丁言仁 著

第二语言习得研究与外语学习

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FOR ENGLISH MAJORS



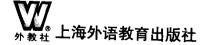
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Preface

The purpose of this book is to offer a general picture of the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), including its history (if 40 years of growth can be called history at all), controversies, and current development. It is my hope that the book will help readers unfamiliar with the field of SLA to approach it with a better sense of direction. The book is not intended to give a comprehensive review of all the research findings; it is impossible to accomplish this mission with a book of this size. Neither is it intended to present the controversies in the field from an onlooker's "objective," non-partisan perspective. Rather, my belief is that readers should be encouraged to engage themselves, take sides, and support their opinions with their own research. Compared with memorizing terms, theories and hypotheses, this is probably an easier way to initiate one-self into an academic field.

The book is also intended to be of some help in improving English teaching in China. It tries to highlight issues and research findings that may help us better understand the challenges facing us Chinese teachers and learners of the English language, and for that matter, leaves out issues I do not consider very relevant. For instance, it makes no mention of the research related to Chomsky's "Universal Grammar" such as the

projection studies and studies on the accessibility hierarchy.

I understand that by being selective and opinionated, I may be carried away by personal bias and ignorance. For all the inaccuracies and mistakes, I assume full responsibility and would like to offer my apologies here. Readers should indeed make their own judgment by comparing the discussions in this book with those in their other readings and, more importantly, with their own experiences of language learning and teaching.

I am indebted to Barbara Penney, my one-time colleague from Nanjing University and currently an Amity teacher at Fuzhou Teachers College, who patiently read an earlier version of the manuscript, did much editing, and offered many invaluable comments and suggestions.

I should also thank Northwest University in Xi'an for giving me a very light teaching load so that I could finish the manuscript during the time when I was teaching there.

Ting Yenren

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS BOOK

CS communication strategy

ESL English as a second language

FL foreign language

FLA first language acquisition

FT foreigner talk

IRF initiate-response-feedback

L1 first language

L2 second language

LAD language acquisition device

MT mother talk; caretaker talk

NNS non-native speaker

NS native speaker

SLA (1) second language acquisition

(2) research on second language acquisition

TL target language

TT teacher talk

TTT teacher talk time

UG universal grammar

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Chapter One

Puzzles in SLA

1.1 A Recent Acronym

SLA is a fairly recent acronym and stands for the term "second language acquisition." It has two meanings. It refers to (1) the conscious or unconscious processes by which people learn (or acquire) a second language, but it also refers to (2) the study of these processes, which is a very important part of applied linguistics. This is somehow like the word "psychology": it refers to the study of the mind and character, but in informal speech, it may also mean the character itself (and the way character influences behavior). In this book, we call the language acquired in the first few years of one's life one's mother tongue or first language (L1). Any language one acquires in addition to this first language is called a second language (L2). In SLA literature, L2 may also be called "target language," the language one is trying to learn or acquire.

SLA — we're using its first meaning — takes place in two kinds of settings. It may happen in natural settings (or naturalistic settings), as when children acquire their mother tongue; no one teaches children any grammar rules, but by age five or six, they are said to be in good command of almost all the basics of their mother tongue. Many people acquire their L2 this

way. Some of them, especially young children in immigrant families, do reach the same level of competence as native speakers. However, many others acquiring L2 this way never reach full competence. We are familiar with the situation of families settling in a new city: in a few years' time, the children are very competent in the local dialect while their parents still speak with the heavy accent of their native dialect; these parents never reach full competence. If they are immigrants, they will always be seen as outsiders.

TASK 1.1: The following story takes place in an immigrant family. What does it tell us about language learning?

Father: Son, Mom and I are having an argument, and we'd like you to be the judge. In your opinion, whose English is better, Mom's or Dad's?

Son: You're both terrible.

SLA may also take place in classroom settings. That is, you go to a class to learn the second language; in calss, you often have to pay conscious attention to grammar rules and vocabulary items and have to make an effort to commit them to memory. This is called instructed or tutored SLA, which we are all very familiar with. Through instruction, people may also reach a high level of competence, but if they do not have opportunities to practice the language in real-life communication, their L2 will not be very fluent or idiomatic. And if they do not contin-

ue learning, their L2 will get rusty and finally be forgotten. Such loss of a language is called **attrition**. Some classroom language learners may become very competent and be able to produce sentences that are grammatically correct; however, many of the grammatical sentences they produce are not found in the speech or writing of native speakers — they are not idiomatic. Researchers have been trying to explain this problem and to come up with good advice for these advanced learners and their teachers.

1.2 SLA as a Field of Learning

Now we are using SLA in its second meaning. As the world in which we live is becoming a global village, it is increasingly important that we know each other's languages and become able to communicate with each other effectively. Sociolinguists will add that it is usually people from Third World countries who learn the languages of the developed countries. English, for instance, has the status of "world language" and is being learned the world over; there are even more people learning and using it as an L2 than there are people who speak it as their L1. It is a language vital for the development of such a Third World country as China. At any rate, in response to the increasing need to learn and teach a second language and the need to improve such learning and teaching, the investigation into the processes whereby people acquire an L2 has grown into an important subject of study, and this is the field of SLA research.

As SLA researchers, we are interested in what people actually do in the process of developing this additional language re-

gardless of whether or not they themselves are consciously aware of the details of this process. When we are learning to ride a bicycle, we are doing many things together, and we can roughly put them in three categories:

- Things we can describe in words; for instance, when a boy is learning to ride a bike, we can tell him; "Hold the handles with two hands."
- Things we know we are doing but cannot describe clearly; for instance, we know we are moving the handles in a way that keeps our balance on the bike, but we do not necessarily know how to describe the rules of the movement.
- Things we are doing although we do not know we are doing them; for instance, few of us are aware that when we are making a turn on the bike, we are also moving our body to keep our balance.

There is also another category: things we think we are doing although we are actually not doing them. A young boy, for instance, often thinks he is riding the bike well until his nose hits the ground. Similarly, most native speakers and learners of English as an L2 mistakenly believe that when they say the words "input" and "greenhouse," they are uttering / 'imput / and / 'grinhaus /, but it is actually / 'input / and / 'grinhaus / that they are uttering. In fact, all the four situations can be found in the study of SLA, and examples are abundant. When we study SLA, we have to consider all the four possibilities.