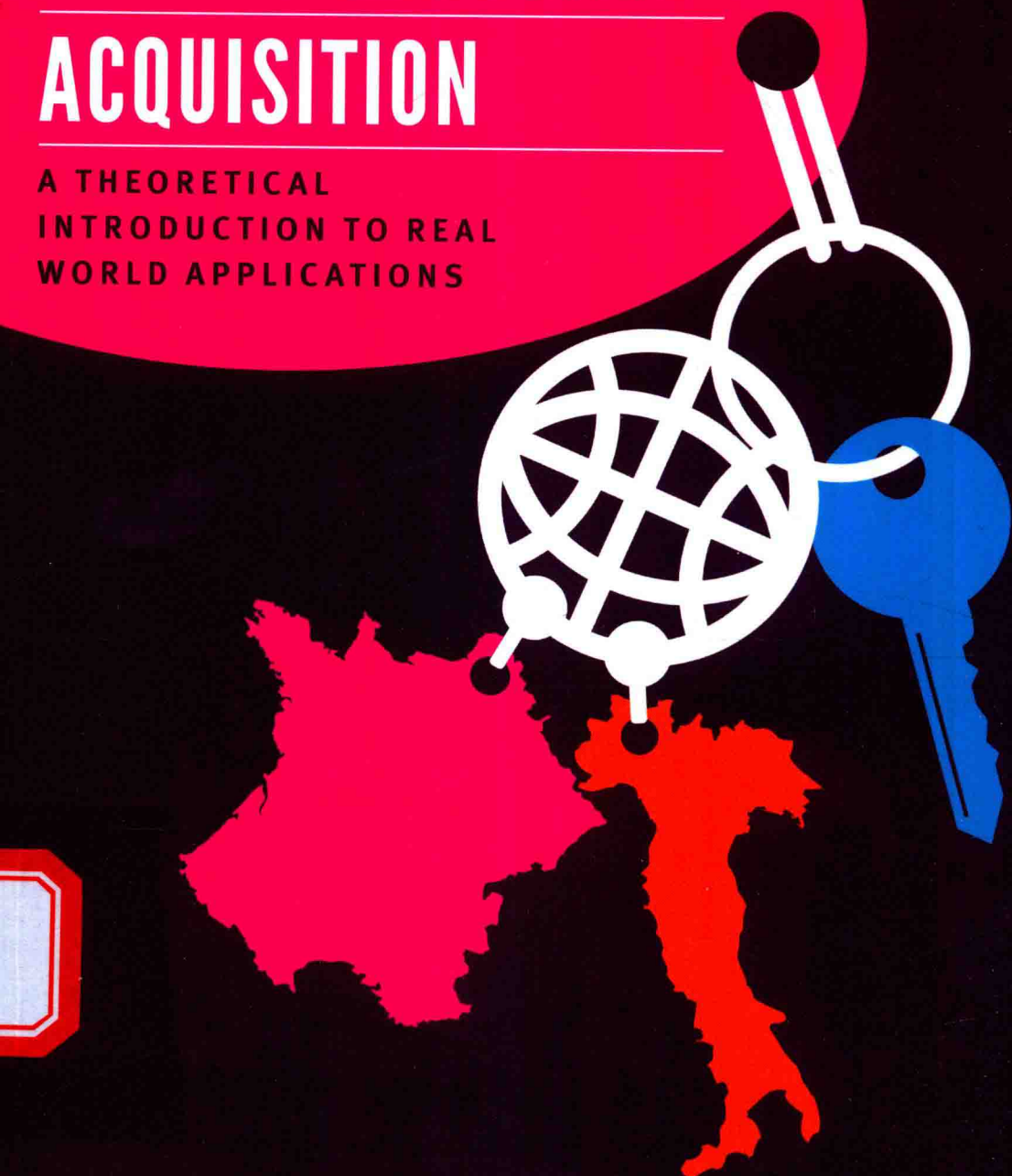


ALESSANDRO G. BENATI &
TANJA ANGELOVSKA

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A THEORETICAL
INTRODUCTION TO REAL
WORLD APPLICATIONS



B L O O M S B U R Y

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Preface



Why this book

This book has been written in order to help undergraduate students and trainee teachers to reflect on certain topics and key issues related to second language acquisition (SLA). Despite the proliferation of books and introductory courses on this topic, most of these very often provide an extremely complex account of associated theories and sometimes fail to emphasize the crucial interplay between how people learn languages and the most effective way to teach languages.

Thus the overall aim of this book is to provide an overview of SLA research and theories by identifying the main key issues in this field and by highlighting the classroom implications of this research. The study of SLA is rich and varied, conducted primarily by authors and academics whose interests and training often lie in the broader disciplines of linguistics, psychology, sociology and education. This book is informed by an increasing number of findings that have a direct application to classrooms and thus serve as a resource to inform teaching practice. Knowing how languages are learned will help language instructors develop a more innovative and effective way to teach foreign languages and to create the necessary conditions for students to learn more efficiently and appropriately.

Although the field has increased in size, scope and complexity in recent times, this book will attempt to simplify the main issues, questions and areas of controversies in the field. We will highlight what we know about second language acquisition and flag up the most salient strategies for language instruction and instructors. Readers will be encouraged to reflect critically on the presented content via a range of activities – including questions and related matching activities, choices and conclusions – all of which focus on how SLA theories can be applied in classroom situations and beyond.

How the book is structured

Our journey starts with some general definitions and considerations around the role of SLA.

Chapter 1 provides the readers with an overview of the various theoretical contemporary frameworks in SLA. A basic model of SLA is provided, key terms are defined and potential real-world applications suggested.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of possible similarities and differences between the acquisition of a first and a second language. This is a fundamental issue in SLA theory and research. Key concepts such as universal properties, innate knowledge and transfer are introduced and analyzed. Different views around the role of universal properties, parameter resetting and transfer are presented, as is research on the possible role of age as a critical period in SLA.

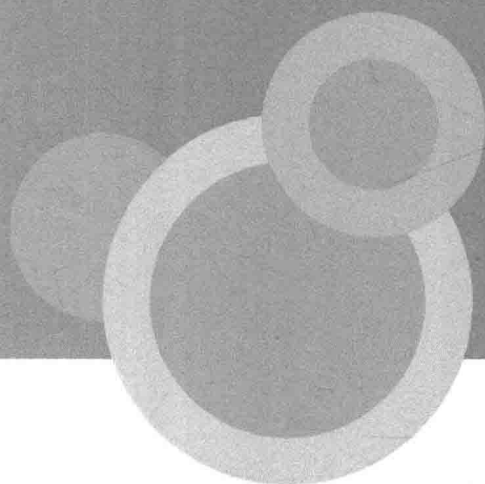
Chapter 3 addresses key issues such as the role of input in SLA and the role of instruction and individual differences in the acquisition process. Input plays a vital role whereas that of instruction seems to be limited. Research on individual differences has investigated a number of variables such as motivation, age, working-memory capacity, aptitude, learning styles and learning strategies.

Chapter 4 deals with important issues related to the developing system of learners and language output. Theorists and researchers have attempted to explain how a language system develops and how learners might tap into it to access information for speech production.

Chapter 5 offers an explanation for how individuals learn to communicate in a second language, how they socialize and adapt to the rules of a particular speech community and what the communicative competence they are aiming to acquire consists of.

Chapter 6 provides a concise evaluation of what we know in SLA, highlighting the principal real-world applications and implications. Finally, the glossary provides the reader with a definition of key terms.

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Introduction to second language acquisition

1

Introduction

This first chapter has four aims: to define the term second language acquisition (henceforth 'SLA'); to provide a brief account of main contemporary theories in SLA; to offer a basic model of SLA so that readers may understand its key elements; and to reflect on practical applications and implications of SLA theory and research. The latter has been conducted from different perspectives (linguistic, language universals, cognitive), and has attempted to shed light on the complexities of language growth and the role of a number of internal and external factors.

Despite the various and different theories and theoretical frameworks formulated in SLA, scholars have agreed the first language (henceforth 'L1') is the starting point and that when learning the second language (henceforth 'L2') learners must 'overwrite' its properties to create a new language system. This new system does not appear to be influenced or affected by instruction. Learners follow certain sequences and orders in the acquisition of another language. A number of factors (e.g. processability, frequency, redundancy and saliency, among others) are thought to be responsible for the emergence and acquisition of linguistic features.

Overall SLA is implicit. Language is a dynamic and integrated system that interfaces with input. Learners seem to make use of declarative working memory when they learn a lexicon and idioms, but they use procedural working memory for grammatical features. Input plays a crucial role in second language acquisition and provides the data for the internal processors. Output and interaction are also important, although output is constrained by processing. Taken in isolation, individual differences might

not contribute towards providing us with an understanding of the internal processing responsible for acquisition; future research on these might focus on uncovering possible correlations between specific individual variables and SLA processes. We will give an overview of important theories below.

This chapter also outlines a number of real-world applications for instructors and instruction. Instruction needs to take into account each learner's internal system. Instruction's ultimate aim must be the development of implicit knowledge. Instruction should maximize exposure to language input, and needs to provide learners with a balanced combination of focus on form and meaning respectively.

Many questions about SLA remain unanswered, while others have had only partial responses to date. Indeed while the field has increased in size and scope, it is still sufficiently focused on questions of learning and teaching for many voices and perspectives to be acknowledged. The richness and complexity of SLA as a learning process and an area of study suggests that there are many perspectives to apply and many more applications to find. In the following chapters, the main questions and issues raised in SLA theory and research will be individually presented and analyzed.

A definition of SLA

SLA is a field of enquiry that has developed rapidly over the last forty years. Studies in SLA have investigated a number of phenomena using different participants (e.g. subjects with different first languages, different proficiency levels, different backgrounds, etc.), examining different contexts (e.g. formal and informal environments), and adopting a variety of research methods:

- experimental studies have manipulated a variety of pedagogical treatments and measured the learning outcomes. Experimental research is conducted in order to explore the strength of a relationship between variables. Scholars and practitioners are often interested in investigating the effects of factors such as a particular 'teaching technique' on language learners' performance or processing.
- observation studies have generated a number of important questions about individuals and groups to be investigated by researchers. Classroom observation is an ideal methodological framework to systematically investigate teaching, learning issues and processes in a second language classroom context. Classroom observation (i.e. action-research framework) is used in second language research for different goals: to compare language teaching methods; to explore effective classroom pedagogical approaches; and to evaluate teachers and materials.

- case studies have examined the language produced by teachers and learners in classroom contexts. A case study is not a standard methodological package like an observational study or an experimental study, but rather examines the way in which a one-off event occurs. A case study normally considers data from different sources, examines an issue/problem in real-life contexts and uses SLA theory to generalize the main findings.

The field of SLA is also becoming more interdisciplinary, and now draws on methods from research areas such as psychology, neurology and education in order to shed light on how learners develop a new language system.

What is second language acquisition?

Name three areas/topics of research in SLA you have come across in your reading.

- 1
- 2
- 3

SLA is the study of how learners create a new language system despite an often limited exposure to the second language/foreign language learning contexts. In a general sense, a second language (L2) refers to a language that is acquired after the first language (L1) has been established in early childhood. If we look at the various definitions of SLA, what emerges is a concern about learners and learning. Researchers in SLA are mainly interested in exploring the processes involved in the acquisition of an L2 and the internal and external factors that might affect acquisition.

SLA addresses two fundamental questions:

- 1 how learners come to internalize the linguistic system of another language;
- 2 how learners make use of that linguistic system during comprehension and speech production.

SLA can be equated to the construction of building, as understanding SLA 'is like understanding how a building works. There is the electrical system, the plumbing, the foundation, the frame, the heat and the air system, and so on. All are necessary; one alone is insufficient. But like those who work in house construction and are electrical contractors or plumbing

contractors, in second language acquisition some of us are in matters dealing with input. Others are interested in output.' (VanPatten 2004: 27).

SLA consists of a series of theories, theoretical views, hypotheses, frameworks and generalizations about the way in which L2 learners create and develop a new language system. Recent reviews of second language acquisition theories (cf. Atkinson 2011; Robinson 2012; Ortega, Cumming and Ellis 2013; Benati 2013) have attempted to group various theoretical perspectives along a kind of continuum, ranging from rationalist and linguistic, to cognitive, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic positions with the intention of understanding some of the processes and mechanisms involved in the acquisition process:

- from a rationalist perspective, humans have an innate capacity to develop language and we are genetically programmed to develop our linguistic system in certain ways. This view is/was in strong opposition to that espoused in behaviourism, which maintained that it is the learner's experience that is largely responsible for language acquisition and indeed is more important than any other capacity.
- understanding SLA from the linguistic perspective of SLA focuses on the language dimension and the linguistic system underlying the grammar and construction (competence) of L2.
- from a cognitive perspective, we need to know how the human brain processes and generates new information. Cognitive theorists are concerned with how L2 learners access the linguistic knowledge in real time or the strategies they might use to do so.
- psycholinguistic approaches to the study of SLA focus on how L2 learners process information, organize their knowledge and subsequently use it.
- from a sociolinguistic perspective, variation and changes in specific elements of the learner's L2 linguistic knowledge are caused by a number of social factors such as social setting, task, communicative purpose, learner intention, role and identity.

Researchers need to continue investigating SLA from these different perspectives before we can develop a complete picture of how languages are learned and the mechanisms and processes responsible for this.

What do you think are the three main factors responsible for language acquisition?

- 1
- 2
- 3

Research into SLA has laid the groundwork for a number of important findings, but despite fast-growing interest in the topic, there remain debates and controversies over some of its key issues and this is partly due to the complexity and the multifaceted character of the field. Studies have increased in quantity as researchers have addressed a variety of topics, set new questions and worked within multiple research methodologies and from a variety of academic disciplines (e.g. linguistics, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology and education). As a result of this multidisciplinary work, we are in a better position to argue that learners acquire a second language through a number of interactive factors, namely: exposure to language input; making use of existing knowledge of the native language; and accessing universal properties. Some of the main claims are:

- L2 learners create an implicit, integrated and dynamic system residing in the brain. This system exists outside awareness.
- L2 learners make use of both procedural and declarative working memory systems to process, store and retrieve information.
- input provides the raw data for the language system to develop and grow.
- the acquisition of grammar is a linguistic and processing constraint and it is a function of the learner.

Issues still up for debate – and related questions – include:

- Is the acquisition of L2 similar or different to that of L1?
- What are the main characteristics of language growth?
- What are the roles of input and output in second language acquisition?
- What is the role of individual differences?

The nature of language

What do we need to acquire in a language? Learning a language means processing a number of elements:

- **lexicon** – the vocabulary within a language, specifically the total stock of words, word elements and their meanings.
- **phonology** – the study of sound patterns. It also refers to the sounds that make up words (pronunciation), and the way they come together to form speech and words.

- morphology – how words are formed. Morphology describes the patterns of word formation (inflections on verbs and nouns) and how new words are made from other words (prefixes and suffixes).
- syntax – the rules of sentence structure. Syntax explains what is permissible – and what it is not – in a target language.
- pragmatics – the use of sentences to intend something specific. It refers to the role of context in language and how people rely on it for successful communication.
- sociolinguistics – the study of the language and how it functions in society. Sociolinguistics is the study of the interaction between linguistic and social variables, such as when it is appropriate to use different types of language.
- discourse – the way sentences are connected. Discourse is essentially about how coherent and cohesive linguistic elements are in sentences.

Acquiring a language, then, means acquiring all these elements. As you might expect, acquisition is a complex phenomenon, and the knowledge picked up by children for their L1 is not necessarily available to L2 learners.

Activity

Match the linguistic terms with the synonyms

Syntax	Vocabulary
Discourse	Grammar
Lexicon	Sounds
Morphology	Word structure
Sociolinguistics	Connecting sentences
Pragmatics	Appropriate use of language
Phonology	What the speaker meant by a sentence

Theories in second language acquisition

Theories in SLA have been developed in the attempt to understand how L2 learners come to develop their competence in a second language. Research into first language acquisition has also provided good insights into the processes involved in the acquisition of a second language. A great deal of the theorizing about SLA has been undertaken with language learning and language learners in mind, and includes:

- Behaviourism
- Universal Grammar Theory
- Monitor Theory
- Interaction Hypothesis
- Processability Theory
- Input Processing Theory
- Skill Acquisition Theory
- Emergentism
- Declarative and Procedural Model
- Complexity Theory
- Sociocultural Theory

Behaviourism

The behaviourist theory that prevailed in the 1940s and 1950s was supported by psychologists such as Skinner (1957). The theory made a number of claims, including that:

- human learning and animal learning are the same;
- the child's mind is a *tabula rasa*; there is no innate knowledge;
- all behaviour is viewed as a response to stimuli;
- behaviour happens in associative chains.

Language was seen by behaviourists as a progressive accumulation of habits and the goal was error-free production. The L1 was seen as a major obstacle to L2 acquisition since it caused interference errors (caused by habits in the L1) and negative transfer (from L1 to L2) of habits.

Contrastive analysis (Lado 1957) was an approach to the study of SLA based on a close comparison of L1 and L2 to understand and identify the similarities and differences between the two in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax. The concept of positive and negative transfer is central to the contrastive analysis and behaviourism. Positive transfer occurs when learners transfer a structure that is appropriate and similar in both languages, while negative transfer happens when learners use a L1 structure inappropriately in the L2. The easiest L2 structures to learn are the ones that also exist in learners' L1 and have the same form and meaning. Corder (1967) questioned the assumption that learners' errors are the result of 'bad habits'. In fact, only a small percentage of errors made by learners in the L2 are traceable to the L1. Instead errors are 'a window' into the learner's