

Second Language Acquisition

An Introductory Course

Third edition

**Susan M. Gass and
Larry Selinker**

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

An introductory course

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Praise for the Third Edition:

"A tour de force. The authors have taken the best text available for an introductory course in second language acquisition (SLA) and made it even stronger. . . . The improvements in the third edition are palpable from the very beginning of the text. . . . The third edition of *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* should form the basis for any introduction to SLA, at either the graduate or undergraduate level."

—Fred Eckman, Center for the Advanced Study of Language,
University of Maryland

"This text presents a comprehensive overview of SLA in an accessible, highly readable manner appropriate for readers new to this discipline. . . . The new edition includes even more data samples than the previous edition, both integrated into the main text and in the discussion questions at the end of each chapter."

—Deborah Pilcher, Gallaudet University

"*Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* presents the most balanced, grounded, and accessible introduction to a broad field. The field has grown rapidly since publication of the second edition in 2001, and a new, updated, and expanded edition is most welcome. [T]he third edition . . . make[s] this breadth of knowledge accessible to students with little background in the feeder disciplines . . . *Second Language Acquisition* has now become a living standard in our field."

—Richard Young, Professor of English Linguistics,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

About the Authors:

Susan M. Gass is University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages at Michigan State University. She has conducted research in a wide variety of sub-areas of second language acquisition, including language transfer, language universals, second language research methods, and input and interaction. She is the author/editor of numerous books, has served as the President of the American Association for Applied Linguistics and is the current president of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA).

Larry Selinker is one of the original contributors to the research field of second language acquisition, having introduced the concepts "interlanguage" and "fossilization," and having conducted one of the first empirical studies in "language transfer" research in 1969. He is now preparing a 40-plus year fossilization study on participants first looked at in 1964. He has held professorships at the Universities of Michigan and London and visiting professorships at various universities around the world. Currently, he is Visiting Professor at New York University and is helping to organize Research Production Associates.

To Gertrude Zemon-Gass and H. Harvey Gass, who instilled
in me the love of inquiry

To my parents, Sol and Miriam Selinker, who inspired me
deeply and whom I miss very much

PREFACE

This is a book about second language acquisition. As such, it deals with the ways in which second languages are learned. We take a multidisciplinary approach in that what we have selected to present in this book represents research emanating from other well-established disciplines. The content of the book is limited, for the most part, to a discussion of adult second language acquisition, although we have included in this third edition information about child language acquisition, both first and second. This is intended to serve as background information.

This book is the third edition of a book originally published in 1994. The field has shown considerable growth, which is reflected in this edition. This book has been updated, and rearranged; new sections have been added and in some cases rewritten, and new chapters have been added as well.

The book is designed to be used in an introductory course for undergraduate or graduate students. The goal is to make the information contained herein available to students with a wide variety of background knowledge. The book can be used with those with a background in languages and/or linguistics and those with little or no background in these areas. The book developed out of our belief that the complexities of the field can and should be brought to the attention of many students, both those who are intending to delve further into the field and those who are only curious about the pervasive phenomenon of learning a second language.

The field of second language acquisition is one about which everyone seems to have an opinion. Even a casual airplane conversation with a seatmate, during which we are asked what we do, always elicits opinions about second language acquisition, some of which are accurate, some of which are not. It is our intent to help set the record straight on this complex research area.

The field of second language learning is old and new at the same time. It is old in the sense that scholars for centuries have been fascinated by the questions posed by the nature of foreign language learning and

language teaching. It is new in the sense that the field, as it is now represented, only goes back about 40 years. In the earlier part of the modern phase, most scholarly articles emphasized language teaching and only had a secondary interest in language learning. In other words, the impetus for studying second language learning was derived from pedagogical concerns.

In the past 30–40 years, the field of second language acquisition has developed into an independent and autonomous discipline, complete with its own research agenda. In addition, we have witnessed an increase in the number of conferences (of both a general and a topical nature) dealing exclusively with second language acquisition as well as special sessions on second language acquisition as part of larger conferences. Furthermore, the field now has journals devoted exclusively to research in the field (*Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Language Learning*, *Second Language Research*) as well as others in which reports of second language studies comprise a major part (e.g., *Applied Linguistics*, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *The Modern Language Journal*). Finally, there are now numerous edited volumes dealing with subareas of the field (e.g., language transfer, language input, language variation, Universal Grammar, Critical Period) and in recent years entire books concerned with subareas of the field as well as numerous texts dealing with research methodologies. In this book we present the old and the new as a way of helping the reader understand some of the history of the field and how we got to where we are today.

What is particularly noteworthy about the field of second language acquisition is its interdisciplinary character. Second language research is concerned with the general question: How are second languages learned? Scholars approach the field from a wide range of backgrounds: sociology, psychology, education, and linguistics, to name a few. This has both positive and negative effects on the field. The advantage is that through the multiplicity of perspectives, we are able to see a richer picture of acquisition, a picture that appears to be more representative of the phenomenon of acquisition in that learning a second language undoubtedly involves factors relating to sociology, psychology, education, and linguistics. On the other hand, multiple perspectives on what purports to be a single discipline bring confusion, because it is frequently the case that scholars approaching second language acquisition from different (often opposing and seemingly incompatible) frameworks are not able to talk to one another. This is so because each perspective brings with it its own way of approaching data and its own research methodology. This book attempts to bring together these disparate threads, to place them within a coherent framework, and importantly, to make the field accessible to large numbers of students.

There are many people to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. Primary

among them is Josh Ard, who has been instrumental in many areas of the book. Josh provided detailed information on some of the original chapters. Through discussions with him, we were able to better determine what was relevant and what was not. Furthermore, he provided valuable clues as to what was involved in writing an introductory textbook whose goal was in part to “normalize” the field and make it informative and interesting to novices. His reading of the text many times over led to minor and major changes throughout. Robin Roots also read the entire third edition for content and for style. Jennifer Behney read and commented on all aspects of this edition. She provided insightful comments and prevented us from making some embarrassing mistakes.

Specific colleagues in the field provided detailed comments on earlier editions and completed surveys which helped us figure out where we could be clearer, where we needed to add parts, and where we needed to delete sections from earlier editions. We are grateful to all of them for their feedback. Bill VanPatten read this manuscript and made us see more clearly how we could organize and portray some of the research presented. Alison Mackey read the entire manuscript and many times made us rethink our conclusions and suggested more research for us to look at. Her comments were detailed and insightful. In expressing our gratitude to these individuals, we wish that we could also blame them for any errors (factual or interpretive) in this book. Alas, scholarly ethics do not allow us this luxury and we accept all errors as our own.

Our colleagues and friends in the field deserve special mention. Although they have not all read the manuscript and may not all approve of the conclusions drawn from their writings, they have all been influential in our thinking and our development as researchers in the field. They are too numerous to mention, but they know who they are and we thank them. Colleagues at Michigan State University have taught from this book and have helped us see where we could improve areas. A hearty thank you to them. In preparing for this third edition, Cathleen Petree, our editor from Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and now with Taylor and Francis, solicited opinions and feedback from prior users. In most cases we do not know who these individuals are, but we hope that you will see your excellent suggestions reflected in these new pages. Even though you are anonymous to us, we hope you accept this expression of gratitude. And many thanks to Cathleen for urging us to do this third edition. We know that she had expected this manuscript earlier and we are fortunate that she has been so patient.

A final group to be thanked consists of our students over the years. In our own introductory courses we have tried and tested this material numerous times. Our students have not hesitated to let us know when material was unclear and when some revision was necessary. Again, there are too many to thank personally, but they are out there somewhere,

possibly teaching courses in second language acquisition. We hope that they have benefited from the material contained in those courses as much as we benefited from their feedback.

To you, the student, who will make use of the book, we have provided you with a summary of what is known today in the field of second language acquisition. We hope that this book is but the beginning of a deeper quest into the nature of the learning process. We hope that your interest will be piqued by the text itself, but equally important is the emphasis we have placed on the follow-up activities for each chapter. It is our belief that working with structured data is as valuable as reading summaries of what is known. These problems allow students to gain firsthand knowledge of what learners do and do not produce. We have found that hands-on experience is integral to the entire learning process. We have indicated in the text where we feel the accompanying workbook (*Second Language Learning: Data Analysis*—see Gass, Sorace, and Selinker, 1999) will be useful. The data sets contained in this workbook help guide students into seeing the data from the perspective of the learner, rather than from the perspective of the analyst.

The subtitle of this book is *An Introductory Course*. It is well-known in second language acquisition circles that a truly introductory treatment of our field is difficult to achieve. We have tried hard and hope that we have been successful in our endeavor and that we have succeeded in making the subject matter relevant to a wide range of students.

Susan Gass
Williamston, Michigan
June 19, 2007

Larry Selinker
New York, New York

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 The study of second language acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a relatively young field. We would be hard-pressed to state a “beginning” date, but it is probably fair to say that the study of SLA has expanded and developed significantly in the past 40–45 years. This is not to say that there wasn’t interest in the fields of language teaching and learning before then, for surely there was. It is to say, however, that since that time the body of knowledge of the field has seen increased sophistication.

We are far from a complete theory of SLA, but there is progress. By approaching SLA from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, as we will see in this chapter and in the remainder of this book, we have come a long way from pure descriptive studies to research that connects with other disciplines.

What is the scope of SLA? What does the study of SLA consist of? It is the study of how second languages are learned. In other words, it is the study of the acquisition of a non-primary language; that is, the acquisition of a language beyond the native language. It is the study of how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language. It is the study of what is learned of a second language and what is not learned; it is the study of why most second language learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language; it is also the study of why only some learners appear to achieve native-like proficiency in more than one language. Additionally, second language acquisition is concerned with the nature of the hypotheses (whether conscious or unconscious) that learners come up with regarding the rules of the second language. Are the rules like those of the native language? Are they like the rules of the language being learned? Are there new rules, like neither language, being formed? Are there patterns that are common to all learners regardless of the native language and regardless of the language being learned? Do the rules created by second language learners vary