

Second Language Acquisition: Issues and Implications

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The study of SLA is still in its infancy and there are still more questions than answers (Rod Ellis)

Abstract: *This paper tries to cover some basic issues related to second language acquisition and examines the process of learning and using a second language. The affective factors that underlie language learning and use will be introduced and relevant research findings will be presented. It also aims at understanding of the principles and processes that govern second language learning and use and how should that serve as the background for reflective teaching practice.*

Key words: *SLA, approaches, learning*

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is relatively young field as it only goes back about 40-50 years. As stated by Gass (2008), it has developed into an independent discipline, complete with its own research agenda. This can be reflected in the increase of conferences number, the 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 (Applied Linguistics and The Modern Language Journal). Furthermore, there are many edited volumes dealing with subareas of the field (eg. Language transfer, language input, language variation, Universal Grammar, Critical Period, etc.). The adoption of an inter-disciplinary approach led scholars to approach the field from a wide range of backgrounds, i.e. sociology, psychology, education, and linguistics. This reflects the complex nature of adult language learning and use. The content of the paper is limited to a discussion of adult second language acquisition to a great extent. The topics investigated in the present paper include:

1. Brief historical background
2. Approaches to SLA
3. Implications from the various perspectives on L2 acquisition

Brief Historical Background

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a relatively young field. In fact, it is hard 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 50 years. It can be assumed that the field had its antecedents in the foundational texts published during the middle of the previous century (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957; Skinner, 1957, and Weinreich, 1953 cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2007). These texts brought together a coherent theory of language (Structural Linguistics) and a theory of learning (Behaviourist Psychology), and reflected a renewed interest in teaching and learning at the same time. Two years after Skinner published his theory of operant conditioning Chomsky (1959) countered with his attack on behaviourism and presented his own form of linguistics claiming that at a deep level all languages shared the same properties. In addition, Chomskyan linguistics introduced the notion that developing language of the child was systematic from the start due to the presence of an innate universal grammar and was not just a reflection of the linguistic input to which he or she had been exposed to (Selinker, 1972).

The claims were represented in the literature of second language in a seminal article by Corder (1967). Corder (1967) argued that language learners' errors were not a reflex of the native language (L1), but rather were reflective of the learners' underlying L2 competence. This perception was later extended in the claim that learners were actively involved in constructing a system out of the linguistic input to which they had been exposed, a linguistic system variously called an *idiosyncratic dialect* by Corder (1967), an *approximative system* by Nemser(1972), and an *interlanguage* by Selinker(1972). All of them highlighted the position that learners' language was a linguistic system in its own right, replace with forms that indicated that learners were applying cognitive strategies to the language learning task. These strategies resulted in, for example, overgeneralization errors, which were taken to be evidence of an attempt by learners to construct the rules of the target language. Furthermore, they adapted a target–language centered perspective suggesting that the learners went through successive stages of learning usually taken to be the standard dialect of educated native speakers. Thus, language acquisition was not seen as a product of habit formation as the behaviourists had been claiming before the publication of Corder's article.

The development in linguistics, psychology, and L1 acquisition research and the shift in awareness contributed by SLA pioneers led to the liberation of the field from the bondage of behaviourism. Language learners were seen as cognitive beings, much more actively involved in the construction of their L2 knowledge. Owing to the pedigree of the SLA field, it was not surprising that a great deal of attention was given to the learners' developing morphosyntactic system. This attention was perhaps most obvious in the early SLA research with the morpheme acquisition studies (Bailey, Madden, & Krashen, 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Larsen-Freeman, 1975 cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2007).

It was then 30 years after the birth of a cognitively oriented approach to SLA that Firth and Wagner presented their 1996 paper calling for an enlargement of the parameters of the field to include a social and contextual orientation to language. The publication of their article in 1997 has generated an extensive debate and discussion during the last 10 years. Finally, since the emergence of the field, there have been several approaches to SLA and each of them has its characteristic features. These approaches will be discussed in brief later. Ellis (1992) states that it is possible to identify three broad trends in the development of SLA research over the last 20 or so years:

- (1) a general move from description to explanation of L2 acquisition,
- (2) the widening of the frame of reference from the study of how learners acquire grammatical competence to how they acquire a knowledge of the pragmatic rules of an L2, and
- (3) the establishment of SLA as a relatively autonomous subdiscipline of applied linguistics and a concurrent lessening of interest in its application to language teaching.

Approaches to SLA

According to Towell and Hawkins (1994), there have been a number of approaches adopted by researchers in SLA towards explaining such phenomena. These approaches fall into three broad categories: linguistic approaches, sociolinguistic approaches, and psychological or cognitive approaches.

Linguistic approaches to the nature of SLA are of a single broad type: they assume that infants are born with a 'language faculty' which equips them with biologically determined grammatical tools for the task of acquiring, natively, the language that is spoken around them. In SLA this language faculty has undergone some structural changes with the course of time, either as the result of the general biological development of the individual ('maturation'), or as the result of an L1 having been acquired. These structural changes which take place in the mental language faculty are what lead to differences between L2 and L1 acquisition.

Sociolinguistic approaches have been concerned with at least two issues: one is the attitudes which L2 learners have towards the L2, the people who speak it, or the culture with which the language is associated. Whether those attitudes are positive or negative may be involved in determining a learner's motivation to learn the L2, and indirectly influence the nature of SLA itself. The second issue is the effect that the context in which the learner encounters or uses the L2 has on the process of acquisition.

Psychological or cognitive approaches have also been concerned with at least two issues: one is the general cognitive maturity of L2 learners as compared with L1 learners. L1 learners acquire knowledge of language and knowledge of the world simultaneously, whereas L2 learners already know quite a lot about the world when they come to the task of SLA. The second issue is the nature of the mental devices

which comprehend, store and produce language, and how this might be related to the way that L1 and L2 learners acquire particular languages.

The linguistic approaches to second language acquisition include:

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is a result of the meeting of behaviourist psychology and structural linguistics. It assumed that language acquisition involved the formation of a set of habits. In the case of SLA, habits formed in the L1 would initially be transferred into the L2. The purpose of contrastive analysis was to compare the structure of languages and to state the differences and use methods of reinforcement and reward to change those habits in the L2.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

The failure of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to predict a number of observations in SLA led to a shift in perspective on the part of researchers in the late 1960s and early 1970s from a primary interest in transfer to a primary interest in staged development and cross-learner systematicity. This shift in perspective was signaled in two landmark papers of the period, one by Corder (1967) and the other by Selinker (1972). This shift has been reflected in the emergence of:

a) Morpheme Studies

The interest in the new shift in perspective is clearly reflected in the many studies (Dulay & Burt, 1973; 1974; Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974; Brown, 1973; Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974; Ravem, 1974; Cazden, Cancino, Rosanksy & Schumann, 1975; Wode, 1976 cited in Towell & Hawkin, 1994).

b) Krashen's Five Hypotheses

Krashen(1981) formulates five key hypotheses about second language acquisition:

1. The acquisition-learning distinction
2. The natural order hypothesis
3. The monitor hypothesis
4. The input hypothesis
5. The affective filter hypothesis

The second approach, the sociolinguistic approach, emphasizing the role of learners' attitude on the one hand and the learning context on the other hand can

be represented by the following approaches;

a) Tarone's Approach

Tarone (1988) argues that L2 learners acquire a 'capability continuum' of styles ranging from the 'vernacular' to the more attention-demanding 'careful' style. In production, different conditions of use will induce in the learner different degrees of attention to linguistic form, resulting in the accessing of different styles. This will create the impression of variability in an L2 learner's use of the L2. Styles towards the careful end of the continuum are more target-like than those towards the vernacular end, but they are internally less consistent. Development over time occurs because new forms may enter any one of the 'styles', and spread from there into the other 'styles'.

b) Ellis's Approach

Ellis (1992) suggests that learners have just one 'style' or grammar, but rules within this grammar may be variable. Initially, rules are constructed which have a unique output. But as the learner gets more exposure to the L2, competing forms may be associated with the same rule. This gives rise to free variation. With yet longer exposure to the L2, the learner may come to restrict each variant to a specific context of use or a specific grammatical function. In this way development in the learner's grammar occurs.

c) Acculturation/Pidginisation Approach

According to this approach, the social distance between a learner and the community speaking the target language is what gives rise to lack of development and individual differences between learners. When the distance is great learners will tend to use 'simplified' language lacking grammatical function words. This is because they omit items which are 'communicatively redundant'. The approach also implies that where there is no social distance between the L2 learner and the community speaking the target language, the learner ultimately will be as successful as native speakers. Thus, social and cultural aspects of L2 have to be taken into account to acquire near-native proficiency. To reduce the social distance between the L2 learner and the community speaking the target language, the learning situation and the context of learning should reflect to a great extent socio-cultural reality of that target community.

The psychological or cognitive approaches could be exemplified through the work done by Pienemann (1987, 1989) and Wolfe Quintero (1992). The former investigated

the stages of development in German word order whereas the latter looked at the account of wh- questions (who, what, which, etc. The two approaches primarily address the observations of staged development and systematicity.

A new approach to second language acquisition has emerged recently and gained widespread acceptance, i.e. The immersion approach. The immersion approach involves exposing learners to instructions through the target language and communicative interaction in it for many years, 100 percent of the school day during the first two or three years. In its longest form, early immersion, this method exposes children to the second language from kindergarten on. By the end of secondary school, young people in full-fledged immersion programmes should have been exposed to the second language for thirteen years. Several studies have revealed that students in such programmes develop very good listening and reading comprehension that they can learn other subjects well through the second language. Over the years, however, certain scholars have found that, when it comes to the productive skills of speaking and listening, immersion students are far from linguistically competent (Hamerly, 1987)

Implications from the various perspectives on L2 acquisition

It is important to emphasize that the study of second language acquisition is separate from the study of language pedagogy, although this does not imply that there are not implications that can be drawn from second language acquisition to the related discipline of language teaching. For example, in Krashen's view (1981), the Input Hypothesis is central to all of acquisition and also has implications for the classroom:

a) Speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause. Speech cannot be taught directly but "emerges" on its own as a result of building competence via comprehensible input.

b) If input is understood, and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The language teacher need not attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order—it will be provided in just the right quantities and automatically reviewed if the student receives a sufficient amount of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981). Two of the important implications of Long's hypothesis are that a task-based approach to classroom teaching is the most efficient, and that tasks can be selected and manipulated so as maximize the opportunities for learners to turn input into intake. The debate on the corrective feedback has some practical implications for classroom teaching and assessment. It offers language teachers new perspectives and techniques for providing assistance to the learner. It offers a new tool for promoting the learner's development using negotiated corrective

feedback provided in collaborative interactions between the learner and the teacher, and it encourages teachers to search for the learner's potential level of development rather than the learner's actual level of development. The acculturation approach implies that classrooms should be viewed as a socio-cultural setting where an active participation in the target language culture is taught, promoted, and cultivated. In other words, classrooms should reflect as much as possible outside socio-cultural and institutional realities. The interaction hypothesis suggests that teachers should not be afraid to experiment with creating as many interactive activities as possible with learners of the same L1 backgrounds or different backgrounds or with L2 learners who are at the same or different levels of language proficiency. The dialogical tradition also provides a unified framework for SLA theory, research, teaching, and testing.

Having reviewed the various perspectives on second language acquisition, it is found that the five inter-disciplinary which shape the research field are psycholinguistics, socio-linguistics, neuro-linguistics, classroom research, and bilingual education. A bulk of research has been conducted in each of the addressed fields. It has been reported that when these perspectives are combined, the implications of L2 research for language teaching are considered.

Conclusion

As has become clear throughout this paper, the SLA phenomenon is multifaceted and complex. In order to fully understand this phenomenon, one must consider all the related issues that influence the process of acquiring the target language. As a result, it has been attempted to provide an account of those issues. The paper begins by shedding light on the historical development of the field of second language acquisition showing the contributions of the pioneers in linguistics, psychology, first language research, etc. In the next section, the various approaches to SLA have been presented in detail. Finally, some implications from the various perspectives have been inferred and explained.

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