

*Introducing Second
Language Acquisition*

第二语言习得研究

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PREFACE

This book grew out of the course material on second language acquisition (SLA) for preservice and inservice teachers of English. It aims at introducing this exciting and rapidly developing field of research, helping teachers understand principles and processes of second language learning.

In the process of teaching this course, the author became all the more convinced that learners are the determining factor in the acquisition of a second language. As teachers, we can select learning materials, decide teaching methods, and design language learning activities, but we cannot guarantee that students learn. SLA informs us of the factors and processes that promote learning.

The ideas presented are taken from various leading researchers and authors in the field of SLA. The extensive bibliography at the back of the book shows that a tremendous amount of literature has accumulated over the years, and also through these works the author wishes to acknowledge their original ideas and fruitful research in the field. Because of the basic purpose of this book is for teachers,

who has a lot of experience but little theory, not much of theorizing or theoretical contents are included. It is meant to be practical useful and insightful. What we Chinese teachers can do is to learn about these researches and attest the theories of SLA in the Chinese setting, and perhaps we can also contribute our own understanding to the field of SLA.

The book can be used for individual reading, and also for group discussion in classrooms. The tasks and topics for thinking and discussion are just for those purposes. After each chapter there is a reading passage of original writing on a relevant to the topic in the chapter. Questionnaires in Appendixes II and III can be used for individual research. A most comprehensive theoretical model of SLA is presented for reference. It is realized that it is not a most ideal model and very controversial at that. However, it is a one that is most accessible to us and comprehensible for practical classroom teachers. The bibliography is not meant to be exhaustive but representative of the topics covered in the book.

The author wants to take this opportunity to thank many people who help make this book possible. First of all, special thanks go to Ma Rong, whose faith and love are most indispensable; and to Lin Guancong, whose independence and self-management has guaranteed the author lots

of valuable time for writing.

English Department, Capital Normal University, has given the author the chance to teach courses on SLA; the participants' have responded encouragingly __ for these the author is most grateful. Last but not least, the author feel most obliged to Gao Ling and Li Xiaoru, whose many - sided assistance makes this book a reality.

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CONTENTS

Preface	
1 Introduction	1
2 The role of the first language in the second language acquisition	18
3 Error analysis	34
4 Interlanguage analysis	55
5 L1 = L2 acquisition hypothesis	75
6 Input in second language acquisition	90
7 Age in second language acquisition - critical period hypothesis	105
8 Attitudes and motivation in SLA	115
9 Intelligence and aptitude in SLA	124
10 Personality in SLA	135
11 Cognitive style in SLA	146
12 Strategies in SLA	157
13 Production process	166
14 Communication strategies in SLA	174
Appendix 1 The theoretical model: five hypothesis	190
Appendix 2 Strategy inventory for language learning	207
Appendix 3 Learning style questionnaire	211
Glossary	219
Bibliography	226

1 INTRODUCTION

...Chomsky's thesis that the human brain is more than just a receptacle that parents and teachers fill with phrases and sentences.

—W. Klein

WHAT IS SLA?

Second language acquisition is an independent and autonomous research field. It studies the ways in which second languages are learned. It is true that "Different learners in different situations learn a second language in different ways." However, as a research field, developed since 1970's, second language acquisition (SLA) aims to uncover some general principles governing second language (L2) learning process. Therefore, it is assumed that some aspects of the process are somehow universal and generalizable to all learners.

TASK 1 Think about a most crucial factor in L2 learning. Compare yours with other course members.

SLA is a complex process wherein learners learn an additional language after they have mastered their first language. Brown (1987: 1) put it this way, "Second language learning is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit. No one can tell you how to learn a foreign language without really trying." In the process, learners learn all areas of language, sound patterns, word formation, structures of sentence, as well as word-, sentence-, and speaker-meaning and taking part in conversation successfully.

SLA is a multidisciplinary field. This interdisciplinary nature makes it both fruitful and potentially confusing. Because through a multidisciplinary perspective, one gets a clearer picture of SLA. "How are second languages learned" can be answered sociologically, psychologically, linguistically, as well as educationally. Related fields provide insights into the process of SLA. Multiple perspectives bring different approaches, theories and methodologies to the study. The conclusion resulted from it can be hard to interpret and may be confusing.

Gass and Selinker (1994) describe the SLA in this way, "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 profi-

ciency in more than one language.”

We have said what SLA is. Now let us add what SLA is not. It is not about language pedagogy, that is, how to teach second languages. It is not focused on the teaching aspect of second languages but on the learning aspect, on the learning processes and on a the learner.

SLA is a cover term which includes both second and foreign language learning, i. e. L2 learned in a naturalistic and classroom settings. What learners do in these settings and why they do it are windows through which the learners' internalized rule system can hopefully be determined. Yet, SLA is still a young academic subject (about 30 - 40 years old), and has many problems to be solved and many things about it to be explained.

What SLA aims to do? A good SLA theory should be able to explain five observable L2 behaviors (Towell & Hawkins 1994). They are: transfer of grammatical properties from the L1 grammar to the L2 grammar; staged development in SLA; systematicity across L2 learners; variability in learners performance; and incompleteness of TL knowledge for most learners.

TASK 2 Make a list of questions you frequently ask yourself or your colleagues, which you concern greatly in your teaching.

WHY SLA ?

SLA is a fascinating field. It helps us understand how we learn second languages. SLA provides us with insight as for how to teach second languages. It can be argued that before we teach second languages we should be equipped with knowledge of SLA. It would be illogical to decide how to teach second languages before we know how second languages are learned. It is like putting a horse before the cart; however, traditionally, teachers decide the content, structure and methodology of teaching. The success of their teaching can only be and will remain to be a matter of practical experience, of individual pedagogical talents or of pure luck, until we know more about the principles of SLA – of how learners go about language learning, what they do about available linguistic data, what strategies they use, and so on. In a word, this is to focus on the learning or to “look at the teaching process as the facilitation of learning”.

In the 1960s and 1970s, L2 teaching drew largely on linguistics for information, as to what it is we teach and what is easy or difficult to teach. Since 1970s, linguistics, as a source discipline for L2 learning, has been replaced by SLA. The questions teachers think about also changed from “What is it we have to teach?” to “What are the conditions that facilitate and promote SLA in a classroom” and “How can we bring about those conditions in our classrooms”.

TASK 3 Engage your students in a free talk or free writing, record what they produce and bring it to the class for discussion and analysis.

It is true that all teachers have a theory of language learning, explicit or implicit, which however, bases on either experience or intuition. The problem of such a theory or rather ideas about language teaching is how well they can match the process learner actually go through in language learning.

Thus, the study of SLA is recognized as an important and rewarding enterprise which provides teachers with scientific perspective, and helps teachers to teach L2 to its best effect. Brown (1987:7) states, "Your understanding of how the learner learns will determine your philosophy of education, your teaching style, your approach, methods, and classroom techniques".

Millions of Chinese learn a second language; yet hundreds of thousands of them fail. What is the cause? The teacher? The textbook? Neither seems to be the cause. The method? Classroom research shows that whatever methods a teacher uses, students learn, and they learn not necessarily what the teacher has taught in class. "... ultimately, what is learned is controlled by the learner and not the teacher, not the textbooks, not the syllabus" (Ellis 1993). This revelation makes it more urgent to shift our attention from the teaching aspect to learning aspect. SLA is such an endeavor – focus on learners.

TASK 4 Think about and discuss the method(s) you are currently using in your teaching and explain why you chose it(them).

BIRTH AND GROWTH OF SLA?

Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) revolutionized the way people look at language learning. Before it, behaviorist learning theory dominated the field of language teaching; and imitation, memorization, reinforcement were the key concepts. Chomsky argued that these concepts could not adequately explain human language learning and what is central is a language-specific "mental structure" (LAD, Language Acquisition Device), which is innate.

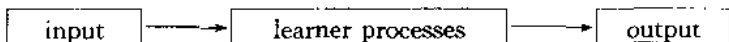
Inspired by Chomsky's view, a great deal of psycholinguistic research began, particularly research in L1. Therefore, SLA studies, in many ways, followed the theory and methodology of L1 research.

The findings of Brown (1973, order of morphemes is not related to how often they hear them, nor to the rewarding of saying them), Slobin (1971, learners learn Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian markers after nouns and verbs first; then markers before them) and of many others caught the attention of L2 teachers and teacher trainers. They realized they had known too little about L2 learning and they need to catch up. Thus, in the late sixties, they began to look at the learners' speech and written compositions. And now we have a large body of information about factors that influence language learning.

Many journals dealing exclusively with SLA appeared, such as, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Language Learning*, *Second Language Research*. Many articles and books published on such areas of SLA as, language transfer, language input, language

variation, language learning strategy, and age factor in SLA.

TASK 5 In the language learning process, people identify three processes:



Which of these processes do you think, as a language teacher, that you can control, and what you should control in the teaching of a language?

Questions/topics for thinking and discussion: (for these questions you needn't definite answers at this stage. Just think about them.)

- 1 Suppose you are a survivor of an air crash. You landed in an isolated area where people are very friendly and accepting you. You know there is no way whatsoever to get out of this human settlement because of natural barriers. It is a good idea to learn the language of these people to continue your new life there. What are some of the main factors controlling your language learning process?
- 2 It is reported that a normal hearing son of deaf parents exposed to TV and radio program didn't acquire an ability to speak or understand English. Why not?
- 3 Is there a best personality trait for language learning?

- 4 What's the best age for L2 learning, if there any?
- 5 Think and talk about the so-called Joseph Conrad phenomenon. Joseph Conrad, an established English language writer, whose novels have become classics of English literature, but whose spoken English retained strong Polish accent. How this came to be?
- 6 What is the best environment for L2 learning, if there is any?
- 7 Should a teacher force learners to speak English from the very first day of English class?
- 8 Does correction of students' grammatical errors help them improve?
- 9 How much does L1 affect L2?
10. A 19th-century British explorer claimed to speak more than 40 languages. This was how he did it. "First he bought a simple grammar and vocabulary and underlined the words and rules he felt should be remembered. Putting these books in his pocket, he studied them at every spare moment during the day, never working more than fifteen minutes at a time. By this method he was able to learn 300 words a week. When he acquired a basic vocabulary, he chose a simple story book and read it, marking with a pencil any new words he wanted to remember and going over these at least once a day. Then he

went on to a more difficult book, at the same time learning the finer points of the grammar . . . When native teachers were available, he claimed that he always learned the 'swear words' first and laughingly said that after that the rest of the language was easy." How do you compare your learning with this explorer?

11. What is the relationship between second language acquisition and second language pedagogy?
12. Discuss the distinction between second language acquisition and second language learning?

TALKING ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING

In language teaching we use such terms as “second language”, “foreign language”, “bilingualism”, “language learning”, and “language acquisition”. One would assume that as a language-conscious profession we had our own house in good order and would use terms which are neatly defined and totally unambiguous. But far from it. The ironic fact is that the terminology we need in language pedagogy is often ambiguous and sometimes downright confusing. We must from the outset be alert to this source of possible misunderstanding and try to minimize it by explaining the terms we use. We can at this point only illustrate the problem of terminology by discussing terms which are of critical importance throughout this book: “second”, or “foreign language”, “bilingualism”, “teaching”, and “learning”.

Second Language

We start from the common-sense distinction between “mother tongue” or “native language” and “second language” or “foreign language”. At a more technical level we also find for the first two the terms “primary language” and “L1” and for the second two “secondary language” and “L2”. We can tabulate the two sets of terms as follows: