

Topics in Applied Psycholinguistics



# Second Language Acquisition

AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

SUSAN M. GASS  
LARRY SELINKER

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# **SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

## **AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

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**AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

## **Topics in Applied Psycholinguistics**

Sheldon Rosenberg, Series Editor

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**Rosenberg/Abbeduto:** Language and Communication in Mental  
Retardation: Development, Processes, and Intervention

**Gass/Selinker:** Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course

## 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. This is done largely out of the need to impose limits on the content as well as our own particular research interests.

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. For instance, 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 30–40 years. In the earlier part of the modern phase, most scholarly articles emphasized language teaching and only had a secondary interest in language learning. That is, the impetus for studying language learning was derived from pedagogical concerns.

In the past 20 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*). Finally, there are now numerous edited volumes dealing with subareas of the field (e.g., language transfer, language input, language variation) and in recent years entire books concerned with subareas of the field (e.g., McLaughlin, 1987; Preston, 1989; Tarone, 1988; White, 1989).

What is particularly noteworthy about the field of second language acquisition is its interdisciplinary character. Whereas it is the case that second language research is concerned with the general question: How are second languages learned?, it is also the case that scholars approach the field from a wide range of backgrounds: for example, sociology, psychology, education, and linguistics. This has both positive and negative effects on the field. The advantage is that through the multiplicity of perspectives, we are able to get a richer picture of acquisition, a picture that appears to be more representative of the phenomenon of acquisition because 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) 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 are Josh Ard and India Plough. Both have been instrumental in many areas of the book. Josh provided detailed information on some of the 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. India also read the entire manuscript numerous times for content and for style. With every chapter she had insightful comments and was unafraid to tell us when something was not clear or just plain wrong. We also thank Catherine Pettinari for her careful reading of the final text. Finally, Shaw Gynan field tested the book; his comments from his perspective and from his students' perspective led to significant revisions and clarifications. 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, unwillingly, 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 respective writings, they have all been influential in our own thinking and our own development as researchers in the field. They are too numerous to mention, but they know who they are and we thank them.

Sheldon Rosenberg, the editor of the series, provided insightful comments on an earlier draft. We are appreciative of his remarks and know that they have helped improve this book. Judith Amsel and the staff at Lawrence Erlbaum have been a pleasure to work with. Their efficiency is to be commended and their patience through all phases of this project are greatly appreciated.

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. Furthermore, these data sets 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

—Larry Selinker

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## CHAPTER

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1. THE STUDY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

What is the study of second language acquisition? It is the study of how second languages are learned. 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 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 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 according to the context of use? Given these varied questions, the study of second language acquisition impacts on and draws from many other areas of study, among them linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and education, to name a few.

Given the close relationship between second language acquisition and other areas of inquiry, there are numerous approaches from which to examine second language data, each of which brings to the study of second language

acquisition its own goals, its own data-collection methods, and its own analytic tools. Thus, second language acquisition is truly an interdisciplinary field. This introductory text attempts to shed light on the nature of second language acquisition from multiple perspectives.

One way to define second language acquisition is to state what it is not. Over the years, the study of second language acquisition has become inextricably intertwined with language pedagogy; in this text, one goal is to disentangle the two fields. Second language acquisition is not about pedagogy unless the pedagogy affects the course of acquisition. Whereas it may be the case that those who are interested in learning about how second languages are learned are ultimately interested in doing so for the light this knowledge sheds on the field of language teaching, this is not the only reason why second language acquisition is of interest, nor is it the major reason why scholars in the field of second language acquisition conduct their research.

Let us briefly consider some of the reasons it might be important for us to understand how second languages are learned.

*Linguistics:* "When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to [humans]" (Chomsky, 1968, p. 100).

The study of how second languages are learned is part of the broader study of language and language behavior. It is no more central nor peripheral than any other part of linguistic study, which in turn has as its larger goal the study of the nature of the human mind. In fact, a major goal of second language acquisition research is the determination of linguistic constraints on the formation of second language grammars. Because theories of language are concerned with human language knowledge, one can reasonably assume that this knowledge is not limited to first language knowledge and that linguistic principles reflect the possibilities of human language creation and the limits of human language variation. This scope of inquiry includes second languages.

*Language Pedagogy:* Most graduate programs whose goal is to train students in language teaching have required course work in second language acquisition. Why should this be the case? If one is to develop language-teaching methodologies, there has to be a firm basis for those methodologies in language learning. It would be counterproductive to base language-teaching methodologies on something other than an understanding of how language learning does and does not take place. As an example, some language-teaching methodologies are based exclusively on rule memorization and translation exercises. That is, a student in a language class is expected to memorize rules and then translate sentences from the native language to the language being learned and vice versa. However, studies



in second language acquisition have made language teachers and curriculum designers aware that language learning consists of more than rule memorization. More important, perhaps, it involves learning to express communicative needs. The details of this new conceptualization of what language learning is about has resulted in methodologies that emphasize communication. In other words, pedagogical decision making must reflect what is known about the process of learning, which is the domain of second language acquisition.

A second rationale for studying second language acquisition has to do with the expectations teachers have of their students. Let's assume that a teacher spends a class hour drilling students on a particular grammatical structure. Let's further assume that the students are all producing the structure correctly and even in an appropriate context. If, after the class is over and the drill is finished, a student comes up to the teacher and uses the incorrect form in spontaneous speech, what should the teacher think? Has the lesson been a waste of time? Or, is this type of linguistic behavior to be expected? If a student produces a correct *form*, does that necessarily mean that the student has learned the correct *rule*? These sorts of issues are part of what a teacher needs to be aware of when assessing the success or failure of his or her teaching.

*Cross-cultural Communication:* We have noted some expectations that teachers have about students. Similarly, in interactions with speakers of another language/culture, we often produce stereotyped reactions. For example, we may find ourselves making judgments about other people based on their language. It turns out that many stereotypes of people from other cultures (e.g., rudeness, unassertiveness, etc.) are based on patterns of nonnative speech. These judgments in many instances are not justified, because many of the speech patterns that nonnative speakers use reflect their nonnativeness rather than characteristics of their personality. It is our view that understanding second language acquisition and how nonnatives speak allows us to separate issues of cross-cultural communication involving nonnative speech from stereotyped behavior.

*Language Policy and Language Planning:* Many issues of language policy are dependent on a knowledge of how second languages are learned. For example, issues surrounding bilingualism, such as the English Only Movement in the United States, or bilingual education (including immersion programs) can only be debated if one is properly informed about the realities of learning a second language. National language programs often involve decision making that is dependent on (1) information about second language learning, (2) the kinds of instruction that can be brought to bear on issues of acquisition, and (3) the realities and expectations one can have