

Third language acquisition in bilingual learners: The importance of linguistic proximity

Marit Kristine Westergaard

*The Arctic University of Norway, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and
Technology, Norway*

I will discuss third language acquisition (L3A) within a formal approach to language, arguing that it can inform linguistic theory. I will also argue that it is time for this field to shift the focus from the order of acquisition (L1 vs. L2) to more abstract linguistic structures of the three languages involved. Thus, L3A can be extended to the study of bilingual populations learning a third language, which is an increasingly common situation. I also discuss a new model (the Linguistic Proximity Model, LPM), which argues that all languages of a trilingual remain active at all times and that cross-linguistic influence in L3A could be from either or both of the previously learned languages, provided there is some abstract structural similarity between them. Furthermore, the model argues for incremental step-by-step learning and no special status of the initial stage(s).