

1 Second language acquisition research: An overview

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Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the rest of the book. In order to do this the chapter will (1) examine what is meant by the term Second Language Acquisition, (2) identify a number of central questions which second language acquisition research has addressed, and (3) present a framework for examining four major areas of enquiry and provide a brief survey of work done in each.

What is second language acquisition?

The obvious first step in the exploration of SLA research is to establish a clear understanding of what the object of the field of study is—second language acquisition. This is particularly important because, as will become evident in subsequent chapters, the nature of this object is far from clear, and different researchers have given very different interpretations of it. We will begin by examining a number of points relating to the meaning of the term ‘second language acquisition’.

‘Second’ v. ‘third’ language acquisition

Many learners are multilingual in the sense that in addition to their first language they have acquired some competence in more than one non-primary language. *Multilingualism* is the norm in many African and Asian countries. Sometimes a distinction is made between a ‘second’ and a ‘third’ or even ‘fourth’ language. However, the term ‘second’ is generally used to refer to any language other than the first language. In one respect this is unfortunate, as the term ‘second’ when applied to some learning settings, such as those in South Africa involving black learners of English, may be perceived as opprobrious. In such settings, the term ‘additional language’ may be both more appropriate and more acceptable.

Second v. foreign language acquisition

A distinction between *second* and *foreign* language acquisition is sometimes made. In the case of second language acquisition, the language plays an

institutional and social role in the community (i.e. it functions as a recognized means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue). For example, English as a second language is learnt in the United States, the United Kingdom, and countries in Africa such as Nigeria and Zambia. In contrast, foreign language learning takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in the community and is primarily learnt only in the classroom. Examples of foreign language learning are English learnt in France or Japan.

The distinction between second and foreign language learning settings may be significant in that it is possible that there will be radical differences in both what is learnt and how it is learnt. However, for the time being the extent to which the sociolinguistic conditions of learning determine learning outcomes or learning processes must remain an open question—to be answered as a result of our exploration of SLA research. This is addressed in greater depth in Chapter 6. There is a need for a neutral and superordinate term to cover both types of learning. Somewhat confusingly, but in line with common usage, the term ‘second language acquisition’ will be used for this purpose.

Naturalistic v. instructed second language acquisition

A distinction will be made between *naturalistic* and *instructed* second language acquisition, according to whether the language is learnt through communication that takes place in naturally occurring social situations or through study, with the help of ‘guidance’ from reference books or classroom instruction.

Klein (1986) similarly distinguishes ‘spontaneous’ and ‘guided’ acquisition, treating the distinction as a psycholinguistic one. He argues that the learner focuses on communication in naturalistic second language acquisition and thus learns incidentally, whereas in instructed second language acquisition the learner typically focuses on some aspect of the language system. It may be better, however, to view the distinction as only a sociolinguistic one—i.e. reflecting the settings and activities in which learners typically participate. It would certainly be wrong to assume that naturalistic learning is subconscious and instructed learning conscious. It remains an open question as to whether the process of acquisition is the same or different in naturalistic or classroom settings. In this book, therefore, the distinction will be used only in its sociolinguistic sense.

Competence v. performance

A distinction is often made between *linguistic competence* and *performance* when studying language. According to Chomsky (1965), competence consists of the mental representations of linguistic rules that constitute the speaker-hearer’s internal grammar. This grammar is implicit rather than

explicit and is evident in the intuitions which the speaker-hearer has about the grammaticality of sentences. Performance consists of the use of this grammar in the comprehension and production of language. The distinction between competence and performance has been extended to cover communicative aspects of language (see Hymes 1971a; Canale and Swain 1980). *Communicative competence* includes knowledge the speaker-hearer has of what constitutes appropriate as well as correct language behaviour and also of what constitutes effective language behaviour in relation to particular communicative goals. That is, it includes both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Communicative performance consists of the actual use of these two types of knowledge in understanding and producing discourse.

The main goal of SLA research is to characterize learners’ underlying knowledge of the L2, i.e. to describe and explain their competence. However, learners’ mental knowledge is not open to direct inspection; it can only be inferred by examining samples of their performance. SLA researchers have used different kinds of performance to try to investigate competence. Many analyse the actual utterances that learners produce in speech or writing (for example, Larsen-Freeman 1975). Some try to tap learners’ intuitions about what is correct or appropriate by means of judgement tasks (for example, White 1985), while others rely on the introspective and retrospective reports that learners provide about their own learning (for example, Cohen 1984). Needless to say none of these provide a direct window into competence. Also, not surprisingly, very different results can be obtained depending on the kind of performance data the researcher studies.

Usage v. use

The distinction between *usage* and *use* was first proposed by Widdowson (1978) to facilitate a discussion of language pedagogy but it is equally applicable to language acquisition. Usage is ‘that aspect of performance which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules’ (p. 3). We study usage if we focus attention on the extent to which the learner has mastered the formal properties of the phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems. Use is that aspect of performance which ‘makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication’. We study use if we examine how learners convey meaning through the process of constructing discourse. One way in which this can be undertaken is by studying pragmatic aspects of language, such as how learners learn to perform speech acts like requests and apologizing.

SLA research has been primarily concerned with studying usage, although it is now paying more attention to use. It has become apparent that even if the aim is to find out how learners acquire purely formal features (such as verb + *-ing* or copula ‘be’), it is often necessary to examine how they use these

features to express meaning. Thus, analyses based on 'form' only have increasingly given way to analyses of 'form-function' and 'function-form' correspondences. Many researchers are no longer content to ask whether learners provide evidence of the correct usage of a form such as the present progressive tense in contexts that call for it. They also want to know what meanings learners use the form to perform and, in particular, whether they use it to perform meanings other than those it serves in the target language. For example, learners who say 'Sharpening please' when they want someone to sharpen their pencil are using verb + *-ing* to perform a function (commanding) which it does not usually have in the target language. Other researchers, particularly those interested in pragmatic characteristics of learner language, take 'function' as their starting point and investigate the different forms that learners use to perform specific functions.

Precisely what should be the object of enquiry in SLA research is a matter of controversy, however. On the one hand, there are researchers who argue that many properties of language are purely formal in nature.¹ On the other, there are those who emphasize the importance of studying the functional uses of language. SLA research currently employs both types of enquiry.

'Acquisition'

In order to study how learners acquire a second language, a clear, operational definition of what is meant by the term 'acquisition' is needed. Unfortunately, researchers have been unable to agree on such a definition. 'Acquisition' can mean several things.

First, some researchers (for example, Krashen 1981) distinguish between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. The former refers to the subconscious process of 'picking up' a language through exposure and the latter to the conscious process of studying it. According to this view, it is possible for learners to 'acquire' or to 'learn' rules independently and at separate times. Although such a distinction can have strong face validity—particularly for teachers—it is problematic, not least because of the difficulty of demonstrating whether the knowledge learners possess is of the 'acquired' or 'learnt' kind.² In this book the terms 'acquisition' and 'learning' will be used interchangeably. They will be placed inside inverted commas if used in their distinctive senses.

Second, researchers disagree about what kind of performance they think provides the best evidence of acquisition. We have already noted that some researchers work with production data, some study learners' intuitions about the L2, while others access learners' introspections. Also, some researchers (for example, Bickerton 1981) consider a feature has been acquired when it appears for the first time, while others (for example, Dulay and Burt 1980) require the learner to use it to some predetermined criterion level of accuracy, usually 90 per cent. Thus, a distinction can be made between acquisition as 'emergence' or 'onset' and acquisition as 'accurate use'.

Clearly 'acquisition' can mean several very different things. This makes it very difficult to compare the results of one study with those of another. Conflicting results can be obtained depending on whether the data used consist of learners' productions, introspections, or intuitions, or whether emergence or accuracy serves as the criterion of acquisition. It is for this reason that it is important to examine carefully the nature of the data used and the way in which acquisition has been measured, when reading reports of actual studies.

Summary

There is no simple answer to the question 'What is second language acquisition?' It can take place in either a naturalistic or an instructional setting, but may not necessarily differ according to the setting. The goal of SLA is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence. To this end, the researcher must examine aspects of the learner's usage or use of the L2 in actual performance, by collecting and analysing either samples of learner language, reports of learners' introspections, or records of their intuitions regarding what is correct or appropriate L2 behaviour. The acquisition of an L2 feature may be considered to have taken place either when it is used for the first time or only when it can be used to a high level of accuracy.

Second language acquisition is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and it is not surprising that it has come to mean different things to different people.

General questions in second language acquisition research

The study of how learners learn a second language does not have a very long history. The surge of empirical work that informs current thinking did not begin until the late 1960s. Although there have been several developments in SLA since its inception, it is still possible to identify a set of general questions for which researchers have sought answers.

1 What do second language learners acquire?

The first question, which guided much of the early research in the late sixties and seventies, concerned what it was that learners actually acquired when they tried to learn an L2. This question was motivated by the recognition that learners often failed initially to produce correct sentences and instead displayed language that was markedly deviant from target language norms.

In order to answer this question, researchers collected samples of learner language and tried to describe their main features. For example, the language samples that learners produced were inspected for errors and these were then classified. Alternatively, recordings of learners communicating with native speakers or other learners were transcribed, specific grammatical features

such as negatives or interrogatives were identified in the data, and descriptions of the 'rules' which could account for the learners' productions were developed. The aim of this research, then, was essentially descriptive—to document what kind of language learners produced, to try to establish whether it manifested regularities of some kind or other, and to find out how it changed over time.

2 How do learners acquire a second language?

Not surprisingly, researchers were not content just to describe learner language; they also sought to explain it. That is, they wanted to account for why learners made errors, why their language displayed marked regularities, and why it changed systematically over time.

The answers were sought by formulating two further questions. The first was 'What contribution do external factors make to L2 acquisition?' This involved considering the role played by the social situation in which learning took place and how the language the learner was exposed to (i.e. the input) accounted for acquisition as evident in the language the learner produced (i.e. the output). Researchers seeking external explanations of learner language made extensive use of ideas and methods from the sociolinguistic study of language.

The second question was 'What contribution do internal factors make to L2 acquisition?' In this case, explanations were sought in the mental processes that the learner used to convert input into knowledge. Various processes have been identified. Some account for how the learner makes use of existing knowledge (of the mother tongue, of general learning strategies, or of the universal properties of language) to internalize knowledge of the L2. These processes can be thought of as learning processes. They serve as the means by which the learner constructs an *interlanguage* (a transitional system reflecting the learner's current L2 knowledge). Other processes account for how the learner makes use of existing knowledge to cope with communication difficulties. For example, sometimes the learner does not know the word needed to communicate an idea clearly and has to resort to paraphrase or word coinage. These processes are known as *communication strategies*. Internal explanations have made extensive use of ideas drawn from both cognitive psychology and linguistics.

A full explanation of L2 acquisition will need to take account of both external and internal factors and how the two interrelate. We are still a long way from such an explanation, however.

3 What differences are there in the way in which individual learners acquire a second language?

In the case of questions (1) and (2) the focus is on learning. In question (3) the focus is on the individual language learner. While much of the work that has taken place in SLA research is based on the assumption that learner language provides evidence of universal learning processes, there is also a long tradition of research that has recognized that learners vary enormously in their rate of learning, their approach to learning, and in their actual achievements. The study of *individual learner differences* seeks to document the factors that contribute to these kinds of variation.

4 What effects does instruction have on second language acquisition?

Much of the early research investigated naturalistic L2 learners,³ motivated in part by claims that classroom learning would proceed most smoothly if teachers stopped interfering in the learning process and left learners to learn in the same way as children acquired their mother tongue (see Newmark 1966). Increasingly, though, researchers have turned to studying the effects that instruction of various kinds has on L2 acquisition. This research has been motivated in part by a desire to address issues of general theoretical interest to SLA research and also by a desire to improve the efficacy of language pedagogy. The classroom affords an opportunity to control very precisely the nature of the input that learners are exposed to. This in turn allows the researcher to formulate and test very specific hypotheses regarding how particular features of an L2 are acquired.

These four questions serve as a heuristic for exploring SLA research. They have helped researchers to identify a number of key issues.

A framework for exploring second language acquisition

It is possible to identify a number of different areas of SLA that have been investigated. These are shown in Table 1.1.

The first area of work concerns the description of the characteristics of learner language. This provides the researcher with the main source of information about how acquisition takes place. Four aspects of learner language have received attention: (1) errors, (2) acquisition orders and developmental sequences, (3) variability, and, more recently, (4) pragmatic features relating to the way language is used in context for communicative purposes. As we have already noted, one of the goals of SLA research is to describe learner language and to show how it works as a system.

The second area concerns learner-external factors relating to the social context of acquisition and to the input and interaction which the learner experiences.