

## WHY STUDY SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

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**Annotation:** *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 David Cook (1965) 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.*

**Key Words:** *SLA, Psychology, Anthropology, Intellectual Curiosity, Efficient language teaching, Application*

### **Introduction**

There is more to be gained from grappling with the complexity of SLA than the sating 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 (1981, 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.

Teachers' expectations about what SLA research can tell us at this point must be modest, though. As Lightbown (1985) 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 the effort has been worthwhile.

### **Development of the field of study 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.

### **A dramatic illustration of the results of this perspective shift**

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<sup>2</sup> of SLA research and to see where we have been and where we are going.

### **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-centred research. 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 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.

### **Activities**

#### **Comprehension**

1. Of what value is the study of second language acquisition to language teachers, according to the text?

2. It was said in this chapter that the perspective shift which occurred towards the end of the 1960s brought about a new focus on the learner. What does this mean?

3. Why do you think Seliger says it is impossible to describe all the variables in SLA?

#### **Application**

• 4. A number of ways that people come into contact with second languages were suggested in this article.

• 5. Can you think of any reasons for why one should study SLA research in addition to the ones proposed here?

• 6. Find out if your country has a national language policy. If it does, are there any officially recognized second languages? How are these dealt with in the educational context?

• 7. Make a list of questions you have about the SLA process. Although we do not promise answers for all, or even any, of them, making a list will help you to identify gaps in your knowledge and will provide you with an initial framework from which to organize what you encounter in subsequent chapters. As you continue to read, this framework, no doubt, will have to be refined.

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