

Introduction

Second language acquisition research: some developments

Although it is not possible to set a precise date on when second language acquisition (SLA) research first established itself as a field of enquiry, there is general agreement that it took place around the end of the 1960s. At this time, some of the first studies of second language (L2) learners were published (for example, Ravem 1968; Huang 1970). At the same time a theoretical case for examining L2 acquisition was advanced (for example, Corder 1967). From that point SLA research developed rapidly and continues to do so. There has been an enormous amount of empirical research directed at describing the characteristics of L2 learner language and how these change as acquisition takes place. There has also been a growing interest in theory construction, as reflected in the plethora of frameworks, models and theories now available.

The developments in SLA research over the years have been of several kinds. One development concerns the scope of the field of enquiry. Whereas much of the earlier work focused on the linguistic—and, in particular, the grammatical—properties of learner language and was psycholinguistic in orientation, later work has also attended to the pragmatic aspects of learner language and, increasingly, has adopted a sociolinguistic perspective. Thus, whereas many researchers continue to focus their attention on how L2 learners develop grammatical competence, many others are concerned with how learners develop the ability to perform speech acts such as requests or apologies appropriately. Similarly, whereas many researchers continue the long-standing attempt to explain the psycholinguistic processes that underlie L2 acquisition and use, others have given attention to the social factors that influence development. The result is that the scope of SLA research is now much wider than in the 1970s or even early 1980s.

A second development concerns the increasing attention paid by SLA research to linguistic theory. This is most evident in the studies based on Chomsky's model of grammar (Universal Grammar), but is also apparent in work based on functional models of language (for example, Givón 1979a; 1995) and language typology (for example, Comrie 1984). Thus, whereas much of the earlier work made use of fairly simple grammatical concepts, derived from descriptive grammars, the later work makes greater use of technical concepts derived from a particular theory of grammar. The relationship between SLA research and linguistics is increasingly symbiotic,

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in the sense that L2 researchers and linguists both draw on each others' work. SLA research, therefore, is no longer a consumer of linguistics, but also a contributor to it.

Another significant development in SLA research has been the increase in theory-led research, which, in part, is a reflection of its relationship with linguistics. Much of the earlier research was of the 'research-then-theory' kind. Typically, it involved the collection of samples of learner language, their analysis, and the description of their main characteristics. Explanations of the main features were a matter of *post hoc* interpretation. This was both inevitable and desirable given the lack of hard information about what learners do when they acquire an L2. However, as theories have been developed, researchers have increasingly sought to confirm them by identifying and testing specific hypotheses, often experimentally. A brief examination of some of the current journals that publish L2 acquisition research (for example, *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Second Language Research*) will reveal the current primacy of theory-led, experimental-type research. However, although there has been a general increase in confirmatory research, many studies of the interpretative kind continue to be published.

The main thrust of SLA research in the early years addressed the universal properties of L2 acquisition—looking for commonalities across learners of different ages, in different settings and with different L1s. There was, however, an alternative tradition that pre-dated the early studies of learner language—the study of how individuals differ. The 1950s and early 1960s, for example, had witnessed intensive research on language aptitude, one of the main factors contributing to individual differences, while the late 1960s and 1970s also saw a substantial body of work on motivation. This tradition, which for a while was partially submerged as SLA research established itself, has now reasserted itself and is viewed as part of the total field of enquiry. However, the study of L2 acquisition as a phenomenon with universal properties and the study of individual differences in L2 learners have not been fully integrated; the study of 'learning' and of 'learners', somewhat surprisingly, exist as separate areas within SLA research.

It is also possible to detect the emergence of another fairly distinct sub-field of SLA research devoted to investigating classroom L2 acquisition. Classroom studies of L2 learners date back to the inception of SLA research. However, many of the early studies deliberately focused on learners in natural settings. Subsequently, studies of classroom learners, either in actual classrooms or in settings that simulate classroom conditions, have proliferated. Some of these studies were designed to investigate issues important to language pedagogy but many were explicitly concerned with theoretical issues related to L2 acquisition.

As a result of these developments, SLA research has become a rather amorphous field of study with elastic boundaries. This makes the task of surveying the field a difficult one, and only a few attempts have been made to

do so: for example, Ellis 1985a, McLaughlin 1987, Spolsky 1989, and Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991. Instead, scholars have usually preferred to identify specific areas of SLA research. Thus, books on such topics as learner errors, vocabulary acquisition, Universal Grammar and L2 acquisition, L2 pragmatics, variability, the role of input, the role of social factors, attitudes and motivation, learner strategies, and classroom L2 acquisition are more common. In a sense, SLA research stands at the cross-roads. It may continue as a coherent field of enquiry with its own recognized research community, or it may splinter into a series of sub-fields, and, in some cases, perhaps become submerged in the 'mother' disciplines that inform these sub-fields.

The aims of the book

The extent to which SLA research can claim to constitute a discipline in its own right depends on whether it is possible to identify a defined field of enquiry and a body of knowledge relating to it. The main aim of this book, therefore, is to develop a framework for describing the field as it currently exists and to use this framework to provide an extensive account of what is currently known about L2 acquisition and L2 learners. It is intended to tackle this 'descriptively'—to avoid taking up any particular position regarding what constitutes the most legitimate approach to SLA research. The account offered, therefore, aims to be balanced and objective, as far as this is possible. Inevitably, though, the personal views of the author will colour the picture provided. Also, although the emphasis will be on 'describing' what has been discovered, attention will also be given to the evaluation of the methodologies that have been used to conduct research, of the significance of the information that has been unearthed, and of the theories that have been developed to explain the findings. Again, though, as far as possible, these evaluations will strive for objectivity by reflecting a range of opinion.

The book's audience

This book has been written for three kinds of reader. One is students of SLA research—those who are beginning their study of L2 acquisition and wish to obtain an understanding of the principal issues that have been addressed, the methods used to research them, the main findings and the theories that have been developed to explain them. It is hoped that the book will provide an accessible introduction to the field.

The second kind of reader is the SLA researcher who feels the need for a reference book that provides an overview of the main work accomplished in the different areas of SLA research. Such readers are likely to be experts in one or more areas of SLA research and, therefore, may have little need for the chapters that deal with their areas of specialism, but may wish to benefit from a survey of the work undertaken in other areas with which they have less famili-

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arity. As has already been pointed out, the scope of the field is now very large and the amount of published research enormous, with the result that few researchers are able to keep themselves up to date in work undertaken in all areas.

The third, and probably the principal kind of reader for which this book is intended, is second/foreign language teachers, many of whom may be completing a post-service programme of teacher education (for example, an MA or Diploma in TESOL or Applied Linguistics). It is pertinent, therefore, to consider why teachers should make the effort to read about L2 acquisition.

Second language acquisition research and language pedagogy

The main reason why language teachers need to be familiar with SLA research was stated in my earlier book (Ellis 1985a) as follows:

... unless we know for certain that the teacher's scheme of things really does match the learner's way of going about things, we cannot be sure that the teaching content will contribute directly to language learning (Ellis 1985a: 1).

The study of SLA provides a body of knowledge which teachers can use to evaluate their own pedagogic practices. It affords a learning- and learner-centred view of language pedagogy, enabling teachers to examine critically the principles upon which the selection and organization of teaching have been based and also the methodological procedures they have chosen to employ. Every time teachers make a pedagogic decision about content or methodology, they are, in fact, making assumptions about how learners learn. The study of SLA may help teachers in two ways. First, it will enable them to make their assumptions about learning explicit, so that they can examine them critically. In this way, it will help them to develop their own explicit ideas of how the kind of learners they are teaching acquire an L2. Second, it will provide them information that they can use when they make future pedagogic decisions.

Of course, SLA research is not the only source of information of relevance to language teachers. There are other areas of enquiry—some with much longer histories than SLA research—which are important. Stern (1983) identifies five areas that language pedagogy draws on for its 'fundamental concepts'—the history of language teaching, linguistics, sociology, psychology, and education. SLA research, as we have seen, is, like language pedagogy itself, a hybrid discipline, drawing on a range of other disciplines for its own constructs. However, it would be a mistake to treat SLA research as a mediating discipline that takes concepts from other disciplines and moulds them into a form applicable to language pedagogy. SLA research has its own agenda and is best treated as another source discipline. Language pedagogy will draw on SLA research in the same way as it draws on other areas of en-

quiry. If it is given privileged status, then, this will only be because its aims—the description and explanation of how L2 learning takes place—are of obvious relevance to the practice of language teaching.

The information provided by SLA research, then, needs to be ‘applied’ in the same way as that from other sources. Indeed, caution needs to be exercised when it comes to making use of the information it supplies. SLA research is not capable of providing teachers with recipes for successful practice. As will become clear later, there is no comprehensive theory of SLA, nor even any single theory that is widely accepted. Researchers do not even agree completely over what constitutes the descriptive ‘facts’ of L2 acquisition. There is much disagreement and controversy—a reflection of the highly complex nature of L2 acquisition and the relative immaturity of the field. For these reasons, SLA research should be treated as providing teachers with ‘insights’ which they can use to build their own explicit theory. It is on the basis of this theory—not on the basis of SLA research itself or any theory it has proposed—that teaching practice should proceed.

The structure and contents of the book

The contents of this book have been organized in accordance with a general conceptual framework that takes account of (1) a general distinction between the ‘description’ and ‘explanation’ of L2 acquisition, and (2) the various sub-fields that have developed over the years. The following are the main Parts with a brief summary of their contents:

Part 1: Background

This section contains one chapter that outlines the conceptual framework of the whole book.

Part 2: The description of learner language

This section reports some of the main findings regarding the nature of learner language. It considers learner errors, developmental patterns, variability, and pragmatic features.

Part 3: Explaining second language acquisition: external factors

This section begins the task of explaining L2 acquisition by considering external influences—the role of social factors and of input/interaction.

Part 4: Explaining second language acquisition: internal factors

This section continues the work of explaining L2 acquisition by examining

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various theories of the mental processing that learners engage in.

Three perspectives on these processes are offered—language transfer, cognitive accounts of L2 acquisition, and linguistic universals.

Part 5: Explaining individual differences in second language acquisition

In this section the focus of attention switches from ‘learning’ to ‘the learner’. Individual differences are considered from the point of view of general psychological factors (for example, motivation) and learner strategies.

Part 6: Classroom second language acquisition

This Part examines classroom-based and classroom-orientated research, from the point of view of both interaction and formal instruction.

Part 7: Conclusion

The book concludes with a critical look at the ‘state of the art’ of SLA research from the point of view of the data it works with, theory construction, and its applications.

There is no separate chapter on research methodology in SLA research, mainly because the methods used vary considerably according to the particular aspect of SLA being studied. However, where appropriate, information about the methods used to investigate specific areas is provided in the individual chapters.

A note on terminology

The term ‘second language acquisition research’ (SLA research) is used to refer to the general field of enquiry. It labels the discipline that is the focus of this book. The term ‘L2 acquisition’ serves as an abbreviation for ‘the acquisition of a second language’. This is what learners try to do and is the object of study in SLA research.

For reasons explained later no distinction is made between ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’, the two terms being used interchangeably.

Throughout the book, words explained in the Glossary are in italic type.