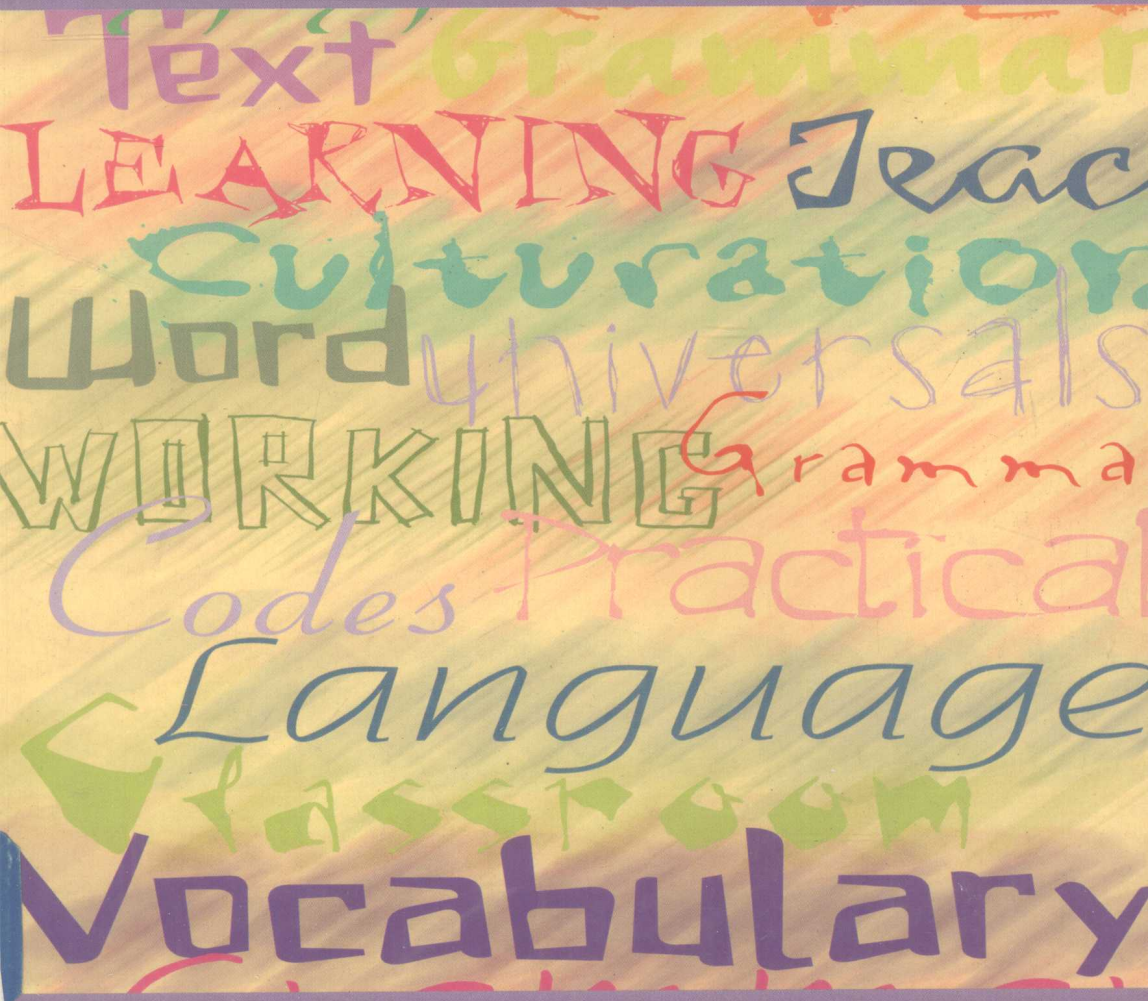
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

THIRD EDITION



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Second Language Learning and Language Teaching

Third Edition

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Acknowledgements

The motto of this book as before comes from Otto Jespersen (1904): 'The really important thing is less the destruction of bad old methods than a positive indication of the new ways to be followed if we are to have thoroughly efficient teaching in modern languages.' The new edition has benefited from the feedback of students, colleagues and readers. Without the musical influence of Brad Mehldau, Ornette Coleman and Cassandra Wilson, it would never have been finished.

Contents

1

Background to second language acquisition research and language teaching

Language is at the centre of human life. We use it to express our love or our hatred, to achieve our goals and further our careers, to gain artistic satisfaction or simple pleasure. Through language we plan our lives and remember our past; we exchange ideas and experiences; we form our social and individual identities.

Some people are able to do some or all of this in more than one language. Knowing another language may mean getting a job; a chance to get educated; the ability to take a fuller part in the life of one's own country or the opportunity to emigrate to another; an expansion of one's literary and cultural horizons; the expression of one's political opinions or religious beliefs. A second language affects people's careers and possible futures, their lives and their very identities. In a world where probably more people speak two languages than one, the acquisition and use of second languages are vital to the everyday lives of millions. Helping people acquire second languages more effectively is an important task for the twenty-first century.

1.1 *The scope of this book*

The main aim of this book is to tell those concerned with language teaching about ideas on how people acquire second languages coming from second language acquisition (SLA) research and to suggest how these might benefit language teaching. It is not a guide to SLA research methodology or to the merits and failings of particular SLA research techniques, which are covered in other books such as *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition* (Cook, 1993) or *Second Language Learning Theories* (Myles and Mitchell, 1998). Nor is it an overall guide to the methods and techniques of language teaching, only to those which connect with an SLA research perspective. It is intended for language teachers and trainee teachers.

The book gradually widens its scope from particular aspects of language to broader contexts and more general ideas. After the general background in this chapter, the next two chapters look at how people learn particular aspects of

language: grammar in Chapter 2 – the area most SLA research has concerned itself with – pronunciation, vocabulary and writing in Chapter 3. The next two chapters treat learners as individuals: Chapter 4 looks at how individuals process language by listening and reading. Chapter 5 describes how learners vary in terms of factors such as motivation and age. Next come aspects of the learning situation: Chapter 6 examines the characteristics of language teaching in classrooms; Chapter 7 puts L2 learning in the wider context of society. Finally, the research is integrated into more general ideas: Chapter 8 describes overall models of L2 learning in relationship to teaching; Chapter 9 relates teaching methods to L2 learning by looking at six styles of language teaching. Thus, while the earlier chapters move from SLA ideas to language teaching, the final chapter moves from teaching to SLA research. The chapters do not necessarily have to be read in sequence since most do not depend critically on the ideas in earlier ones. Readers can concentrate on particular areas they find interesting. Those who want to start with overall teaching theories, for example, can start with Chapter 9, and then go back to the earlier chapters to look for the sources of the ideas discussed.

In general, the emphasis in writing the third edition has been to make the discussion of language teaching fuller, to highlight some of the places where SLA research contradicts standard language teaching beliefs, to keep to a more consistent line emphasizing the student becoming an independent L2 user, and to personalize the account more by using examples of materials, research and teaching that I have been involved with. While some updating and revision has been carried out, the broad framework and approach of the second edition have been maintained. One disappointment is indeed that so few practical suggestions have been put forward for the practical use of SLA research in the classroom over the ten years since the first edition.

Much of the discussion concerns the L2 learning and teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), mainly because this is the chief language that has been investigated in SLA research. English is, however, used here for exemplification rather than being the subject matter itself. The teaching and learning of other modern languages are discussed where appropriate. Most sections of each chapter start with a display defining keywords and end with a boxed summary of the area in question.

Contact with the language teaching classroom is maintained in this book chiefly through the discussion of published course books, usually for teaching English. Even if good teachers use books only as a jumping-off point, they can provide a window into many classrooms. The books and syllabuses cited are taken from countries ranging from Germany to Japan to Cuba, though inevitably the bias is towards those published in Britain for reasons of accessibility. Since most modern EFL course books tend to be very similar in orientation, often the examples of less familiar approaches have been taken from older course books.

This book is highly selective and talks about only a fraction of the SLA research on a given topic. Yet it is nevertheless wider than most books that link

SLA research to language teaching in the range of areas of SLA research and language teaching that it tackles, for example taking in pronunciation, vocabulary and writing. It uses ideas from the wealth of material produced in the past twenty years or so rather than just the most recent.

1.2 *Common assumptions of language teaching*

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century a revolution took place that affected much of the language teaching used in the twentieth century. The revolt was primarily against the stultifying methods of translation of texts and grammatical explanation which were then popular. In its place the pioneers of the new language teaching such as Henry Sweet and Otto Jespersen emphasized the spoken language and the naturalness of language learning and insisted on the importance of using the second language in the classroom. These beliefs are largely still with us today, either explicitly instilled into teachers or simply taken for granted. Box 1.1 below is a way of testing the extent to which the reader actually believes in six of these common assumptions.

Box 1.1 **Assumptions of teaching**

Tick the extent to which you agree or disagree with these assumptions

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Students learn best through spoken, not written language.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
2. Teachers and students should use the second language rather than the first language in the classroom.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
3. Teachers should avoid explicit discussion of grammar.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
4. Language should be learnt as a whole rather than split up into fragments.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
5. Language should be presented to students through dialogues and texts.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
6. Language consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

If you agreed with most of the above statements, then you share the common assumptions of teachers over the past 120 years. Let us spell them out in more detail.

Students learn best through spoken, not written, language

One of the keynotes of the nineteenth-century revolution in teaching was the emphasis on the spoken language, partly because many of its advocates were

phoneticians. The English curriculum in Cuba for example insists on 'The principle of the primacy of spoken language' (Cuban Ministry of Education, 1999). The teaching methods within which speech was most dominant were the audiolingual and audio-visual methods, which insisted on presenting spoken language from tape before the students encountered the written form. Later methods have continued to emphasize the spoken language. Communication in the communicative method is usually through speech rather than writing. The Total Physical Response method uses spoken, not written, commands. The amount of teaching time that teachers pay to pronunciation far outweighs that given to spelling.

The importance of speech has been reinforced by many linguists who claim that speech is the primary form of language and that writing depends on speech. Few teaching methods in the twentieth century saw speech and writing as being equally important. The problem with accepting this assumption, as we see in Chapter 3, is that written language has distinct characteristics of its own which are not just pale reflections of the spoken language. To quote Michael Halliday (1985, p. 91), 'writing is not speech written down, nor is speech writing that is read aloud'. Vital as the spoken language may be, it should not divert attention from those aspects of writing that are crucial for students. Spelling mistakes, for instance, probably count more against an L2 user in real life than a foreign accent.

Teachers and students should use the second language rather than the first language in the classroom

The emphasis on the second language in the classroom was also part of the revolt against the older methods by the late nineteenth-century methodologists, most famously through the Direct Method and the Berlitz Method with their rejection of translation as a teaching technique. In the 1990s the use of the first language in the classroom is still seen as undesirable: 'The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern language course' (DES, 1990, p. 58). This advice is echoed in almost every teaching manual. One argument for avoiding the first language is that children learning their first language do not have a second language available, which is irrelevant in itself – infants don't play golf but we teach it to adults. The other argument is that the students should keep the two languages separate in their minds rather than linking them; this adopts a compartmentalized view of the languages in the same mind which is not supported by SLA research, as we see in Chapters 3 and 4. Nevertheless, many EFL classes justifiably avoid the first language for practical reasons, either because of the mixed languages of the students or because of the teacher's ignorance of the students' first language. This will be developed in Chapter 6.

Teachers should avoid explicit discussion of grammar

The ban on explicit explanation of grammar also formed part of the rejection of the old-style methods. Grammar could be practised through drills or incorporated within communicative exercises but should not be explained. While grammatical rules could be demonstrated though substitution tables or through situational cues, actual rules should not be mentioned to the students. The old arguments against grammatical explanation were on the one hand the question of conscious understanding – knowing some aspect of language consciously is no guarantee that you can use it in speech – and on the other, the time involved – speaking by consciously using all the grammatical rules means each sentence takes several minutes to produce, as those of us who learnt Latin by this method will bear witness. Chapter 2 describes how grammar has recently made something of a comeback with task-based learning, though this sees grammar as arising out of other classroom activities rather than being the driving force.

Language should be learnt as a whole rather than split up into fragments

In all modern teaching methods language tends to be treated as whole sentences or whole utterances rather than being learnt as fragments such as words or verb paradigms. Students don't practise tenses as such but sentences or texts, which happen to include the tenses. Stephen Krashen called the fragmentation of the language for teaching purposes 'rule isolation', contrasting it with the natural acquisition process where language is treated always as a whole (Krashen, 1985). Most recent methods have tried to use whole pieces of language, at least so far as the students are aware. If the materials and techniques are based on rule isolation, this is without the students' knowledge. Only in the teaching of certain aspects of language such as vocabulary and pronunciation do people still tend to teach discrete bits of language, as we see in Chapter 4.

Language should be presented to students through dialogues and texts

A constant theme in teaching has been the use of language situated in a context, rather than sentences, phrases or words in isolation, again traceable to the nineteenth-century revolution against sentences out of context. The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods insisted on the presentation of new language through spoken dialogues; the communicative method increased the reliance on communicative exchanges, task-based learning the role of tasks. Most coursebooks continued to use dialogues and texts as the basis for lessons. Later controversies have revolved around whether these had to be authentic, i.e. based on what native speakers had said outside the classroom rather than on language concocted for teaching purposes, and have not discusssed whether

dialogue and text presentation was right, as we see in Chapter 6. Lately the use of task-based methods has perhaps diminished the number of pre-scripted dialogues in favour of the students' own interaction in the classroom.

Language consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing

The concept of language skills came into teaching more recently than the others through the audiolingual method from the 1940s onwards. Language was thought to consist of four main skills: listening to spoken language, speaking, reading written language, and writing. Audiolingualism itself combined the emphasis on spoken language with the concept of four skills to claim that spoken skills should come before written skills and that 'receptive' skills in which the learner has to produce no language themselves should come before 'productive' skills in which they do, as discussed in Chapter 9. The UK National Curriculum for modern languages (Department for Education and Employment, http://www.nc.uk.net/) recommends 'During key stage 3 pupils begin to understand, speak, read and write at least one modern foreign language'; that is to say, it mentions the four skills in the usual order. Sometimes the skill sequence applies to the whole course so that students spend weeks or months listening before they speak. Sometimes the sequence is applied within a single classroom lesson; the students always hear a word before they see it written, and hear it or read it before they have to say it or write it.

Many quibbles have been made about these four skills. Some feel that four skills is too few, the present four concealing all sorts of differences. Others have disputed the word 'skill' itself, because it does not distinguishing speaking language from riding a bicycle. Nevertheless, most manuals for language teachers mention the four language skills somewhere, even if only as a convenient way of dividing language teaching into four broad areas. The series *Tapestry 1* (series editor R. Oxford, 2000) for example has three volumes, for Reading, Writing, and Listening and Speaking, at each of four levels.

As we shall see, many of these background assumptions are questioned by SLA research; for example, the avoidance of the L1 in the classroom. Others are not affected as SLA research has little to say about them one way or the other; for instance, presentation through dialogues. Nevertheless, they certainly underlie much teaching practice. Much of the time these unstated assumptions continue as the basis for language teaching however the fashions in language teaching change.

1.3 *Technique analysis*

One way of starting to think how students learn is called *technique analysis.* The idea, familiar to those who have done 'practical criticism' with literary texts, is to start from the printed page of a textbook and to take nothing else for

granted – forget what the teacher's book says, ignore what you know about the method or the book: just look at what is *there*. This may free one from all the preconceptions one has built up over the years about teaching so that one can look at what is actually going on rather than what methodologists say is going on.

To practise this, first of all choose a sample piece of language teaching. This might be a teaching technique you have just observed in a classroom or any section or page of a convenient textbook. Then analyse the sample through the checklist of questions and explanations given in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2 Technique analysis checklist

A. What are the background assumptions of the technique?
- Physical situation (equipment, group size, teacher resources).
- The type of students (age, motivation, etc.).
- The teacher (teaching style, training, etc.).
- Joint assumptions by teacher and students (goals of teaching, classroom expectations, the use of the first language).

B. What language input is provided?
- How much language?
- Spoken or written?
- Is the language discourse or fragments?
- Authentic or non-authentic?
- What role does the teacher's language play?

C. What activities do the students do?
- Four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing).
- Do they use communication and interaction?
- How deeply do the activities involve the students emotionally and cognitively?
- How consciously aware are the students supposed to be of the forms of language?

The background assumptions (A) are often neglected in the discussion of language teaching. Whether or not the technique requires a blackboard or an overhead projector; whether the teacher can make photocopies; whether the students must have copies of the book: these simple practical aspects of the teaching situation make an immense difference. So too does the type of student. A dialogue technique in which the students play roles might not be successful with a group in which the men refuse to play women or the women will not speak in front of men. These variations in types of student are looked at in Chapter 5. The joint assumptions that the students and the teacher bring to the situation and their previous experiences also affect the technique – do they think the L2 natives are odd? That learning a language is just a matter of

memorizing lines? That the teacher is a wise being who imparts wisdom and must not be contradicted or interrupted? That the first language should never be used in the classroom? Do the teacher and students share the same beliefs or is the teacher an interloper from another culture? Whether these beliefs are actually right or wrong is beside the point if they are real to the students or the teacher and affect the technique.

The second factor is the question of language input (B). The most obvious necessity in teaching is that the student gets to hear the language, whether from the teacher, from tapes or books, or from other students. Without enough appropriate examples of the target language, the students will get nowhere. So it is vital to consider how a teaching technique provides samples of the language itself, whether it concentrates on spoken or written language, how much new language is introduced, how interactive and communicative it is, whether it consists of whole utterances and sentences or just fragments, phrases and words. One overall difference is that between *authentic* language (language used by native speakers outside a classroom) and *non-authentic* (language specially written for teaching). It is also important for teachers to be aware of what role is expected from them in language terms. Are they alone responsible for supplying all the new language? Are they supposed to simplify their speech deliberately or to speak naturally? Are they to keep firmly to the vocabulary in the textbook or are they expected to expand it according to the individual student's requirements? These aspects of language input are covered in Chapter 6.

Finally, the activities the students carry out determine how they learn (C). Some activities are directly forced on the students by the technique – repeating sentences, exchanging ideas, memorizing vocabulary, understanding grammatical rules, and so on. This is the domain of teaching methodology: Chapter 9 groups techniques into six main teaching styles. We need at least to make certain which combination of the four skills is being employed in the technique.

But learning takes place inside the students' minds. In the privacy of their minds, they may be attempting something quite different from what their teachers have planned: they may have switched off entirely; they may be utilizing powerful learning processes that are invisible to the teacher; they may be adopting all sorts of learning strategies, as described in Chapter 5. Teachers need to see how the materials make the students' minds work and how deeply they involve their emotions, without implying that depth is necessarily either a good or a bad thing.

This is, then, the area that most of this book is concerned with – how our teaching activities link to the processes going on in the students' minds. Successful teaching techniques have to suit the particular students who are being taught and their teachers, the particular educational context in which they are placed, and above all the processes in the students' minds through which they are acquiring a new language.

1.4 *What a teacher can expect from SLA research*

Let us take three examples of the contribution SLA research can make to language teaching: understanding the students' contribution to learning, understanding how teaching techniques and methods work, and understanding the overall goals of language teaching.

Understanding the students' contribution to learning

All successful teaching depends upon learning; there is no point in providing entertaining, lively, well-constructed language lessons if students do not learn from them. The proof of the teaching is in the learning. One crucial factor in L2 learning is what the students bring with them into the classroom. With the exception of young bilingual children, L2 learners have fully formed personalities and minds when they start learning the second language, and these have profound effects on their ways of learning and on how successful they are. SLA research, for example, has established that the students' diverse motivations for learning the second language affect them powerfully, as we see in Chapter 5. Some students see learning the second language as extending the repertoire of what they can do, others see it as a threat.

The different ways in which students tackle learning also affect their success. What is happening in the class is not equally productive for all the students because their minds work in different ways. The differences between individuals do not disappear when they come in through the classroom door. Students base what they do on their previous experience of learning and using language. They do not start from scratch without any background or predisposition to learn language in one way or another. Students also have much in common by virtue of possessing the same human minds. For instance, SLA research predicts that however advanced they are, students will find that their memory works less well in the new language, whether they are trying to remember a phone number or the contents of an article, as discussed in Chapter 4. SLA research helps in understanding how apparently similar students react differently to the same teaching technique, while revealing the problems that all students share.

Understanding how teaching methods and techniques work

Teaching methods usually incorporate a view of L2 learning, whether implicitly or explicitly. Grammar–translation teaching, for example, emphasizes explanations of grammatical points because this fits in with its view that L2 learning is the acquisition of conscious knowledge. Communicative teaching methods require the students to talk to each other because they see L2 learning as growing out of the give-and-take of communication. For the most part, teaching methods have developed these ideas of learning independently from

SLA research. They are not based, say, on research into how learners use grammatical explanations or how they learn by talking to each other. More information about how learners actually learn helps the teacher to make any method more effective and can put the teacher's hunches on a firmer basis.

The reasons why a teaching technique works or does not work depend on many factors. A teacher who wants to use a particular technique will benefit by knowing what it implies in terms of language learning and language processing, the type of student for whom it is most appropriate, and the ways in which it fits into the classroom situation. Suppose the teacher wants to use a task in which the students spontaneously exchange information. This implies that students are learning by communicating, that they are prepared to speak out in the classroom and that the educational context allows for learning from fellow students rather than from the teacher alone. SLA research has something to say about all of these, as we shall see.

Understanding the overall goals of language teaching

The reasons why the second language is being taught depend upon overall educational goals, which vary from one country to another and from one period to another. One avowed goal of language teaching is to help people to think better – brain-training and logical thinking; another is appreciation of serious literature; another the student's increased self-awareness and maturity; another the appreciation of other cultures and races; another communication with people in other countries, and so on. Many of these have been explored in particular SLA research. For example, the goal of brain-training is supported by evidence that people who know two languages think more flexibly than monolinguals (Landry, 1974). This information is vital when considering the viability and implementation of communicative goals for a particular group of students. SLA research can help define the goals of language teaching, assess how achievable they may be, and contribute to their achievement. These issues are discussed in Chapter 7.

SLA research is a scientific discipline that tries to describe how people learn and use another language. It cannot decide issues that are outside its domain. While it may contribute to the understanding of teaching goals, it is itself neutral between them. It is not for the teacher, the methodologist, or any other outsider to dictate whether a language should be taught for communication, for brain-training, or whatever, but for the society or the individual student to decide. One country specifies that groupwork must be used in the classroom because it encourages democracy. Another bans any reference to English-speaking culture in textbooks because English is for international communication rather than for developing relationships with Britain or the USA. A third sees language teaching as a way of developing honesty and the values of good citizenship; a plenary speaker at a TESOL conference in New York proclaimed that the purpose of TESOL was to create good American citizens.