

SLA Second
Language
Acquisition

Understanding Second Language Process

Edited by ZhaoHong Han

In Collaboration with Andrea Revesz, Eun Sung Park,
Charles Combs and Ji Hyun Kim



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Preface

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) research, since its inception, has been inextricably intertwined with pedagogical concerns. For many, if not all, researchers, the goal of SLA research is to produce insights and develop instructional strategies that may eventually improve the efficacy and efficiency of learning, something that learners at large have proven to be lacking. Although numerous strategies have indeed been developed over the years, the empirical research that has undergirded them, in the main, enacts and perpetuates a tradition that values learning as a product rather than a process. In that vein, the efficacy of the strategies has been construed and/or measured in terms of overtly manifested – oftentimes, superficial and form-oriented – changes in learners' behaviour (cf. Philp, 2003; Truscott, 1998). Often, though not always, statistical results are adduced to support one strategy over another. Individual-level, qualitative analyses of the linguistic data are, on the other hand, sparse, but when and where such analyses are undertaken, the results tend to show divergence rather than convergence (cf. Bardovi-Harlig, 2006a; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2006a). The overall understanding that then ensues is one replete with contingency – the strategies are helpful for some learners but not for others, or they are helpful sometimes but not always. Nothing conclusive can therefore be said about any of them, and speculations have come in abundance.

Some of the speculations have even turned into clichés. For example, nowadays it is often said that second language (L2) learning is 'a complex enterprise'. Another impending cliché is that it is learners themselves, and not any external agents (i.e. a teacher, a researcher, or a textbook developer), who control the learning process. Importantly, such clichés are vacuous, empirically, for there has been little direct empirical proof of them. As a result of the product orientation in research referred to above, there has been a persistent absence in the literature of a fine-grained understanding of many fundamental issues pertaining to L2

learning as a process. These issues include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the genesis and ontogenesis of linguistic and metalinguistic abilities;
- the extent to which a multilingual mind influences cognition in general, and the processing of L2 input and generation of output in particular;
- the process by which learning transfers from one context to another;
- the extent to which L1 interferes with L2 meaning – form mapping;
- the extent to which learner attention can be externally manipulated;
- the default process and strategies by which learners analyse input;
- learners' working memory capacity for processing input for form and meaning;
- the extent to which Universal Grammar (UG) constrains the processing of grammatical ambiguity;
- the extent to which tasks differ in identifying metalinguistic ability;
- the extent to which various aspects of L2 (e.g. prosodic features, pragmatic formulas) are acquired;
- the relationship between perception and production.

This book tackles these issues and many more, through theoretical analyses and/or empirical research. The book contains eleven chapters, the first four of which are conceptually orientated and the remaining seven of which are empirical studies, conducted with a variety of target languages, including Korean, Chinese, Spanish, French, English, and Japanese, and with hearing and/or deaf learners. Although not a comprehensive treatment of process in L2 learning, as the title of the book indicates, the book provides much food for thought, particularly for second language instruction. Each chapter conveys a message for classroom learning, but the messages are not always consistent. This scenario aptly mirrors the diversity of current convictions about what would bring about the most effective instruction, and it, in turn, points to the need to increase the amount of further, systematic research by both researchers and practitioners.

Since Corder's (1967) seminal distinction between input and intake, it has never been clearer that instruction cannot be effective unless it directly addresses learners' processing needs (e.g. Doughty, 2001, 2003; VanPatten, 1996, 2004a). Doughty (2003: 298) has convincingly argued that 'the goal of L2 instruction should be to organise the processing space to enable [learners] to notice the cues located in the input ...'. Even so, exactly what that entails and how that may be achieved in the classroom requires concerted effort to elaborate. This book, at it were, provides a point of departure for the collective endeavour.

The book resonates with an increasingly stronger call from the 'applied linguistics quarter' of SLA research for a paradigmatic shift from product to process. Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006a) have emphasised:

[A]ttested data cannot tell us what transpired in the language up until the construction of the text, nor where it is destined. While this may seem obvious, and forgivable, from a complexity theory perspective, by limiting our investigations to attested language, we miss the perceptually changing, perceptually dynamic nature of language.

In her recent paper in *Applied Linguistics*, Larsen-Freeman (2006a) underscores the need for researchers to adopt an 'emic' perspective on second language development (cf. Hauser, 2005) and provides a clear demonstration of the level and depth of understanding that may result from pursuing a focus on the learner rather than on the target language. This is doubtless a promising direction for future research to take.

Along a similar line, many authors in this book have pleaded earnestly for longitudinal research to document the dynamics of the L2 process. In light of the currently abundant cross-sectional research, it appears that cross-sectional research, although capable of capturing group tendencies, is inadequate to reveal the multifaceted complexity of the learning process per se, unless it is balanced by ontogenetic research. Although many of the logistics of the learning process tend to be 'eclipsed' in phylogenetic research, they can be elucidated by research examining learners as individuals (Bardovi-Harlig, 2006). It follows, then, that not only should case studies be promoted in future SLA research, but a within-group design must also be encouraged in group-based research.

This book would not have been possible without the dedicated work of its authors and their cooperation and patience with the process. We are indebted to them all. Our thanks also go to the reviewers, whose critical feedback and constructive comments are essential in helping authors achieve and maintain clarity. Lastly, we wish to express our appreciation to Michael Feyen and Kristen Loesch at Teachers College, Columbia University and Tommi Grover (and his colleagues) at Multilingual Matters for their support and efficiency.

The book is intended for second language researchers, graduate students, and bilingual and/or second language practitioners.

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(In collaboration with Eun Sung Park,
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Chapter 1

Revisiting the Role of Consciousness with MOGUL

MICHAEL SHARWOOD SMITH

Thirty years of research has not produced any really hard evidence that making people aware of formal features of the second language (L2) has any significant long-term effect on their grammatical development. However, people still have a persistent feeling that metalinguistic ability in the L2 is more than just a luxury extra or, viewed more pessimistically, more than a distraction and an encumbrance. It is surely a prerequisite for any proper research into such issues that we have a much more fine-grained explanation of the mechanisms involved in metalinguistic ability than has been the case so far. At the least, we need to develop a coherent theoretical model of this ability that we can use to generate interesting research questions about such issues as input enhancement (see Berent & Kelly, this volume) and focus on form (see Han, this volume). You might say that, although there has been no dearth of empirical research, not all that much has happened in this theoretical arena since the 1970s. The MOGUL¹ framework being developed by Sharwood Smith and Truscott aims, among other things, to rekindle the search for more coherent conceptualisations of the problems involved.

MOGUL is a processing model that is devised in such a way as to engage coherently with research across a variety of domains. Following proposals by Ray Jackendoff, it involves a recognition of the existence of a separate, modular language faculty, containing the core phonological and syntactic systems. It also recognises the crucial importance of 'conceptual structure', which includes the vital semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language that, in this framework, lie outside this core and allow for the possibility of conscious introspection. In fact, it is in the conceptual domain that metalinguistic ability is anchored, allowing the language user to construct fragmentary or even quite sophisticated

metagrammars that co-exist with the inaccessible grammar(s) processed inside the core language modules. Although accessible to conscious awareness, these metalinguistic systems can in principle be recruited in performance skilfully and quite spontaneously.

MOGUL has a way of explaining the relationships between these two types of grammar and the way they may develop and interact, which takes us well beyond the original innovative and widely disputed model proposed by Stephen Krashen and in ways that accord with current research into cognition. It also places metalinguistic ability in a wider context as something that is a regular part of everyday use in both first language (L1) and L2, that is, both in and outside the classroom.

The Early Years

At the close of what might be called the first years of L2 acquisition starting with Corder's seminal paper on error analysis and ending with Dulay, Burt and Krashen's *Language Two* in 1982, three basic ideas had been introduced to the field (Corder, 1967; Dulay *et al.*, 1982):

- (1) The learner system;
- (2) The 'developmental imperative'; and
- (3) Dual Knowledge Hypothesis.

The first of these was the idea that language learners operate a non-native version of the target language, which one could regard in some sense as systematic and autonomous, in other words, as not merely an ill-assorted collection of correct and incorrect ideas, rules or principles concerning the properties of the L2 in question.

The second basic notion was what one might call the 'developmental imperative', namely that the L2 grammar, or a goodly part of the morpho-syntax, unfolds in the learner in pre-ordained ways, usually to be interpreted as a pre-ordained *sequence* or perhaps a set of sequences, such that no intervention by either teacher or learner could influence the course of events, provided that the learner continued to be exposed to the L2. It is as though there is a programmed sequence of steps that needs only exposure to the appropriate input to trigger growth. Aspects of the learner's system must develop in their own time and in a manner much constrained by in-built principles (not provided by the environment) – it is the role of SLA research to determine the nature and scope of these principles. Although the idea of fixed sequences is not a Chomskyan notion nor is it necessarily implied by the existence of

principles of universal grammar, the basic idea fits in neatly with the general assertion, familiar from generative linguistics, that because mother tongue (L1) grammatical development unfolds without the need for correction or introspection, it must therefore in some way be helped along by innately given principles. The claim put forward by various L2 researchers was, of course, that L2 development is driven by essentially the same principles, although their implementation might in practice encounter more obstacles on the way.

The third and perhaps most contentious notion was that learning language in a conscious, analytic manner resulted in a kind of knowledge that was quite distinct from that which underlies spontaneous language use. *Knowing* the language is not the same as *knowing about* the language. SLA theory must account for the characteristic discrepancy between the two.

The nub of the problem

The most contentious part of the dual knowledge idea was Krashen's assertion that there was no 'interface' between consciously and subconsciously gained grammatical knowledge (Krashen, 1976, 1978, 1985; Sharwood Smith, 1981). Conscious rules could not be converted into subconscious ones, no matter how hard one practised. If this were so, then the developmental sequences could easily be subverted and, all other things being equal, particular training programmes could dictate the actual sequences in which learners gained control over given areas of the L2 grammar. The research carried out during this early period suggested that conscious learning could not interfere with the pre-ordained sequences of development and only made the learners more knowledgeable about the nature of the 'errors' they committed. The best thing was to focus on the meaning and not the form of the message (Dulay *et al.*, 1982).

Looking back on these early days from a 21st century perspective, one can see that these three basic ideas have stood the test of time. Even the conscious/subconscious distinction as presented in Krashen's various publications is still a live issue, and it took until 1998 for a collection of studies to come out that signalled a concerted attempt to find support for drawing learners' attention to formal aspects of the L2, and this included explicit reference to (or 'focus on') form as opposed to meaning (Doughty & Williams, 1998a; Long & Robinson, 1998). Moreover, Doughty herself, in a state-of-the-art paper in 2003, expresses great reserve about the role of consciousness, that is, 'metalinguistic'

knowledge in grammatical development (Doughty, 2003:298). Although Schmidt claims that no learning can take place without noticing, the precise nature of noticing, whether it involves some degree of conscious awareness – without necessarily implicating analytic understanding (Schmidt, 1990) – is constantly under scrutiny and is no way decided (Carroll, 2001; Truscott, 1998).

After so many years of empirical research, one senses in the SLA literature a growing trend to refine the conceptual basis for making claims about how an L2 develops over time and, in particular, how the basic ideas outlined above accord with contemporary research in sister disciplines. In the discussion that follows, the idea surrounding ‘metalinguistic’ ability and its role in L2 development will be revisited, this time using the MOGUL framework, the aim behind which is precisely to achieve the required increase in theoretical precision and cross-disciplinary validity.

Dual knowledge: The essentials

Krashen’s conscious/subconscious learning distinction can be explicated as follows:

- (1) Conscious learning produces ‘technical’ (‘meta’) knowledge about the target language.
- (2) Using this knowledge requires the operation of a conscious mental editor called the ‘Monitor’.
- (3) The Monitor is a grammatical ‘first aid kit’. It is
 - (a) linguistically unsophisticated (for most learners);
 - (b) available only for non-spontaneous use; and
 - (c) not always used anyway, even in optimal circumstances.

What are the consequences for language learners (and teachers)? Put in its most extreme form, the advice to learners is to throw away the grammar book and just try to listen, read, and understand. Learning words and phrases, in the sense that this is focusing on meaning and not on the systematic aspects of L2, is the only guaranteed way in which a conscious approach to L2 learning will bring benefits. In short, the role of conscious learning is given at most a very peripheral role.

In the 1970s, the evidence for the no-interface hypothesis was not solid and hence open to considerable scepticism. However, despite the failure to establish a strong empirically backed foundation for conscious learning in defiance of the no-interface hypothesis, people continue to have a persistent feeling that metalinguistic ability in the L2 is more

than just a luxury extra that is of no real relevance to L2 development. This may be justified, but where is the hard evidence for this feeling? Thirty-five years of research has not produced any substantial proof that making people aware of formal features of the L2, whether by means of correction or explanation or both, has any long-term effect, at least where basic morphosyntax and phonology are concerned.

Note that it is important to mention what aspects of the language we are talking about, because when talking about 'the' language or 'the' L2, people sometimes ignore substantial aspects of language that (1) have not been as well researched as syntax and phonology and (2) may by their very nature be amenable to manipulation by external agents, either teachers or the learner 'outside' the inaccessible parts of language, that is, by the conscious learner (see relevant discussion in Sharwood Schwartz, 1999; Smith, 1994). The role of 'conscious' learning *outside* core syntax and phonology has never been explicitly denied but the issue has remained vague and relatively unexplored. It also depends on what you mean precisely by 'lexical' and 'pragmatic' aspects of L2. You certainly need a proper linguistic theory to determine this: the empirical data will not tell you and traditional grammatical categories are notoriously vague and unreliable. Is the English definite article 'the' a functional/grammatical phenomenon or a lexical one, for instance? The category 'article', or 'determiner' or *Det* are functional terms but the particular items in English that actually fulfil this morphosyntactic function can easily be called lexical, and the selection of which article should go in which context may well be dictated by semantic or pragmatic principles. In sum, the question of conscious awareness and what aspects of language it has absolutely no access to remains a problematic and complex issue that requires both linguistics and other disciplines to be brought to bear on it.

Alternatives to dual knowledge

There are various theoretical perspectives that allow for different modes of knowledge but deny total separation between them (DeKeyser, 2003; Hulstijn, 2002). Development in one area may contribute to development in the other, as knowledge is 'automatised' or reformatted for real-time processing. There are also theoretical perspectives that would, in addition, account for language development without resorting to notions like 'knowledge' or 'internal representations' of language at all (N. Ellis, 2003). Realistically, these approaches still have to make their case and provide enough evidence to discredit their rival and