Chapter 4
L2 Learning Processes

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OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter will deal with one of the processes which connects the poles of our model: learning, and in our case, learning L2 in distance settings. In this study of the different theories that contribute to our understanding of the domain, the specific points that seem of interest in the context of distance second language learning will be highlighted in order for us to be able to integrate these points into a coherent organization. According to Jordan (2004), there are over 60 theories describing Second Language Acquisition (SLA). These theories deal with the same phenomena that can be viewed as the crystals of a kaleidoscope. Each tilt of the kaleidoscope will lead to a different interpretation of how these phenomena can be organized or explained (Narcy, 1990). Some of these theories are ambitious and try and provide global answers, while others limit the scope of their study, but are not necessarily less interesting. Finally, a whole body of results may come from less researched everyday classroom practices. This is how the chapter will be organized in the light of the specific demands of distance language learning. Our debt to the various researchers we quote is obvious and we hope we have not misquoted them. With Lamy and Hampel (2007), we agree that all theories can inform our position to distance-learning. Learning L2 is but one aspect of learning, and before going into how learning L2 is described, more general epistemological considerations need to be expressed. They will serve as guidelines to select the relevant crystals.

The major objective of the chapter is to determine the nature of the crystals in order to organize them into a coherent whole that can be applied to
the development of distance language learning environments. One way of reading the chapter may consist in making a list of the determining crystals and organizing them. A comparison with the classification and organization proposed at the end of the chapter may prove a worthwhile starting point for a debate among readers.

**LEARNING THEORIES AND THE NEED FOR DISTANCIATION**

**Distanciation**

The role that neurophysiology now gives to emotions changes the way we look at the rationality of human reflection as Damasio clearly shows in the title of one of his books: Descartes’ Error (1994). Researchers in neurophysiology, for instance Damasio himself (1999), LeDoux (2003) or Buser (1999), and in post-Bourdieu French sociology as well (Kaufmann, 2001, or Lahire, 2001), tell us that a given social situation will cause an individual to respond according to an emotion which is personally specific to this type of situation and to what he or she is meant to do in the situation, combined with his or her other more immediate emotions, and this interplay of emotions is likely to trigger his or her cognitive response to the situation. Lahire (2001) and Channouf (2004) among others, remind us that individuals access their attitudes, emotions and other inner states only partly by inferences drawn from observing their behaviors or circumstances. Inner clues are weak, ambiguous or cannot be deciphered. Everybody observes who they are and what they feel and must rely on external clues to be able to infer their inner states. Some form of mediation will prove beneficial as the only way to compensate for the impossibility of fully effective introspection. This combines with the notion of cognitive unconscious (Channouf, 2004, Buser, 1999) which monitors the way humans perform sometimes very complex actions without their being conscious of what determines that performance. It can be postulated that humans go through their life and education without necessarily being fully aware of their need for distanciation and for mediation.

Research now relies on physically observable neurophysiological data thanks to new instruments. Maintaining personal behaviors and teaching practices that do not take these facts into account is less defendable. Human conditioning is not necessarily immovable and humans would gain from an authentic reflection (distanciation) which would help them become “less assertive” (Laborit, 1996).

**Gagné’s Hierarchy of Learning**

Gagné’s classification (1985) helps us understand some of the problems encountered by learners which may increase their initial destabilization. Individuals cannot access the most complex ways of learning until they have accessed the lower ones:

- problem solving,
- rules,
- concepts,
- discriminations,
- verbal associations,
- chaining,
- instrumental conditioning / associative learning,
- classical conditioning.

This should be remembered in organizing sequences of tasks/activities in order to lead learners gradually from what is easiest for them to what is difficult, remembering that L2 may turn things which are found to be easy in L1 into disturbingly difficult things to do in L2.