

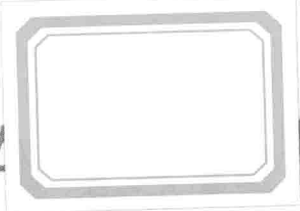
A Brief Introduction to
Second Language Acquisition

第二语言习得概论

张宏武◎ 编著



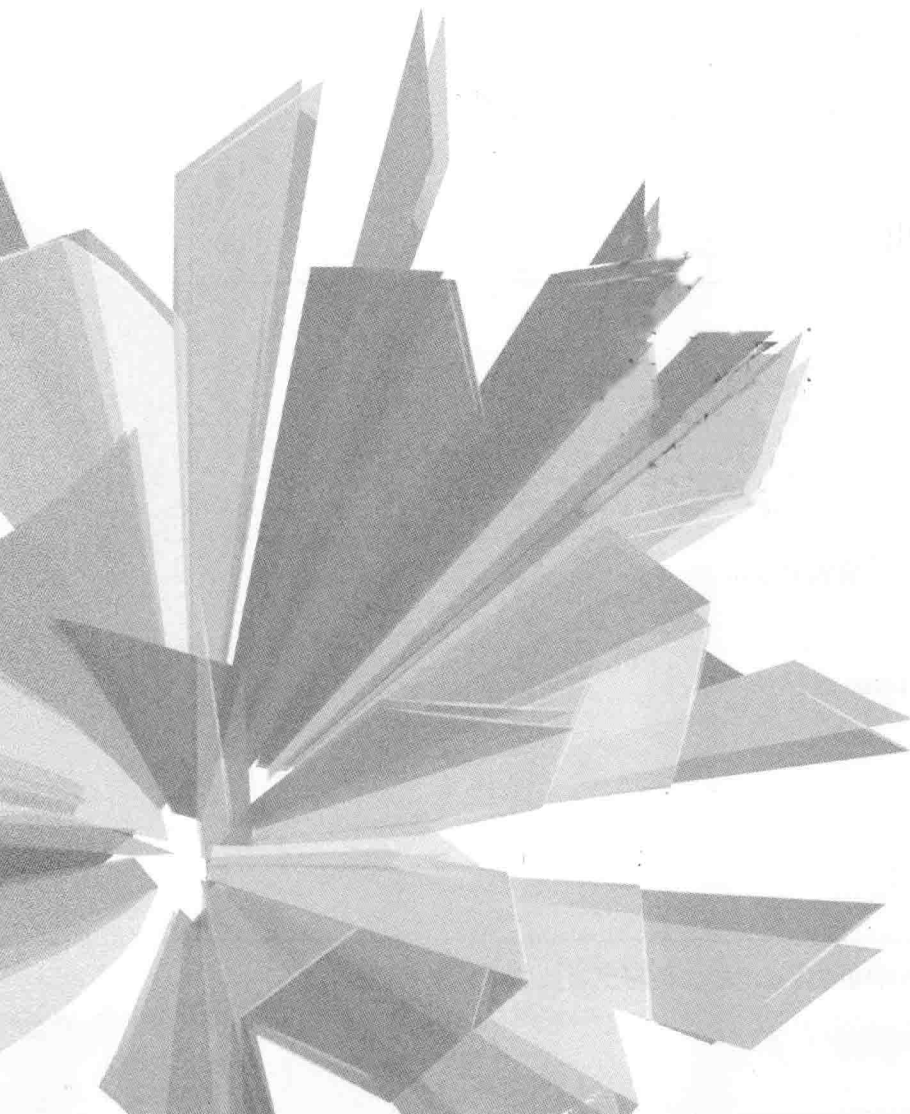
暨南大学出版社
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中国·广州

图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

第二语言习得概论 = A Brief Introduction to Second Language Acquisition: 英文/张宏武编著. —广州: 暨南大学出版社, 2012. 9

ISBN 978 - 7 - 5668 - 0213 - 2

I. ①第… II. ①张… III. ①第二语言—研究—英文 IV. ①H003

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2012) 第 104491 号

出版发行: 暨南大学出版社

地 址: 中国广州暨南大学
电 话: 总编室 (8620) 85221601
营销部 (8620) 85225284 85228291 85228292 (邮购)
传 真: (8620) 85221583 (办公室) 85223774 (营销部)
邮 编: 510630
网 址: <http://www.jnupress.com> <http://press.jnu.edu.cn>

排 版: 广州市天河星辰文化发展部照排中心
印 刷: 湛江日报社印刷厂

开 本: 787mm × 1092mm 1/16
印 张: 9.5
字 数: 220 千
版 次: 2012 年 9 月第 1 版
印 次: 2012 年 9 月第 1 次

定 价: 19.80 元

(暨大版图书如有印装质量问题, 请与出版社总编室联系调换)

Preface

In recent twenty years, there has been a rapid development in the study of second language acquisition (SLA) both at home and abroad, which is partially the result of globalization, and, above all, the outcome of an increasing number of a second language learners. In line with this trend, China has incorporated a growing number of research centers and faculties engaged in the research of second language acquisition, and has also imported a large number of academic books on applied linguistics. However, these academic books do not seem to cater to the “mass market” of the universities of China, especially the largest population of undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages. A random survey may yield the possible answers: these books are too difficult in light of both concept and language. Students are daunted even when they start reading the first page. It is true that most of these books are written for researchers; thus they are mainly intended for careful perusal, but unsuitable for classroom instruction. This course book written by my colleague, Mr. Zhang Hongwu, fills the gap in the “mass market”.

First, it gives a brief introduction to the most influential achievements in the field of second language acquisition research in the past 40 years. Mr. Zhang has been engaged in research and teaching of second language acquisition for quite a few years, and has a good command of the fundamentals in the field. This can be seen in the organization of the book. The first chapter is reader-friendly, intending to appeal to students' interest in the subject of SLA. The second chapter focuses on interlanguage and the findings in interlanguage studies. The main part of the book, from Chapter Three to Chapter Six, presents a brief and comprehensive introduction to linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and pedagogical aspects of second language acquisition. The last chapter of the book ends with the technique of data analysis in L2 research. The whole book can be used as a textbook for one semester of classroom teaching.

Second, the book is tailor-made for undergraduates, as well as graduate students who have little or no prior knowledge of linguistics. The sentences are less complex in grammar and contain the smallest possible number of technical jargon. Besides, the book introduces the latest development in the studies of second language acquisition. For example, the connectionist/emergentist model of second language acquisition discussed in Chapter Four is an up-to-date model loaned from cognitive science. Interlanguage pragmatics discussed in Chapter Two is one of the most appealing issues in second language acquisition in recent years, which touches upon the use, not the usage, of learner language in real contexts.

Third, the author has designed creative and inspiring exercises at the end of each chapter that may help readers review the essential issues in the same chapter. The mini-discussion corner provides readers a chance to further explore the relevant problems in second language acquisition. Most of the questions are open and suitable for both teachers and students to discuss in or after class.

The author is a hardworking and intelligent teacher. In his lectures of second language acquisition, he is capable of stimulating students' interest in this subject with his wise and insightful remarks, as well as his rational and logical thinking. Mr. Zhang has been working on the book for about two years, and most of the contents are based on the elaboration of his teaching materials. Personally, I am full of confidence that the book will be of theoretical and practical value in both teaching and learning of a second language.

Liu Hongmei

Professor of Applied Linguistics

About the book

This book is intended for both undergraduates and graduate students majoring in English language and literature. There are three main reasons for me to write this course book.

One is that I feel necessary to give a brief introduction to the studies in second language acquisition (SLA) for English majors, especially those who are going to be, and have the potential to be English teachers after graduation. I have learned from my teaching experience that knowing the basic rationale in language acquisition is of great help for second/foreign language teaching. SLA is the right course to acquaint us with such fundamental principles so that we can be competent in second language teaching, because it offers us from different perspectives the process of learning a second language, and enables us to have an integrative concept of what it is to be learned, how to learn it and why some learners are more successful than others.

Second, while teaching this subject, I have found it hard to cope in one semester with all those wonderful achievements in the field of second language acquisition. Moreover, I think it unnecessary to do this, especially for undergraduate students, because it is impossible for them to master everything within such a short period of time. A brief introduction, then, is necessary. The reason is that few undergraduates will be second language acquisition researchers; many of them will be teachers of a second/foreign language. In addition, having a better understanding of second language acquisition may as well pave the way for further in-depth research in the future. Therefore, it is my goal to make the course book concise so that it is suitable for one-semester classroom teaching.

The third reason is related to the difficulty of the subject. Many books are imported directly from English-speaking countries, and most of them are strongly theoretical and are written for researchers in the field of second language acquisition. They are excellent academic works, but not suitable as textbooks for Chinese students, who learn English mainly for communicative purpose. In most cases, the students are daunted by the difficulty of comprehending the contents, either because it is too technical or because it gives too detailed an account of the development in the research of second language acquisition. These books are very thick, even more than 500 pages, which is a great challenge for readers, who spend endless hours wrestling with technical terms, complex syntax and grammar in them. This is why I was determined to write this course book on

SLA.

When I had the idea of writing a course book on SLA, I realized I needed to touch upon second language acquisition in a way that differed from the academic way of dealing with linguistic issues. Rather than discuss in great detail, I intended to introduce briefly the main findings in second language acquisition research from four major perspectives: linguistics, psychology, sociology, and pedagogical. The goals of this course book can be summarized as follows: it is concise and reader-friendly with little jargon. If there are special terms, they are given clear definitions.

This book can be used as a textbook or a reference book. However, the main points in the field can be covered two periods a week, for eighteen to twenty weeks in a semester all together.

This textbook has seven short chapters. The first chapter gives a brief introduction to the study of second language acquisition, and presents some fundamental terms frequently used in the field of second language acquisition. The second chapter discusses the characteristics and the major findings in the study of interlanguage. A brief introduction is also given to interlanguage pragmatics, which has become a major concern in recent years. Chapter Three, Four, and Five are the major parts of the book, discussing second language acquisition from linguistic, psychological and socio-cultural perspectives respectively. The sixth chapter covers the relationship between classroom instruction and second language acquisition. The last chapter is about second language data collection and analysis. This final part is specially designed for those whose job is related to second language acquisition research.

The features of this book can be briefly summarized as follows:

(1) Short and concise. The principle I followed throughout the whole course of writing this book is brevity and conciseness. Each chapter is designed to introduce briefly the major and the most recent findings in the field of second language acquisition so that the readers may have easy access to the recent contributions made by devoted second language acquisition researchers. It will also be rather comfortable for classroom instruction in one semester.

(2) Easy to understand. Another principle I followed while writing this book is that the language is made easy for readers to understand. Without missing and distorting the main theme of each second language acquisition theory, I tried my best to make the language as plain as possible, so that the readers will not be daunted by linguistic barriers and will have easy access to the content.

(3) A variety of assignment. In order that readers will have a better understanding of the thoughts and ideas presented in each chapter, I have designed different kinds of exercises at the end of each chapter, including translation (usually of an important quotation from some famous scholars in the relevant field of study, or a short epigram

from an authority, either an expert or a book), blank-filling, question-answering, and mini-discussion corner. These exercises are intended to bring readers a refreshing review of the key issues touched upon in the chapter. The open-ending questions in the mini-discussion corner are especially designed for those who are interested in research after reading the text, and provide them with a chance of further exploration.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere gratitude to a number of people who read the manuscript and selflessly offered their feedback and constructive suggestions on both the contents and organization of the book. My first thanks are given to Professor Zheng Chao, whose instruction in second language acquisition has inspired me a lot. He shared selflessly with me the latest valuable information and reference books on second language acquisition research. Our common interest is on applied linguistics and second language acquisition in China and we often discuss second language acquisition problems with each other and exchange our views on second language learning and teaching. I benefited from those talks and gained many insightful ideas, which have enriched the contents of the book.

My sincere thanks are also given to my colleagues, the foreign experts teaching in China, Professor Gary Lee, Dr. George Andersen, Dr. Michael Owens, who read the first draft, and gave detailed proofreading of it. They were meticulous in going through the text, paying attention to grammar, syntax, as well as wording. They even pointed out the errors in punctuation marks, capitalization, and the use of articles and pronouns. Their proofreading and suggestions were of great help in making the draft sound more idiomatic and coherent. I also thank some of my colleagues, especially Professor Liu Hongmei, Associate Professors such as Zhang Yangfen, Zhu Jinhua and Zhang Bi for their constructive suggestions for the composition of the book.

I would also like to thank some of my family members, especially my wife and my son for their understanding of and support for my writing of this book. They have done many more household chores than ever before and have never complained about the extra burden. I owe much to their understanding and support.

Without the help from my above loved ones, the completion of this book would have been impossible.

Zhang Hongwu

January 9, 2012

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Chapter One Understanding Second Language Acquisition

When you turn to this page, you are approaching the field of second language acquisition. In this opening chapter, you will get an overall understanding of what second language acquisition (SLA) is and what the objectives of second language acquisition (SLA) are. And you will also gain knowledge of those basic terms in the field of second language acquisition.

1.1 What is second language acquisition ?

A second language can be defined as any language that is learned after the acquisition of the mother tongue. In this context, learning a second language refers to the learning of a third, a fourth or even a fifth language. A second language is commonly called a target language. The study of second language acquisition focuses on the developing knowledge and use of the second language being learned. The scope of SLA includes informal L2 learning taking place in naturalistic contexts, formal L2 learning taking place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. To put it simply, SLA is the study of how a second language is learned, that is, the acquisition of a language beyond the native language. It is a study of how learners create a new language system with limited exposure to a second language. It is the study of what is learned of a second language and what is not learned. It is a study of why some learners achieve more than others do. What's more, SLA also deals with the learners' hypotheses about the rules of a second language. Considering how the rules are constructed in the learner's mind, the study of second language acquisition is closely related to other areas of study such as linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, education, and so forth.

This field of SLA research has both theoretical and practical importance. The theoretical importance is associated with our understanding of how language is represented in mind and whether or not there is a difference between the way language is acquired and processed and the way other kinds of information are acquired and processed. It is assumed that understanding how languages are learned will lead to more effective teaching practices. Broadly speaking, a knowledge of SLA may help educational policy makers set more realistic goals for programs for both foreign language courses and the learning of the majority language by minority language children and adults (Spada & Lightbown, 2008) .

1.2 What are the objectives of SLA research ?

Second language acquisition research covers not only the study of those people who are learning an L2, but also the process of learning that language. In trying to probe into the process of learning a second language, researchers are seeking to answer the following three fundamental questions:

- (1) What does the L2 learners come to know?
- (2) How does the learners acquire the knowledge?
- (3) Why are some learners more successful than other learners?

(Saville-Troike, 2008: 2)

Actually, SLA research aims to seek answers to the above questions. In order to answer the first question, researchers collect samples of learner language and try to describe their features. Generally speaking, the learner language is full of errors, and researchers usually start their study by classifying these errors. Besides, researchers may record learners' speech while they are communicating with native speakers or other learners, and then produce transcriptions of the recordings. By studying these transcriptions, researchers identify specific grammatical features such as negatives or interrogatives in the data, and describe the 'rules' which could account for the learner's productions. The goal of this research is essentially descriptive, that is, to record the learner language, to try to establish whether it manifests regularities of some kind, and to find out how it changes over time.

The second objective of SLA is to explain why learners produce the L2 in the way they do. That is, they want to account for why learners make errors, why their language exhibits marked 'rules', and why the learner language changes systematically over time. In order to answer these questions, researchers may consider both external and internal factors which affect L2 acquisition. The external factors are concerned with the social situation in which learning takes place. Researchers who are searching for external explanations of learner language make comprehensive use of ideas and methods from the sociolinguistic study of language. The internal factors which also make contributions to L2 acquisition are rooted in the mind of the learner, who employs mental processes to convert input into knowledge. The mental processes can be regarded as learning processes. By means of the learning processes, the learner constructs his L2 knowledge.

Another objective of SLA is connected with the third question, which focuses on the individual language learner. Although the basic assumption in SLA research is that learner language offers evidence of universal learning processes, learners do vary significantly in their rate of learning, their approaches to learning, and especially in their final achievements. The study of individual learner differences seeks to document the factors which contribute to different kinds of variation.

1.3 Basic terminology in SLA

The main purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the rest of the book. We have discussed what is meant by the term Second Language Acquisition, and declared the main objectives of the study of SLA. Here we think it necessary to examine a few key terms related to the research of SLA. Understanding these terms may pave the way for a better knowledge of what SLA is about.

1.3.1 Native and target language

Native language refers to the mother tongue, or the first language (L1) spoken by native speakers. For example, English is the native language for American and British people; Chinese is the native language for Chinese people and Japanese for Japanese people. Native language is ‘picked up’ in naturalistic environment in an informal manner. People generally learn to speak and use the language in real communicative contexts, and the primary focus is meaning instead of linguistic forms. Native language is also tightly bound to native culture, and because of this, it is often difficult to decode for a person from another culture. Target language refers to any language that is the aim of learning. A second or foreign language which is being learnt can be called a target language. A target language, unlike native language, is often learned in classrooms in a formal way. People learn to speak it in an inauthentic context. While people are learning it, their primary focus is linguistic forms first, and then move on gradually toward interactive communication.

1.3.2 Second and foreign language

A second language, in a broad sense, refers to any language learned after one has acquired one’s native language. However, when compared with foreign language, it refers more narrowly to a language which plays a dominant role in a particular country or region though it may not be the first language of many people. A second language is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively. However, a foreign language is not the Native Language of large numbers of people in a particular country or region. It is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, nor is it widely used as a medium of communication. A foreign language is typically taught as school subjects for the purpose of communicating with foreigners or for reading printed materials in the language. English, for instance, is a second language for Chinese immigrants in the U. S. A. , but it becomes a foreign language for Chinese people in China.

Similar distinction should also be made between the second language context and foreign language context. In a second language context, the language is spoken in the country or area where it is being learnt. In a foreign language context, the language is not normally spoken outside the classroom, as is the case in learning English in China. In this book and in the field of SLA in

general, a second language refers to any language other than a person's first language. Therefore, for a learner of English in China, the field of SLA research would say that English is a second language being learned in a foreign language context.

1.3.3 Bilingualism and multilingualism

Bilingualism refers to the use of two (or at least two) languages either by an individual, or by a group of speakers, such as the inhabitants of a particular region or a country. Bilingualism is the normal linguistic phenomenon in most of the countries in the world. In everyday use, a bilingual person is the one who can speak, read, or understand two languages equally well. But the ability to read and write a second language or foreign language does not necessarily imply a degree of bilingualism. That is, bilingual is an end point, usually referring to someone who can use two languages with some degree of proficiency. However, SLA researchers are interested in individuals who are in the process of learning.

Multilingualism refers to the use of three or more languages by an individual, or by a group of inhabitants of a particular region or country. Usually, a multilingual person does not know all the languages equally well. For example, he or she may speak and understand one language best, or may be able to write in only one of them. Or he or she may use each language for different communicative purposes: one language at home, one at work, and one for shopping. Multilingualism and multilingual acquisition are complex phenomena. They implicate all the factors and processes associated with SLA and bilingualism as well as unique and potentially more complex factors and effects associated with the interactions that are possible among the multiple languages being learned, and the processes of learning them (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998, see Gass & Selinker, 2008: 21) .

It must be pointed out that both bilingualism and multilingualism overlap to some extent with second language acquisition.

1.3.4 SLA and foreign language learning

Second language acquisition, generally, refers to the learning of a new language after the native language has been learned. Sometimes the term refers to the learning of a third or fourth language. It also means both the acquisition of an L2 in a classroom setting and that in the natural language environment. Foreign language learning, however, is different. It refers to the learning of a nonnative language in the environment of the learner's native language. For example, French speakers learn English in France or Chinese speakers learn Spanish in China. Second language acquisition, in contrast, refers to the learning of a nonnative language in the environment in which the language is spoken. For example, if German speakers learn Japanese in Japan, Japanese is their second language. Such a process of learning may or may not take place in a classroom situation. An important distinction is that learning in a second language environment has considerable access to speakers of the language being learned, whereas learning in a foreign language environment usually does not have such an advantage.

1. 3. 5 Input and output

Input refers to the language which a learner hears or receives and from which they can learn. In contrast, what a language learner produces is called output. Both input and output are important for L2 learning. In second language acquisition, one learner's output can be another learner's input.

1. 3. 6 Competence and performance

Philosophers and scientists have dealt with the difference between competence and performance for centuries. Competence refers to a person's underlying knowledge of a system, event or fact. It is the non-observable ability to do something. Performance is the observable and concrete realization of competence. It refers to the actual doing of something, such as walking, singing, dancing and speaking. In western society, competence-performance distinction is used in all walks of life. For example, children in schools are assumed to possess certain competence in given areas and that this competence can be measured and assessed by means of observation of elicited samples of performance. As for language, competence is one's knowledge of the system of a language, that is, the rules of grammar, its vocabulary, all the pieces of a language and how these pieces fit together. Performance, however, is the actual comprehension (listening, reading) or production (speaking, writing) of linguistic events. According to Chomsky (see Ellis, 1994: 12 - 13), competence is the mental representations of linguistic rules that constitute the speaker's internal grammar. The internal grammar is implicit rather than explicit. The speaker has the intuitions about the grammaticality of sentences. That is, they know whether an utterance is grammatically correct. The competence-performance distinction has been extended to cover communicative aspects of language. Some scholars have distinguished communicative competence and communicative performance. The former includes both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, that is, the speaker's knowledge of what is appropriate and correct language behavior and what is effective language behavior in relation to particular communicative goals. Communicative performance is the actual use of these two types of knowledge in understanding and producing speech.

In light of this distinction, the principal goal of SLA is to describe and explain the learners' linguistic competence. This is usually done by studying the samples of their performance, for the mental knowledge is not open to direct inspection. As for research method, some SLA researchers analyze the actual utterances learners produce in speech and writing. Some try to tap learners' intuitions about what is correct or appropriate by means of judgment tasks. Others rely on the introspective and retrospective reports that learners provide about their own learning (see Ellis, 1994: 13). One thing we think necessary to point out here is that none of these research methods can provide a direct window into competence. It is not easy to extract underlying grammatical knowledge from the subjects, especially children, for example, whether it's better to say 'two