


Understanding Second Language Acquisition

第二语言习得概论

Rod Ellis



上海外语教育出版社 

牛津应用语言学丛书

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图字:09-1999-027号

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上海外语教育出版社出版发行

(上海外国语大学内)

中华商务联合印刷(广东)有限公司印刷

新华书店上海发行所经销

开本 880×1187 1/32 10.5印张 458千字

1999年4月第1版 1999年6月第2次印刷

印数:3000册

ISBN 7-81046-578-3

H·589 定价:21.00元

Oxford University Press
Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York Toronto Madrid
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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ISBN 0 19 437081 X

First published 1985
Ninth impression 1994

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This edition of *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, originally published in 1985, is published by arrangement with Oxford University Press.

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出版前言

这是一部论述第二语言习得问题的学术专著,汇集了这一领域的研究成果,指明其发展趋势和研究方向。作者 R·埃利斯教授在美国费城坦普尔大学教育学院工作,从事作为第二语言的英语教学的研究。本书出版于 1985 年,至 1996 年已重印 10 次。

第二语言习得的研究开始于 20 世纪 70 年代初,鉴于各种有关理论尚处于逐渐成熟阶段,作者撰写此书意在介绍这门年轻学科的发展情况、特别是近年来所取得的研究成果,归纳有关的理论和假设,提出研究的框架,希望以此来促进第二语言习得研究的开展。

本书论述的内容有三个特点:

一、力求客观性。考虑到第二语言习得的研究尚处初级阶段,尚不存在被公认接受的理论,因此作者尽可能对各种理论作客观的介绍,不向任何特定的理论倾斜。

二、强调理论对实践的指导作用。作者认为,教师在明确掌握了一整套关于语言学习的理论之后能更有成效地工作。他的观点是:所有的教师实际上都是按照一定的有关学习者行为的理论原则在实施教学。不过,教师对理论的运用存在着两种情况:一是明白自己运用了何种理论,有意识地运用该理论指导教学实践;二是无意识地运用了某种理论,这种理论只是含糊地存在于教师的思想之中。如果教师运用的是明确的理论,他就倾向于有批判地接受该理论,并在实践过程中将其不断完善;如果教师受到隐含的理论的影响,那么他们就不会用批判的眼光来看待它,而且不会想到去改进它。

三、注重帮助读者形成关于第二语言习得的独立见解。作者强调,对第二语言习得的透彻理解是教学改革的基础。对第二语言学习的复杂过程的了解并不一定能直接导致更加有效的教学,但它能激励教师去进行批判性的思考,对旧原则提出挑战,力争在此过程中形成新的指导原则。对于希望了解语言学习过程的学生或教师而言,他们

需要形成自己的第二语言习得理论。本书旨在为他们提供背景知识和理论依据。

全书分为 10 章。第一章从明确第二语言习得的定义开始,提出了该领域研究的主要问题,并简要进行评析,为后面的有关论述建立了框架;第二至九章是本书的中心内容,提出并具体讨论以下一些关键问题,如第一语言的功用,中介语(interlanguage)及第二语言习得的“自然”途径,中介语变量,学习者个体差异与第二语言习得的关系,与学习者第二语言习得相关的外在因素,普遍性假设与第二语言习得的关系以及课堂教学对第二语言习得所起的作用等。第十章对上述问题加以综合,对不同的第二语言习得理论加以评述,最后列举了关于构成第二语言习得框架的 5 个因素和 11 项假设。最后,作者在结论中对前述内容加以归纳,并阐述了一些关于第二语言习得的个人观点,特别对促进第二语言习得研究的因素、对第二语言习得的了解以及在研究中存在的难题作了扼要的提示和分析。

本书在每一章的结尾都提供了深入学习的书目,并且对这些书籍所述的主要内容作了评点,对于读者扩大阅读范围和选定所需读物有很大帮助。正文后还列出了术语表,有助于初学者了解有关术语的定义。

本书的目的是通过对语言学习者的语言及其形成过程进行讨论来帮助教师把这种模糊的、无意识实施的理论变成明确的、有意识地贯彻的理论。

本书主要是针对两种读者而设计的:一是涉此领域、希望全面了解第二语言习得研究概况的学生;二是从事第二语言习得研究、希望全面掌握第二语言习得研究动态的教师。本书也可供对语言熟练程度测试等方面感兴趣的应用语言学研究人员参考。

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide a thorough account of what is known about second language acquisition (SLA). As far as possible the book will describe, rather than prescribe; that is, it will not consciously project any single approach or theory of SLA as received opinion. Indeed, this is not possible at the moment, as the study of SLA is still in its infancy and there are still more questions than answers. Of course, it is impossible to separate description from interpretation entirely, so my own views on what second language (L2) learners do and why they do it will necessarily colour the account I provide, if only in the research and theories which I choose to report.

The book has been written for two kinds of readers: students taking an initial course in SLA who want an overview of the current state of the art in SLA studies, and teachers who want to improve their understanding of how learners learn a second language.

For students taking an initial course in SLA the book offers a review of the main aspects of SLA. These are outlined in Chapter 1. Each of the subsequent chapters tackles a particular issue. Chapter 10 then attempts to pull all the threads together in a survey of different theories of SLA. At the end of each chapter there are suggestions for further reading. These are designed to guide the student into the rapidly developing area of published SLA research.

It is envisaged, however, that many readers will be teachers of second or foreign languages and so the book has been written to give them a clear idea of what happens in SLA, both inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers traditionally decide both what classroom learners will learn and what order they will learn it in. A language textbook, for instance, imposes an organization of content on the learner. It assumes that the order in which features of the language are presented will correspond to the order in which the learner is capable of acquiring them. Likewise, a teacher who draws up his or her own scheme of work does so in the belief that a careful selection and ordering of the teaching material will facilitate learning. However, unless we know for certain that the teacher's scheme really does match the learner's own way of going about things, we cannot be sure that the teaching content will contribute directly to language learning.

Teachers do more than decide on the content and structure of

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teaching. They also decide on how the L2 will be taught. They provide a methodology. They decide whether to drill or not to drill, how much to drill, whether to correct or not correct, when and how much to correct, etc. It is by means of their chosen methodology that teachers seek to manage the process of language learning. Again, however, there is no guarantee that the methodological principles which the teacher chooses to follow will conform to the way in which the learner learns the language. For instance, the teacher may decide to focus on grammatical correctness, whereas the learner may focus on trying to get his meaning across, irrespective of how grammatical his utterances are. The teacher may concentrate on instilling mastery of the language item by item, whereas the learner may tackle the learning problem globally, gradually gaining the ability to handle a whole range of items at one and the same time. If learning does take place, it may not be in the manner in which the teacher's methodology envisaged. In order to discover how the learner utilizes the language data made available to him, it is necessary to consider the strategies that the learner uses. In this way we can try to explain why learners learn in the way they do.

All teachers have a theory of language learning. That is, they act in accordance with a set of principles about the way language learners behave. This theory, however, may not be explicit. In many cases the teacher's views about language learning will be covert and will only be implicit in what he does. For instance, he may decide to start teaching a class of complete beginners the Present Continuous Tense. In so doing, he may have consciously decided that grammar should take precedence over other aspects of language such as pronunciation or vocabulary in the early stages because he believes that this corresponds to the learner's order of priorities. Or he may simply have assumed this without conscious enquiry. The decision to begin with the Present Continuous Tense has further implications. One is that learning can and should begin with verbs, rather than nouns or some other part of speech. Another is that out of all the verb tenses the Present Continuous is the one the learner will need to learn first. The teacher may be aware of these implications or he may not. He may have intuitions which he has never made explicit. Language teaching cannot take place without a theory of language learning, but this may exist only as a set of covert beliefs.

This book seeks to help teachers make their theory of language learning *explicit* through an examination of language-learner language and the processes that produce it. It is based on the conviction that teachers will be better off with an explicit set of ideas about language learning. This conviction needs some justification.

It is only when principles are made explicit that they can be examined with a view to amending or replacing them. Teachers who operate in accordance with implicit beliefs may be not only uncritical but also

resistant to change. Alternatively they may shift and change in an unprincipled way, following blindly the latest fashion in language teaching. Teachers who make explicit the principles by which they teach are able to examine those principles critically.

This book is based on the belief that teachers will do better to operate with a theory of language learning that is explicit and therefore open to revision, than with an implicit theory that may ignore what learners actually do. Greater consciousness of the complex process of language learning will not guarantee more effective teaching—arguably our state of knowledge is insufficient to warrant firm pedagogical applications—but it will stimulate critical thought, challenge old principles, and maybe suggest a few new ones. A conscious understanding of SLA is a basis for modifying and improving teaching.

Whether the reader is a student of SLA or a teacher keen to know more about the process of language learning, there is a need for him to develop his own theory of SLA. This book seeks to provide the necessary background knowledge on which to base this theory. In Chapter 10 I develop a framework and a set of hypotheses to account for what is known about SLA.

This book could not have been written without the support and guidance of a number of people. In particular I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Henry Widdowson and Keith Johnson. Their help has been instrumental in shaping and revising the manuscript of the book. Needless to say, any faults the book may have are of my own doing.

In this book the pronouns used to refer to 'learner' and 'teacher' are 'he', 'his', and 'him'. They have been chosen as a stylistic convenience and are intended as unmarked forms. To those readers for whom this convention is not acceptable, I extend my apologies.

1 Key issues in Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. This chapter will examine the main issues that have arisen in the study of this process. It will begin by considering what is meant by 'second language acquisition' and then go on to discuss briefly the issues that have preoccupied SLA researchers. Finally, a framework will be set up for the discussion of these issues in the rest of the book.

What is second language acquisition?

In order to investigate SLA, it is important to establish clearly what is meant by the term. A number of key questions need to be addressed so that the reader is clear what positions researchers have taken up in order to study how a second language (L2) is learnt. The points considered below are all central to an understanding of how researchers have set about examining SLA. They underlie the various perspectives that inform the subsequent chapters of this book.

SLA as a uniform phenomenon

SLA is not a uniform and predictable phenomenon. There is no single way in which learners acquire a knowledge of a second language (L2). SLA is the product of many factors pertaining to the learner on the one hand and the learning situation on the other. It is important, therefore, to start by recognizing the complexity and diversity that results from the interaction of these two sets of factors. Different learners in different situations learn a L2 in different ways. Nevertheless, although the variability and individuality of language learning need to be emphasized, the study of SLA assumes interest only if it is possible to identify aspects that are relatively stable and hence generalizable, if not to all learners, then, at least, to large groups of learners. The term 'second language acquisition' is used to refer to these general aspects. This book will examine both what seems to be invariable and what is apparently variable about the process of acquisition.

Second language acquisition vs first language acquisition

Second language acquisition stands in contrast to *first* language acquisition. It is the study of how learners learn an additional language after they have acquired their mother tongue. The study of language-learner language began with the study of first language (L1) acquisition. SLA research has tended to follow in the footsteps of L1 acquisition research, both in its methodology and in many of the issues that it has treated. It is not surprising that a key issue has been the extent to which SLA and L1 acquisition are similar or different processes.

Second language acquisition vs foreign language acquisition

Second language acquisition is not intended to contrast with *foreign* language acquisition. SLA is used as a general term that embraces both untutored (or 'naturalistic') acquisition and tutored (or 'classroom') acquisition. It is, however, an open question whether the way in which acquisition proceeds in these different situations is the same or different.

The centrality of syntax and morphology

Second *language* acquisition refers to all the aspects of language that the language learner needs to master. However, the focus has been on how L2 learners acquire grammatical sub-systems, such as negatives or interrogatives, or grammatical morphemes such as the plural {s} or the definite and indefinite articles. Research has tended to ignore other levels of language. A little is known about L2 phonology, but almost nothing about the acquisition of lexis. SLA researchers have only recently turned their attention to how learners acquire the ability to communicate and started to examine how learners use their knowledge to communicate their ideas and intentions (i.e. pragmatic knowledge). This book, therefore, will be largely confined to what is known about the SLA of syntax and morphology. It must be acknowledged from the start that this constitutes a limitation. Many researchers would now accept that not only is it important to know about other aspects of SLA (in particular how the ability to participate in discourse is acquired), but also that these other aspects need to be studied in order to find out about the acquisition of grammar.

Competence vs performance

A distinction is often made between *competence* and *performance* in the study of language. According to Chomsky (1965), competence consists of the mental representation of linguistic rules which constitute the speaker-hearer's internalized grammar. Performance consists of the

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comprehension and production of language. Language acquisition studies—both first and second—are interested in how competence is developed. However, because the rules the learner has internalized are not open to direct inspection, it has been necessary to examine how the learner performs, mainly in production. The utterances that the learner produces are treated as windows through which the internalized rule system can be viewed. In one sense, therefore, SLA research is about performance; it looks at actual utterances. But these are treated as evidence for what is going on inside the learner's head. One of the major problems of SLA research has been precisely to what extent competence can be inferred from performance.

Acquisition vs learning

Second language *acquisition* is sometimes contrasted with second language *learning* on the assumption that these are different processes. The term 'acquisition' is used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure, whereas the term 'learning' is used to refer to the conscious study of a second language. However, I wish to keep an open mind about whether this is a real distinction or not, so I shall use 'acquisition' and 'learning' interchangeably, irrespective of whether conscious or subconscious processes are involved. If I wish to use either of these terms with a more specific meaning, they will be italicized and their reference made explicit.

To summarize, the term 'second language acquisition' refers to the subconscious or conscious processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learnt in a natural or a tutored setting. It covers the development of phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatic knowledge, but has been largely confined to morphosyntax. The process manifests both variable and invariable features. The study of SLA is directed at accounting for the learner's competence, but in order to do so has set out to investigate empirically how a learner performs when he or she uses a second language.

The sections of this chapter that follow will consider a number of key issues in the study of second language acquisition.

The role of the first language

Beginning in the post-war years and carrying on into the 1960s, there was a strong assumption that most of the difficulties facing the L2 learner were imposed by his or her first language. It was assumed that where there were differences between the L1 and L2, the learner's L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2, and where the L1 and L2 were

similar, the L1 would actively aid L2 learning. The process that was held responsible for this was called *language transfer*. In the case of similarities between the L1 and L2 it functioned positively, while in the case of differences it functioned negatively. Teachers were encouraged (e.g. by Brooks 1960 and Lado 1964) to focus their teaching on the areas of difficulty created by negative transfer. They were exhorted to apply massive practice to overcome these difficulties.

In order to identify the areas of difficulty, a procedure called Contrastive Analysis was developed. This was founded on the belief that it was possible, by establishing the linguistic differences between the learner's L1 and L2, to predict what problems the learner of a particular L2 would face. To this end, descriptions of the two languages were obtained and an interlingual comparison carried out. This resulted in a list of features of the L2 which, being different from those of the L1, were presumed to constitute the problem areas and which were given focal attention in the teaching syllabus.

It was not until the late 1960s that the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis was submitted to empirical investigation. Were learners' errors traceable to the effects of the L1? The findings of researchers such as Dulay and Burt (1973;1974a) raised grave doubts about negative transfer as a major factor in the process of SLA. A large proportion of grammatical errors (although precisely what proportion was a controversial issue) could not be explained by L1 interference. As a result of such studies, the role of the L1 was played down and Contrastive Analysis became less fashionable.

There were, however, many questions left unanswered by the early empirical studies. In particular no consideration was given to the possibility that the effects of the L1 operated in ways other than through transfer. The theory of transfer was linked to a particular view of language learning as a series of habits which could be developed only through practice and reinforcement. In order to challenge this view of language learning, it was necessary to demonstrate that the 'old' habits of the L1 did not get in the way of learning the 'new' habits of the L2. Hence the attempt to show that L2 errors were not predominantly the result of interference. However, the L1 may contribute to learning in entirely different ways. For instance, learners may not *transfer* L1 rules into the L2, but may *avoid* using those rules that are absent in their L1 system. Or there may be linguistic constraints on which differences between the L1 and the L2 constitute difficulties so that transfer occurs only under certain linguistic conditions. Or learners may use the L1 as a resource from which they consciously *borrow in order to improve their performance* (i.e. they 'translate'). If a more cognitive perspective on the role of the L1 is adopted, it remains an issue which is very much alive.

Chapter 2 examines the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis and its rejection as a result of studies of learner errors. Chapters 2 and 8 look at

more recent research in which a positive role for the L1 in SLA is once again advanced.

The 'natural' route of development

One of the assumptions of the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis was that learners with different L1s would learn a L2 in different ways, as a result of negative transfer imposing different kinds of difficulty. Challenging the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis led to a consideration of the possibility that L2 learners followed a universal route in acquiring a L2. This possibility was encouraged by research in L1 acquisition which showed that children learning their mother tongue followed a highly predictable route in the acquisition of structures such as negatives and interrogatives (Klima and Bellugi 1966) and a range of grammatical morphemes (R. Brown 1973). If this was true for L1 acquisition and if, as the studies of L2 learner errors showed, negative transfer was not the major factor in SLA that it was once assumed to be, then it was not unreasonable to hypothesize that SLA followed a 'natural' sequence of development. That is, that all learners, irrespective of their L1, learnt the grammar of the L2 in a fixed order.

A key issue, then, was whether there was a 'natural' route of development and if so, what it consisted of. A related issue was whether the route of development in L1 acquisition matched that of SLA. This issue became known as the L2 = L1 hypothesis. This states that the processes of SLA and L1 acquisition are very similar as a result of the strategies learners employ. The task of 'cracking the code', which every language learner faces, is met through the application of a common set of mechanisms which have their origin in the special characteristics of the human language faculty.

The L2 = L1 hypothesis was investigated in two different ways. One was through the analysis of learner errors. Samples of language-learner language were collected and then examined in order to discover the different types of error that learners made. The errors were classified according to whether they could be predicted by contrastive analysis or whether they resembled the developmental errors that occurred in L1 acquisition. A large proportion of developmental-type errors was evidence that the processes of L1 acquisition and SLA were similar. Error analysis was also used in another way to examine the L2 = L1 hypothesis. If it was assumed that structures in which errors were very common were learnt later than structures containing few errors, then it was possible to work out an order of development based on error frequencies. For instance, if a larger proportion of errors occurred in the use of plurals than in the use of pronouns, then it could be assumed that plurals were acquired later than pronouns. By equating the order of difficulty with the order of acquisition, a developmental route could be established and the L2 = L1 hypothesis tested.

The second way in which the L2 = L1 hypothesis was examined was in longitudinal studies of L2 learners. A number of longitudinal studies of L1 acquisition had already taken place, so there was a basis for comparison. The 1970s saw a remarkable growth in the number of longitudinal studies of SLA, many of them originating in the University of California, Los Angeles, under the supervision of Evelyn Hatch (see Hatch 1978a).

Both Error Analysis and the longitudinal studies show that there are striking similarities in the ways in which different L2 learners learn a L2. Strong claims have been made that these amount to a 'natural' sequence of development. This route resembles that reported for L1 acquisition but is not identical with it. Chapter 3 examines the 'natural' route and the L2 = L1 hypothesis.

Contextual variation in language-learner language

Language-learner language contains errors. That is, some of the utterances produced by learners are not well formed according to the rules of the adult grammar. Errors are an important source of information about SLA, because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorize target language rules and then reproduce them in their own utterances. They indicate that learners construct their own rules on the basis of input data, and that in some instances at least these rules differ from those of the target language.

The existence of errors in language-learner language, however, is only of interest if they can be shown to be systematic – that is, that their occurrence is in some way regular. One of the major problems of investigating SLA is that learner errors are not systematic in any simple way. It is rare that a learner produces the same error in all contexts of use. It is much more likely that a learner produces an error in some contexts but not in others. However, accepting that errors are variable does not mean rejecting the notion that they are in some way regular and therefore rule-based. If it is accepted that learners perform differently in different situations, but that it is possible to predict how they will behave in specific situations, then the systematicity of their behaviour can be captured by means of *variable rules*. These are 'if . . . then' rules. They state that if x conditions apply, then y language forms will occur. For instance, we may find that subject–verb inversion in WH questions occurs in some questions but not in others. The learner's performance may seem entirely haphazard, but on closer inspection it may be possible to specify when subject–verb inversion occurs and when it does not. A variable rule might be constructed to show that inversion occurs in 'what' and 'who' questions but not in 'where' and 'when' questions. Although 'if . . . then' rules are much more complex than simple invariable rules, they are necessary if the true systematicity of language-learner language is to be understood.

There are two types of contextual variation. Language-learner language varies according to the *situational* context. That is, learners use their knowledge of the L2 differently in different situations. For example, when learners are under pressure to communicate instantly, they will not have time to maximize their existing knowledge and are likely to produce errors that would not occur in situations when they have the opportunity to monitor their output more carefully. Language-learner language also varies according to the *linguistic* context. That is, learners produce errors in one type of sentence but not in another. For example, errors in the third person singular of the English Present Simple Tense may not occur in sentences consisting of a single clause (e.g. 'He *buys* her a bunch of flowers'), but may occur regularly in the second clause of complex sentences (e.g. 'He visits her every day and *buy* her a bunch of flowers'). A full account of contextual variability needs to consider both types.

The notion of a 'natural' route of development and the notion of contextual variation need to be reconciled. If learners vary in their use of a L2, in what sense is it possible to talk about a general developmental route? How can there be an invariable route if language-learner language is inherently variable? In many respects this is the single most important issue in SLA research. It is considered in Chapter 4.

Individual learner differences

Variability in language-learner language is the result not only of contextual factors. It also occurs because of individual differences in the way learners learn a L2 and the way they use their L2 knowledge. It is probably accurate to say that no two learners learn a L2 in exactly the same way.

The learner factors that can influence the course of development are potentially infinite and very difficult to classify in a reliable manner. SLA research has examined five general factors that contribute to individual learner differences in some depth. These are age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation, and personality.

A question that has aroused considerable interest is whether adults learn a L2 in the same way as children. A common-sense approach to this issue suggests that adult and child SLA are not the same. Adults have a greater memory capacity and are also able to focus more easily on the purely formal features of a language. However, these differences need not lead to differences in the route through which learners pass, which may be the product of a language faculty that does not change with age. The comparison of child and adult SLA needs to be undertaken in two parts. First it needs to be shown whether the learning route differs. Is there a 'natural' route for adults and a different one for children? Second, the *rate* at which adults and children learn needs to be