

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

Rosamond Mitchell,
Florence Myles and
Emma Marsden

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To Paul, Francis, David, Katie and Claire

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Preface

Aims of this book

This book is the result of collaboration between researchers interested in second language acquisition from a range of perspectives: linguistic (Myles), cognitive (Marsden) and social/educational (Mitchell). As in previous editions, our general aim is to provide an up-to-date, introductory overview of the current state of second language learning studies. Our intended audience is wide: undergraduates following first degrees in language/linguistics, graduate students embarking on courses in foreign language education/EFL/applied linguistics, and a broader audience of teachers and other professionals concerned with L2 education and development. Second language learning is a field of research with potential to make its own distinctive contribution to fundamental understandings, e.g. of the workings of the human mind or the nature of language. It also has the potential to inform the improvement of social practice in a range of fields, most obviously in language education. We ourselves are interested in second language learning (SLL) from both perspectives, and are concerned to make it intelligible to the widest possible audience.

All commentators recognise that while the field of second language learning research has been extremely active and productive in recent decades, we have not yet arrived at a unified or comprehensive view of how second languages are learned. We have therefore organised this book as a presentation and critical review of a number of different theories of SLL, which can broadly be viewed as linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic. Indeed, the overall 'map' of the field we proposed in the first edition largely survives today, reflecting the fact that key strands of research already active 20 years ago have continued to flourish and develop. No single theoretical position has achieved dominance, and new theoretical orientations continue to appear. Whether this is a desirable state of affairs or not has been an issue of some controversy for SLL researchers (see discussion in Chapter 1). On the whole, while we accept fully the arguments for the need for cumulative programmes of research within the framework of a particular theory, we incline towards a pluralist view of SLL theorizing. In any case, it is obvious that students entering the field today need a broad introduction to a range of theoretical positions, with the tools to evaluate their goals, strengths and limitations, and this is what we aim to offer.

Previous editions (1998, 2004) were strongly influenced by the 1987 volume by McLaughlin, *Theories of second language learning*, which provided a selective and authoritative introduction to key L2 learning theories of the day. In this third edition, our primary aim remains the same: to introduce the reader to those theoretical orientations on language learning which seem currently most productive and interesting for our intended audience. But we have revised our text throughout to reflect the substantial developments that have taken place in the field in the last few years, so that the work aims to be fully up-to-date for a twenty-first-century readership. In particular, the new edition takes account of recent substantial developments in cognitive approaches to second language learning, and our treatment of this area has been split into two new chapters, with Emma Marsden as lead author for this domain. The rise of Minimalism in generative (Chomskyan) linguistics and its impact on generativist approaches to SLL is given thorough treatment; finally the strength of the ongoing 'social turn' in second language learning research has been acknowledged, with substantial revisions of later chapters dealing with functional, sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives. Throughout the book, key theoretical and methodological advances are presented and explained, greater attention has been paid to research on internet-based language learning, and new studies (in a range of languages) have been incorporated as examples. The evaluation sections in each chapter have been expanded and generally the book is rebalanced in favour of newer material.

As one sign of the vigour and dynamism of second language learning research, a good number of surveys and reviews are now on the market. Reflecting the variety of the field, these books vary in their focus and aims. Some are written to argue the case for a single theoretical position (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; Ayoun, 2003; Cook and Newson, 2007; Hawkins, 2001; Herschensohn, 2000; Lardiere, 2007; Leung, 2009; Mackey, 2007; Paradis, 2009; Thomas, 2004; White, 2003); some are encyclopaedic in scope and ambition (e.g. R. Ellis, 2008; Gass and Mackey, 2012; Herschensohn and Young-Scholten, 2013; Ritchie and Bhatia, 2009); some pay detailed attention to research methods and data analysis (e.g. Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Mackey and Gass, 2012).

This particular book is intended as a unified introduction to the field, for students without a substantial background in linguistics. We begin with an introduction to key concepts (Chapter 1), and a historical account of how the

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SLL field has developed (Chapter 2). In later chapters (3–9) we have made a selection from across the range of second language learning studies of a range of theoretical positions, which we believe are most active and significant. To represent linguistic theorising on SLL, we have concentrated on the Universal Grammar approach (Chapter 3). In Chapters 4 and 5 we deal with a selection of cognitive theories: in Chapter 4, we examine the application to SLL of general and implicit learning mechanisms, concentrating on emergentist and processing perspectives, while in Chapter 5, we explore the place of memory, explicit knowledge and attention in SLL, and their contribution to skill acquisition in particular. Chapter 6 explores the concept of interaction and its contribution to SLL, tracing earlier and later versions of the Interaction Hypothesis and related theories. Chapter 7 examines a range of theoretical positions which assume the centrality of meaning-making for SLL (functionalism, 'cognitive linguistics', L2 pragmatics). Chapter 8 deals with sociocultural theory and some of its more recent extensions (activity theory, dynamic assessment, concept-based instruction). In Chapter 9, we turn to the emergence of socially patterned variation in L2, and examine L2 socialization theory, as well as theories of identity, agency and investment as applied to SLL. Each of these theoretical positions is explained, and then illustrated by discussion of a small number of key empirical studies that have been inspired by that approach. We use these studies to illustrate: the methodologies that are characteristic of the different traditions in SLL research (from controlled laboratory-based studies of people learning artificial languages, to naturalistic observation of informal learning in the community); the scope and nature of the language 'facts' that are felt to be important; and the kinds of generalizations that are drawn. Where appropriate, we refer our readers to parallels in first language acquisition research, and also to more comprehensive treatments of the research evidence relevant to different theoretical positions. Each chapter concludes with an evaluation section (see below).

Other new features of this third edition which are intended to help the new reader build up an overall picture of the field include a timeline of important milestones in the development of SLL research, and a glossary explaining key terms used in the book.

Comparing SLL perspectives

We want to encourage our readers to compare and contrast the various theoretical perspectives we discuss in the book, so that they can get a better sense of the kinds of issues which different theories are trying to explain, and the extent to which they are supported to date with empirical evidence.

In reviewing our chosen perspectives, therefore, we evaluate each systematically, considering the nature and extent of empirical support and paying attention to the following factors:

- the claims and scope of the theory;
- the view of language involved in the theory;
- the view of the language learning process; and
- the view of the learner.

In Chapter 1 we discuss each of these factors briefly, introducing key terminology and critical issues that have proved important in distinguishing one theory from another.

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1 | Second language learning: key concepts and issues

1.1 Introduction

This preparatory chapter provides an overview of key concepts and issues which will recur throughout the book. We offer introductory definitions of a range of terms, and try to equip the reader with the means to compare the goals and claims of particular theories with one another. We also summarize key issues, and indicate where they will be explored in more detail later in the book.

The main themes to be dealt with in the following sections are:

- 1.2 What makes for a 'good' explanation or theory?
- 1.3 Views on the nature of language
- 1.4 Views of the language learning process
- 1.5 Views of the language learner
- 1.6 Links between language learning theory and social practice.

First, however, we must offer a preliminary definition of our most basic concept, 'second language learning'. We define this broadly, to include the learning of any language, to any level, provided only that the learning of the 'second' language takes place sometime later than the acquisition of the first language.

Simultaneous infant **bilingualism** is a specialist topic, with its own literature, which we do not try to address in this book. For overviews see Döpke (2000), relevant sections in Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) and Müller (2009). However, we do take some account of growing research interest in interactions and mutual influences between 'first' languages and later-acquired 'second' languages, surveyed for example in Cook (2003) and Pavlenko (2011); aspects of this work are discussed in some later chapters.

For us, therefore, 'second languages' are any languages learned later than in earliest childhood. They may indeed be the second language the learner is working with, in a literal sense, or they may be his/her third, fourth, fifth language ... They encompass both languages of wider communication encountered within the local region or community (for example, in educational institutions, at the work place, or in the media), and truly foreign languages, which have no substantial local uses or numbers of speakers. We include 'foreign' languages under our more general term of 'second' languages because we believe that the underlying learning processes are essentially the same for more local and for more remote target languages, despite differing learning purposes and circumstances. (And, of course, such languages today are likely to be increasingly accessible via the internet, a means of communication which self-evidently cuts across any simple 'local'/'foreign' distinction.)

We are also interested in all kinds of learning, whether formal, planned and systematic (as in classroom-based learning), or informal and unstructured (as when a new language is 'picked up' in the community or via the internet). Following the proposals of Stephen Krashen (1981), some second language researchers have made a principled terminological distinction between formal, conscious learning and informal, unconscious acquisition. Krashen's distinctive 'Acquisition-Learning' Hypothesis is discussed further in Chapter 2; however, most researchers in the field do not sustain any principled distinction between the two terms. Unless specially indicated therefore, we ourselves will be using both terms interchangeably. (And in Chapters 4 and 5, where the distinction between conscious and unconscious learning is central, we will use the terms 'implicit' and 'explicit' learning to distinguish the two.)

1.2 What makes for a good theory?

Second language learning is an immensely complex phenomenon. Millions of human beings have experience of second language learning, and may have a good practical understanding of the activities which helped them to learn. But this practical experience, and the common-sense knowledge which it leads to, are clearly not enough to help us understand the process fully. We know, for a start, that people cannot reliably describe the language system which they have somehow internalized, nor the inner mechanisms which process, store and retrieve many aspects of that new language.

We need to understand second language learning better than we do, for two basic reasons:

- (a) Improved knowledge in this particular domain is interesting in itself, and can also contribute to more general understanding about the nature of language, of human learning, and of intercultural communication, and thus about the human mind itself, as well as how all these are interrelated and affect each other.
- (b) The knowledge will be useful; if we become better at explaining the learning process, and are better able to account for both success and failure in L2 learning, there will be a payoff for millions of teachers, and tens of millions of students and other learners, who are struggling with the task.

We can only pursue a better understanding of L2 learning in an organized and productive way if our efforts are guided by some form of theory. For our purposes, a **theory** is a more or less abstract set of claims about the entities which are significant within the phenomenon under study, the relationships which exist between them, and the processes which bring about change. Thus a theory aims not just at description, but at explanation. Theories may be embryonic and restricted in scope, or more elaborate, explicit and