

牛津应用语言学丛书



Conditions for Second Language Learning

第二语言学习的条件

Bernard Spolsky

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Conditions for Second Language Learning

Introduction to a general theory

Bernard Spolsky

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出版前言

去年5月本社出版了从牛津大学出版社引进的19种“牛津应用语言学丛书”，受到了外语教学界师生的一致好评和欢迎，在短短的一年中，重印了4次。为了向我国的外语教学和研究人员提供更多的学术参考专著，帮助读者了解近年来国外应用语言学和外语教学研究的理论，促进我国外语教学的研究和改革，本社又挑选了10本该系列中的精品，奉献给广大读者。希望本套丛书能够对于借鉴国外研究成果和总结我国自己的外语教学经验，形成具有中国特色的外语教学理论有所帮助。

《第二语言学习的条件》是一部论述第二语言学习诸规律，旨在建立一个通用的语言学习理论的学术著作。作者B·斯波尔斯基是巴依兰大学的英语教授。本书的应用语言学顾问是著名的H·G·威多森教授。

在作者看来，尽管目前各种各样的语言学习理论层出不穷，但是真正具有实用价值的通用理论却不多。克拉申的监控理论(The Monitor Model)虽然也是一个综合的理论，但是在本书作者看来也未免有失空洞。作者从事语言教学多年，一直致力于建立一个能够解释包括第一语言学习在内的通用理论。本书可以说是作者毕生研究的结晶。

所谓“通用”，就是指这个理论不是针对某一个领域，比如正式的课堂学习、非正式的自然学习或者语言某个部分的学习，而是包括所有的语言学习形式。本书的“理论”指的是一组能够用实践验证的假设。因此，本书的主体部分逐一阐述74个语言学习的条件，而所谓“通用”的理论正是由这74个条件组成。这些条件有的是关于语言本身、语言使用、语言测试、学习者个体差异、社会文化差异等等，涵盖了语言学习的各个侧面。总的来说，语言学习理论就是要解释“谁在怎样的条件下学习了何种语言到了什么程度”，而影响语言学习的

因素数目众多,互相影响。因此,作者指出,语言学习是一个高度复杂的过程,只有从不同的侧面着手,才能有纵深的研究。

全书内容包括:导论、14个章节和一个附录(案例研究)。作者思路清晰,章节组织有条不紊,多数“条件”对中国的英语教学有指导意义。

本书的读者对象为英语及语言学与应用语言学专业的教师、研究生,英语及相关专业的本科高年级学生以及其他相关专业的研究人员。

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For Ellen

פיה פתחה בחכמה

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Preface

It is more than a little humbling to find that a book one has spent much of one's professional career trying to write can claim to be no more than an introduction. The ideas in it have developed over twenty years. Whenever I can, I have said where they come from, but I am certain that there will be many sources that I do not recall, notions and phrases I have absorbed from reading and teaching and listening, and that I pass on into the public domain of knowledge. I take this opportunity to thank my teachers, colleagues, and students.

Apart from the longish incubation period, the writing of this book took a number of years. An unexpected gap in a teaching programme gave me the opportunity to prepare a dozen or so lectures on current theories of second language learning; this later formed the basis for a paper I was invited to give at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee conference in 1985. From these initial notes, the book started to take shape, but the bulk of the work of writing waited for a year's leave from Bar-Ilan University; without the sabbatical, I doubt that it would have been finished.

I am grateful therefore to Bar-Ilan University for the time to write the book, to the University of London Institute of Education, which made me a research fellow while I was writing, and to Carmel College, which provided me with an ideal setting for scholarly work. In particular, I must thank my colleagues at Bar-Ilan, who allowed me a year free from departmental responsibility; Henry Widdowson, who took a deep interest in the book and whose questions I have tried to answer, often unsuccessfully, but always feeling it was worth trying; Peter Skehan, who provided access to computers and—even more important—a fund of useful information and a continuing availability for discussion; and the Headmaster, Phillip Skelker, of Carmel College, its staff, and pupils, who encouraged and suffered and shared in the case study. I also want to thank a number of universities in Britain, Japan, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, which during the year I was on sabbatical leave gave me the opportunity to try out some of the formulations on captive audiences; questions raised in those lectures led to much necessary rethinking.

I should like also to thank Raphael Nir for discussions and collaboration on a larger Hebrew language study, part of which is

reported here; Robert Cooper for providing a critical and friendly ear over the years; Ellen Bialystok, whose wise comments on the draft manuscript helped solve some problems and raised others I am unable (or unwilling) to answer; and Cristina Whitecross, Anne Conybeare, and others at the Oxford University Press, who have encouraged me and helped me prepare the book for publication.

The dedication recognizes a quarter-century of love, companionship, stimulation, and the sharing, among other things, of conditions for second language learning, preference rules, computers, and our two children, whose characters and actions honour their mother and delight their father.

Jerusalem
February 1988

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Introduction

The need for a general theory

The task of a general theory

Like many other workers faced with difficult and often unrewarding tasks, language teachers long for someone to offer them a simple and effective method that will suit all kinds of learners. Responding to this demand, scholars who have built theories of second language learning have often set as their main criterion not the elegant parsimony expected of a scientific theory but the stark appeal of a crisp advertising slogan. Translatability (even translation) into a teaching method rather than accounting for the empirical facts has been the goal pursued by many theory builders.

With the toppling of the Audio-Lingual Method from its throne, however, it seemed for a while that a general acceptance of eclecticism in language teaching would relax pressure on theorists and let them get on with their own particular job. All indications were, Stern (1985) remarked, that the profession would get over the 'century-old obsession' with finding a panacea and that 'a more sophisticated analysis of pedagogy would no longer be satisfied with the global and ill-defined method concept'. We might even have hoped that the sound notion of informed language teaching described by Strevens (1985) would come to hold sway, but the seventies and eighties have continued the search for the pot of gold, and there has been a new method boom. Where once they were faced with Berlitz Methods, and Army Methods, and Ollendorf Methods, and Direct Methods, and Series Methods, language teachers are now offered the Total Physical Response, Community Counselling, and Suggestopedia. Even scholars who started in solid theoretical research have caught the methods fever, as Oller and Richard-Amato (1983) published *Methods that Work* and Stephen Krashen, who made an important attempt to assemble current research into an integrated theory, latched on to the Natural Approach¹ and went from theorizing to promotion.

There are two points that I want to make: the first is that there are serious weaknesses with the theoretical bases of these various methods, not excluding Krashen's method and the theory it is based on;² the

second is the more general point that any theory of second language learning that leads to a single method is obviously wrong. If you look at the complexity of the circumstances under which second languages are learned, or fail to be learned, you immediately see that a theory must not only be equally complex but must also be able to account for the success and failures of the many different methods that have been and are used throughout the language teaching world.

The goal of this book then is certainly not to propose a new method but rather to explore the requirements for a general theory of second language learning by examining the conditions under which languages are learned, and to consider the relevance of such a theory for language teaching. I describe the theory as *general* to distinguish it from theories of formal classroom learning,³ or of informal natural learning,⁴ or the learning of one part of a language, such as sentence-level syntax.⁵ I use the term *theory*⁶ to mean a hypothesis or set of hypotheses⁷ that has been or can be verified empirically.⁸ I use the term *second language learning* to refer to the acquisition of a language once a first language has been learned, say after the age of two,⁹ without any technical definition or jargon or in-group implication for the words *learning* or *acquisition*.¹⁰ Within these definitions, I see the task of a theory of second language learning as being to account both for the fact that people can learn more than one language, and for the generalizable individual differences that occur in such learning.

First, it is always the case that some individuals are more successful than others in mastering the language, even though the language experience has in all cases been ostensibly identical. Second, for a particular individual, some aspects of language learning are mastered more easily than are others. (Bialystok 1978:69)

This makes the task similar in many ways to that of understanding first language learning at more advanced stages, although it must be pointed out that current psycholinguistic interest in first language acquisition has focused on the initial stages of learning and on the universal acquisition of language rather than on the individual variations in ultimate accomplishment.

A general theory of second language learning such as I am seeking to develop will need to relate in significant ways to a theory of first language learning. Ideally, rather than seeking separate theories of first and second language learning, I should perhaps be pursuing a unified theory of language learning (Carroll 1981), which would, within itself, distinguish between first and second language learning,¹¹ including, for instance, the fact that in the case of second language learning, learners have already succeeded in such crucial issues as distinguishing the sounds of language from the noise around them, and recognizing the basic working of speech acts. Omitting this initial stage of first language

acquisition, much of what I propose here can easily and usefully be applied to mother tongue learning, to the learning of additional dialects and registers, to the development of control of standardized and classical varieties of one's first language, and to the complex variation of individual achievement in all language learning.

In spite of the attractiveness of this challenge, I have chosen at this stage to accept the constraint of working to develop a theory of second language learning independently, accepting the common scientific practice when dealing with complex systems of attempting to deal with one definable part at a time. But, as is clear in the use of the term 'general' and will be shown in more detail, it is an essential part of my approach to consider all kinds of second language learning together, calling on the model (and not some a priori limitation of scope) to show the differences proposed between, for example, second and foreign language learning and formal and informal learning.

If I may use a rhetorical form that is favoured by Joshua Fishman, the critical issues to be dealt with may be set out in the following question:

Who learns how much of what language under what conditions?

Using this as a mnemonic, a theory of second language learning must account for:

who: differences in the learner. This includes such factors as age, ability, intelligence, specific abilities (for example, hearing acuity), special aptitudes, attitudes (to learning, to a language, and to its speakers), motivation, choice among strategies, personality. These factors form a continuum from permanence (for example, those that are biologically given) to modifiability (under various controls).

learns: the process itself. How many kinds of learning are there? What is already there, preprogrammed in some way? What is the difference between conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) knowledge? Between knowing and being able to? Between learning a single item and gaining control of functional skill? How does transfer work? How does learning vary individually and culturally?

how much of: What is the criterion for having learned? What part of language is learned (for example, phonology versus grammar versus semantics versus culture)? How does one account for learning single items? How different is the development of functional proficiency?

what language or variety, or mode, or dialect. And what about culture?

under what conditions: Is it amount or kind of exposure that makes the difference? How does exposure lead to learning? Who is the best person to learn from?

And how does each of these factors interact with the others? What kind of person prefers what kind of strategy? Who learns best under what conditions? What kind of person learns what parts of language? What

variety of language is best learned by what kind of learner under what kind of circumstances?

This brief analysis helps us see the complexity of the question and suggests something about the nature of the model that might provide a satisfying solution to it. It is most unlikely to be a simple basic principle such as those proposed by any of the New Key Methods,¹² or even a more sophisticated combination of half a dozen hypotheses such as Stephen Krashen has proposed. The claims behind these method-supporting theories of course all have a modicum of truth; they are 'correct' with certain interpretations under certain conditions; they capture certain facts; but they are either so loosely worded as to be meaningless, or when they are made precise, they are wrong. Rather, as I will try to show in this book, a general theory of second language learning is best expressed as a complex collection of typical and categorical rules or conditions. As I will suggest in Chapter 1, it can be most appropriately stated in terms similar to the preference model in linguistics proposed by Jackendoff (1983), and not by models consisting only of well-formedness conditions nor certainly by single factor or simple models. Language learning results, the theory will claim, from the interaction and integration of a large number of factors and not from any single factor.

Two preliminary questions arise. First, one might ask how theory relates to practice. A theory of second language learning will need to explain (that is to say, it will be testable against) any kind of example of second language learning; it will not be useful to have, for instance, a separate theory of adult second language learning, or of immersion learning, but at the same time, a theory will be expected to explain differences observable between these various kinds of learning. A complete theory will thus be a heuristic for studying the effect of various modifications of teaching goals, situations and approaches rather than a prescription for how to teach. Teaching practice will in essence serve as a method of testing a theory empirically, rather than being its direct outcome. A theory of second language learning, then, will have implications for teaching and not direct applications.¹³ It will be relevant to any model of language teaching, but will not be its only component. In other words, it will need to avoid both the Scylla of imperialistic application and the Charybdis of scholarly irresponsibility: both theory and practice must work in mutual respect, for, as Widdowson (1984a:36) summed it up, 'The effectiveness of practice depends on relevant theory; the relevance of theory depends on effective practice.' One of my main tasks in this book is to try to clarify the notions of relevance and effectiveness.

A second important question is whether or not a theory of second language learning needs to be a processing model, proposing a working model of exactly how language learning takes place. I think the answer