives and multiple obligations leave limited time slots to seek opportunities for language practice.

In the last chapter, Newcombe concludes, "successful language learners require regular interaction in the target language in a setting in which they feel comfortable" (p. 109). She suggests that language learners need support from both teachers and native speakers. Teachers should make learners aware of the challenges of using the target language outside the classroom and equip them with strategies that will help them overcome the challenges. Native speakers should overcome their negative attitudes towards learners and join in activities that promote Welsh language learning.

Newcombe's book addresses paramount issues that adult language learners face throughout the world. English language teachers can gain deeper insights into some fundamental characteristics of adult learners from the descriptions of Welsh learners' experiences, opinions, and behavior. However, the social context for speaking Welsh seems to differ from that for learning and using English. Unlike Welsh, a 'lesser-used language,' English is privileged when in contact with other languages, so the tendency is to switch to English rather than to the other language. Native speakers of English do not always share a common language with English language learners, unlike in Wales where Welsh native speakers and learners both speak English. Lastly, with its status as a lingua franca, English is used for wider communication and in a large range of linguistic and social contexts and domains, while the range of domains may be much more restricted for Welsh.

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