Second Language Acquisition

Dr. Fahriany, M.Pd.
PREFACE

This course aims at giving the students of English understand the concept of second language acquisition. There have differences between the acquisition of English and the acquisition of the students’ mother tongue. These differences might cause confusing in applying the target language (English). By understanding the concepts of second language acquisition in the use of English the students will be able to use English in according to the socio cultural reflected in English.

This book discusses about the place of second language in the world today, why study second language acquisition, development of the field of study of second language acquisition, the scope of second language acquisition research Follow by Language: from intelligence or innate ideas? The quest for the perfect circle, empiricist, and rationalist answers, the empiricist view: no knowledge is innate, the Rationalist view: basic knowledge is innate, Chomsky’s Universal Grammar, arguments are intelligence and Universal Grammar, Chomsky’s ease and speed of child acquisition argument, objections to ease and speed of child acquisition argument, Chomsky’s inadequate language data argument, objections to the inadequate language data argument, Chomsky’s poverty of stimulus argument, objections to Chomsky’s poverty of stimulus argument, Chomsky’s irrelevance of intelligence argument, objections to the irrelevance of intelligence argument, the rationalist view: basic knowledge is innate, mentalism and behaviorism contrasted, language, thought, and culture speech as the basis of thought, arguments against this idea in speech, understanding
precedes production, speech understanding by people with speech disabilities, thinking while paralyzed by a drug, talking about one thing while thinking about another, language as the basis of thought, arguments against this idea, deaf children without language can think, bilinguals are not schizoids, creoles: new languages from old, where language does affect thought, thought as the basis of language, the non-linguistic origin of meaning, the true relationship between language and thought, language and the brain, brain structure and function, hemispheric dominance and lateralization, language areas and functioning, brain maturation and critical age for learning language, language disorder, Broca's aphasia, Wernicke's aphasia, other speech-related aphasias, reading, and writing aphasias: dyslexia, localism and holism, methods of investigating brain and language, established methods: post-mortem, injured people, electrical stimulation, new high-tech methods: CAT and PET, mind and brain, culture and foreign language teaching. By reading this book the students are expected to be able to understand the concept of language acquisition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. The Place of Second Language in the World Today

What comes to mind for many people when they encounter the phrase 'second language acquisition' is the experience they had as school students when they were engaged in the study of one or more foreign languages. Second language acquisition, however, occurs in other forms in schools today as well. Bilingual education, for example, has been a reality, in many parts of the world for years. There are several models for bilingual education programs, but generally, they exist for purpose of helping student to maintain their native language or to continue to grow in their native language while acquiring a second language.

Another form of second language acquisition in an educational context is the immersion programs which is popular in Canada and certain parts of the United States. In these programs, native English-speaking children receive all of their initial instruction in a second language. After the early grades, more and more content courses are taught in their native language.

The acquisition of second languages in a formal school setting, however, is not the only context where second languages have their place in the world today. English, as second language for most other people of the world, has increasingly become the international language for business and commerce, science and technology, and international relations and diplomacy. Other professional intercourse, such as the
proceedings of meetings of health practitioners or educators from many different parts of the world, is often conducted in English, a second language for many of the participant. In fact, it has been estimated that although there are only 325 million of the world's 4.7 billion population who speak English natively, for as many as 1.4 billion additional people.

English is an official second language (Crystal, 2005). Another example of second language use linked with occupations is the gastarbeiter or migrant worker situation in Europe. In recent years, 11 million workers, primarily from Greece, Spain, Italy, and Turkey, have left their homes and families to seek employment in the Industrialized Western European countries. The migrant workers typically do not speak or understand the language of their new environment when they arrived. This has made for a number of social problems in the host community. It has also afforded a unique opportunity for SLA researchers to study what language is acquired, research about which we will learn more later.

What distinguishes the foreign workers from other migratory populations is that the former for the most part have no intention, initially at least, of residing in the host countries for the rest of their lives. Thus, another instance where second language acquisition becomes an issue is the arrival and assimilation of immigrants. In the 1980's this was brought to mind by the large influx of Indochinese refugees to many different countries around the world.

Second languages frequently enter into consideration in affairs of state. Bitter contests have been fought in multilingual societies over national language policy formulation: Which languages are to be accorded official recognition and which denied it? Which language(s) is to be the medium of instruction in school and which language(s) is to be taught as a second language? And, of course, these same decisions often apply to dialects— as well. Many children of the world grow up
speaking a ‘dialect’ at home, only to encounter their national language for the first time as they enter school.

In short, not only do second languages have a place in school, they also affect many other aspects of people’s lives. In the interdependent world of today, second language acquisition and use are ubiquitous.

B. Why Study Second Language Acquisition

There are almost as many reasons to study SLA as there are places where second languages are acquired and used. First of all, the study of SLA is fascinating in its own right. It is a true conundrum. Understanding it requires drawing upon knowledge of psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and neurolinguistics, among others. As Cook & Singleton (2014) has said:

We sometimes overlook the fact that there is much that we can know and need to know about our universe and ourselves that is not necessarily useful at the moment of discovery. By the same token, we are too prone to reject knowledge for which we cannot find an immediate practical application.

Yet much of what those who apply knowledge have discovered in their practical pursuits was made possible by those who were only pursuing knowledge for its own sake. In an ultimate sense all knowledge is practical. (p. 9).

But there is more to be gained from grappling with the complexity of SLA than the satiating of intellectual curiosity. The most obvious beneficiary of an increased understanding of SLA is the second language teaching profession, and through the teachers, the learners themselves, indeed, many researchers have been or remain language teachers who find themselves attracted to SLA research as a source of insight into the teaching/learning process. As Corder (2007, p. 7) puts it, ‘Efficient language teaching must work with, rather than against, natural processes, facilitate and expedite rather than impede
learning. This can happen best when we know what those natural processes are.

Indeed, we have found it helpful to depict the central players, processes and content in the language teaching field as a triangle. As the Figure 1.1 implies, we believe that language teachers’ decisions about the teaching process should, to a large extent, be informed by knowledge of the subject matter they are teaching (i.e. the target language and culture) and by knowledge of the unique group of learners with whom they are working and of the language-learning process. It is the lower right angle of the triangle with which we are concerned in this book.

![Figure 1.1](image)

**FIGURE 1.1**

Teachers’ expectations about what SLA research can tell us at this point must be modest, though. As Lightbown (2005) reminds us, at the moment SLA research does reveal to a certain extent what learners do and what they know. It has not yet, however, reached the point where we can say with assurance how they have come to do and to know these things, and we are further still from saying what teaching practices should therefore follow. On the other hand, if our research leads to greater teacher awareness of the acquisition process and increased sensitivity towards learners, then it seems to us that effort has been worthwhile.

Then, too, although we have no independent evidence to
corroborate their claim, second language learners who have studied SLA research report anecdotally that their awareness of the SLA process facilitates their subsequent attempts at language learning. Clearly a heightened understanding of second language acquisition could also have impact on the other educational programs involving language acquisition, such as bilingual education and immersion programs.

But there are other, less obvious areas for which an understanding of SLA may prove helpful. One such example is with certain populations which have specific language-learning needs. For instance, language intervention issues for mentally retarded individuals parallel second language teaching issues to a striking degree (see, for example, Rosenberg, 1982). Diagnosing non-native speaking children’s learning disabilities as distinct from their second language problems is another example. Facilitating the acquisition of a spoken language by deaf individuals already fluent in sign language is yet a third. Many other potential applications could be cited here.

Mention was made earlier about how knowledge of certain disciplines helps us to understand the SL process better. Ideally SLA research can and should inform these disciplines as well. SLA provides a good test case for linguists’ claims about language universals, and for psychologists’ observations on individual learning style differences. It also provides fertile ground for anthropologists’ exploration of cultural universals and for sociologists’ study of the effect of group membership on task achievement. Psycholinguists should be able to use SLA research findings in order to address a perennial problem for them: how to sort out the effects of cognitive development from normal child language development. Sociolinguists should find second language acquisition research helpful in expanding their understanding of when speakers prefer one speech style over another. Neurolinguists will find that SLA evidence can be brought to bear on issues in human biological
development. For example, is there such a thing as a critical period in an individual’s development, beyond which it is very difficult or in possible for anyone to truly master something as complex as a second language? These are but a few of the issues which SLA research should shed some light on in these related disciplines.

C. The Development of the Study Field of Second Language Acquisition

People have been interested in second language acquisition since antiquity, but in modern times much of the research emphasis was in fact placed on language teaching. Large comparative studies of language teaching methods were conducted. Less ambitious studies focused upon the most efficacious way to teach a particular skill or to sequence structures in a syllabus. The assumption seemed to be that if language teaching methods could be made more efficient, then learning would naturally be more effective.

This assumption may be perfectly valid; indeed, interest in improving language teaching methodology has not diminished. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, as a result of the inconclusive findings from the comparative studies, a debate in psychology over the nature of learning and a revolution in linguistics, a challenge to the dominance of research on language teaching was to take place. Although we will discuss in Chapter 3 the precise nature of this challenge and its implication for second language acquisition, suffice it to say here that for the first time in recent history, many researchers’ attention was shifted from the teaching process to the learning process. It was this shift in perspective which introduced a new research agenda and gave definition to the field that has come to be known as

second language acquisition.

A dramatic illustration of the results of this perspective shift can be found by simply glancing at the table of SLA studies compiled by Hatch (1978c). Hatch lists only seven studies prior to 1965. Subsequent to this date, there are scores of studies, the mere listing of which consumes almost seven pages. And Hatch’s book was published in 1978. Since then there have been hundreds more studies conducted, several new journals begun, and numerous conferences convened.

Raimes (1983) offers an additional indicator of the birth and growth of the SLA field. She conducted an analysis of the topic index of articles which appeared in the TESOL Quarterly from 1967 to 1980. For the ten-year period 1967–76, Raimes found 29 articles listed under the topic heading ‘second language learning’. Compare this with the 24 articles she counted for the two years 1979-80 in a topical area which was renamed second language acquisition—a four-fold growth! Given the vitality of the field today, it seems prudent to pause here to take stock of twenty years of SLA research and to see where we have been and where we are going.

D. The Scope of Second Language Acquisition Research

Focusing research efforts on the learner and learning process has not meant ignoring the effect of instruction on SLA. On the contrary, one of the fundamental goals of SLA research is to facilitate and expedite the SLA process, and appropriate instruction will undeniably make a contribution indeed, there is a group of SLA researchers whose special interest is in conducting classroom-centered research.

Having said this, it is also true that the scope of research has broad-ended considerably from being solely concerned with what takes place in the classroom. In fact, much of the research these past twenty years has been conducted on SLA in a natural, that is untutored, environment. Sometimes a
distinction is made between second language learning which takes place within a classroom and second language acquisition which occurs ‘naturally’ outside a classroom. We discuss the difference between learning and acquisition but prefer to follow most researchers in the field and use acquisition as the super ordinate term for all settings. We do, however, retain the traditional term learners’ to refer to those in the process of acquiring a second language.

A somewhat related matter having to do with setting is that researchers must be able to explain SLA whether the acquisition takes place in a second language or a foreign language environment. A second language is one being acquired in an environment in which the language is spoken natively. For example, a Spaniard acquiring English in England would be acquiring it as a second language. If he or she were studying English in a classroom in Spain, i.e. outside of an environment where the second language is spoken natively, he or she would be acquiring it as a foreign language. In which environment the acquisition takes place is often related to the first variable, whether it takes place in a classroom or not, since foreign languages usually require instruction whereas second languages can often be ‘picked up’ from the environment. In the second language acquisition field, however, and therefore in this book, we refer to both as instances of second language acquisition, taking up the differential effects of the two settings in.

In addition, to setting variables, SLA research must account for learner variables. Age is an example of one such learner variable. The only thing that calling a language ‘second’ implies is that it is acquired later than a first language. Consequently, SLA research must account for the acquisition of a second language by young learners who may have very little proficiency in their native language, up to the acquisition of a second language by an older learner for whom the native language is very well established. Of course, there are many
other learner variables besides age which affect the acquisition process. We will deal with a number of these in.

Even the term ‘second language’ is not as straightforward as it first seems, as sometimes it refers to a language which is not chronologically the second. SLA really has come to mean the acquisition of any language(s) other than one’s native language. Thus, we have ‘second’ language acquisition studies dealing with the acquisition of third and fourth languages, and we even have ‘second’ language acquisition case studies of simultaneous bilingualism which in reality are studies of children engaged in learning two first languages.

What complicates our study further is that learners acquire language for a variety of reasons: to fully participate in a society, to travel as a tourist, to pass an examination, to obtain employment, to read scientific texts, etc. It won’t do to say glibly that linguistic or communicative competence is what everyone aspires to because, first of all, not all do and second, as McGroarty (1984) reminds us, communicative competence can mean different things for different people.

In sum, the scope of SLA research must be sufficiently broad to include a variety of subjects who speak a variety of native languages, who are in the process of acquiring a variety of second languages in a variety of settings for a variety of reasons. Small wonder Seliger (1984) states unequivocally that it is impossible to describe all the variables in SLA. Nonetheless, Seliger also notes: ‘In spite of such infinite diversity there exists the universal fact that human beings of all ages, attitudes, levels of intelligence, socioeconomic background, etc., succeed in acquiring L2s4 in a wide variety of both naturalistic and formal settings’ (p. 37). It is to understand how learners accomplish this and why some fail to do so which has motivated SLA research since its inception twenty years ago.
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Language Acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language, natural communication in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.

This book outlines a general framework for the study of Second Language Acquisition. Subsequent sections provide a description of learner language, account for the role of linguistics environment, examine the learners’ internal mechanism, explore individual differences in language learning and review the expanding research on classroom second language Acquisition.

This book aims to give the readers ‘understanding of second language acquisition concepts. The fact that there have differences between the acquisition of English and the acquisition of the students’ mother tongue might cause confusing in applying the target language (English). By understanding the concepts of second language acquisition in the use of English, the students will be able to use English in according to the socio cultural reflected in English.