

University of Tikrit /College of Education/

English Department

Subject: Applied linguistics /Ph.D Studies

2025-2026

Second Language Acquisition

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What is second language acquisition? Second language acquisition research focuses on the developing knowledge and use of a language by children and adults who already know at least one other language. This field of research has both theoretical and practical importance. The theoretical importance is related to our understanding of how language is represented in the mind and whether there is a difference between the way language is acquired and processed and the way other kinds of information are acquired and processed. The practical importance arises from the assumption that an understanding of how languages are learned will lead to more effective teaching practices. In a broader context, a knowledge of second language acquisition may help educational policy makers set more realistic goals for programmes for both foreign language courses and the learning of the majority language by minority language children and adults. This chapter begins with a discussion of some of the linguistic and psychological theories which have informed second language acquisition research. This is followed by a review of research findings on learners' developing knowledge and use of their second language (L2), including a discussion of how previously learned languages affect that development. The final section examines the role of instruction in L2 development. Theories of L2 learning Both linguistic and psychological theories have influenced research in second language acquisition. One of the fundamental differences between theories developed in these two disciplines is the role they hypothesize for internal and external factors in the learning process. Some linguists have suggested that language

acquisition is based on the presence of a specialized module of the human mind containing innate knowledge of principles common to all languages. In contrast, most psychologists have argued that language is processed by general cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for a wide range of human learning and information processing and requires no specialized module. 112 Spada and Lightbown Linguistic perspectives Universal grammar The idea that there exists a universal grammar (UG) of human languages originated with Chomsky's (1968) view on first language (L1) acquisition. He was looking for an explanation of the fact that virtually all children learn language at a time in their cognitive development when they experience difficulty grasping other kinds of knowledge which appear to be far less complex than language. It was observed that even children with impaired intellectual ability were usually successful in acquiring the language they heard around them. Chomsky argued, furthermore, that the kind of information which mature speakers of a language eventually have of their L1 could not have been learned from the language they hear around them. This problem came to be called the 'logical problem of language acquisition'. Chomsky pointed out that children were exposed to samples of language that were incomplete and sometimes 'degenerate' (for example, slips of the tongue, false starts, etc.). In addition, some L1 researchers noted that parents did not provide systematic feedback when young children produced speech that did not match the adult language, and yet children would eventually leave behind their childish errors and acquire full competence in the language they were exposed to. Thus, Chomsky inferred that children must have an innate language faculty. This faculty, originally referred to as the language acquisition device (LAD) and later as UG, was described as a specialized module of the brain, pre-programmed to process language. UG was said to contain general principles underlying all languages. The child's task would be to discover how the language of his or her environment made use of those principles. Chomsky's theory of UG was offered as an explanation for L1 acquisition and, although it has been questioned in that context (Elman et al., 1996), it is widely accepted as at least a plausible explanation for L1 acquisition. The question of whether UG can also explain L2 learning is controversial. One of the reasons for this controversy is the claim that there is a critical period for language acquisition. That is, it is suggested that while UG permits a young child to acquire language during a particular developmental period, referred to as the 'critical period' for language acquisition, UG is no longer available to older learners. Even some

theorists who accept UG as the basis for L1 acquisition argue that UG is no longer available after puberty and that older L2 learners must make use of more general learning processes (Bley-Vroman, 1989). Because these are not specific to language, second language acquisition by older learners is more difficult than for younger learners and it is never complete. Other researchers have suggested that language acquisition continues to be based on UG but that, once a first language has been learned, UG is no longer neutral and open to the acquisition of any language. That is, although L2 grammars are still consistent with universal principles of all human languages, learners tend to perceive the L2 in a way that is shaped by the way their L1 realizes these principles (White, 2003). Researchers who study second language acquisition from a UG perspective seek to discover a language user's underlying linguistic 'competence' (what a language user knows) instead of focusing on his or her linguistic 'performance' (what a language user actually says or writes or understands). Therefore, researchers have usually used indirect means of investigating that competence. For example, rather than record spontaneous conversation, the researcher may ask a language user to judge whether a Second language acquisition sentence is grammatical or not. In this way, it is possible to determine whether the linguistic feature of interest is part of an individual's linguistic competence, even if it is rarely or never used. Alternatively, a child might be asked to use toy animals to demonstrate a sentence such as 'The tiger is chased by the lion'. If the child's linguistic competence does not yet include passive sentences, it is likely that the toy tiger will chase the lion.

3 Monitor Theory

Monitor Theory shares a number of the assumptions of the UG approach but its scope is specifically second language acquisition. As with UG, the assumption is that human beings acquire language without instruction or feedback on error. Krashen developed this theory in the 1970s and presented it in terms of five 'hypotheses' (Krashen, 1982). The fundamental hypothesis of Monitor Theory is that there is a difference between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Acquisition is hypothesized to occur in a manner similar to L1 acquisition, that is, with the learner's focus on communicating messages and meanings; learning is described as a conscious process, one in which the learner's attention is directed to the rules and forms of the language. The 'monitor hypothesis' suggests that, although spontaneous speech originates in the 'acquired system', what has been learned may be used as a monitor to edit speech if the L2 learner has the time and the inclination to focus on the accuracy of the message. In

light of research showing that L2 learners, like L1 learners, go through a series of predictable stages in their acquisition of linguistic features, Krashen (1982) proposed the 'natural order hypothesis'. The 'comprehensible input hypothesis' reflects his view that L2 learning, like L1 learning, occurs as a result of exposure to meaningful and varied linguistic input. Linguistic input will be effective in changing the learner's developing competence if it is comprehensible (with the help of contextual information) and also offers exposure to language which is slightly more complex than that which the learner has already acquired. The 'affective filter hypothesis' suggests, however, that a condition for successful acquisition is that the learner be motivated to learn the L2 and thus receptive to the comprehensible input. Monitor Theory has been criticized for the vagueness of the hypotheses and for the fact that some of them are difficult to investigate in empirical studies (DeKeyser, 1997; McLaughlin, 1990; White, 1987). Nonetheless, it has had a significant impact on the field of L2 teaching. Many teachers and students intuitively accept the distinction between 'learning' and 'acquisition', recalling experiences of being unable to spontaneously use their L2 even though they had studied it in a classroom. This may be especially true in classrooms where the emphasis is on meta-linguistic knowledge (the ability to talk about the language) rather than on practice in using it communicatively.

Psychological perspectives

Behaviourism For much of the first half of the twentieth century, behaviourism dominated psychology and education and, consequently, theories of L2 learning and teaching. Behaviourism was based on the view that all learning— including language learning— occurs through Spada and Lightbown a process of imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation. According to behaviourism, the environment is crucial not only because it is the source of the linguistic stimuli that learners need in order to form associations between the words they hear and the objects and events they represent, but also because it provides feedback on learners' performance. Behaviourists claimed that when learners correctly produce language that approximates what they are exposed to in the input, and these efforts receive positive reinforcement, habits are formed (Skinner, 1957). Behaviourism came under attack when Chomsky (1968) questioned the notion that children learn their first language by repeating what they hear in the surrounding environment. He argued that children produce novel and creative utterances— ones that they would never have heard in their environment. Researchers asserted that children's creative use of language showed that they were not simply

mimicking what they heard in the speech of others but, rather, applying rules and developing an underlying gram mar. Following Chomsky's critique of behaviourist explanations for language acquisition and a number of studies of L1 acquisition, behaviourist interpretations of language acquisition fell into disfavour. It took almost 30 years, but some of the principles of behaviourism have re-surfaced and gained recognition in a different framework (see 'Connectionism' below). One of the ideas associated with behaviourism was the notion that the L1 habits that learners had already established would interfere with the formation of new habits in the L2. The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) was proposed to account for the role of the L1 in L2 learning. CAH predicted that where similarities existed between L1 and L2 structures, there would be no difficulty for L2 learning. Where there were differences, however, the L2 learner would experience problems (Lado, 1964). When put to the test, CAH was not fully supported. It failed to predict errors that L2 learners were observed to make, and it predicted some errors that did not occur. Researchers found that L2 learners from different backgrounds made some of the same errors and that some of these errors would not have been predicted by a contrastive analysis between learners' L1 and L2. These findings, together with the rejection of behaviourist learning theories which CAH had been associated with, led a number of second language acquisition researchers in the 1970s and 1980s to argue that there was, in fact, very little L1 influence in second language acquisition (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982). Later research has tended to re-establish the importance of L1 influence, but it has also shown that the influence is complex and that it changes as the learner's competence in the second language develops (Kellerman and Sharwood Smith, 1986; Odlin, 1989).

Cognitive psychology Since the late 1980s, there has been a revival of interest in psychological theories of language learning. In contrast to the hypotheses of linguistic theories, cognitive psychologists see no reason to assume that language acquisition requires specific brain structures used uniquely for language acquisition. Rather, they hypothesize that second language acquisition, like other learning, requires the learner's attention and effort whether or not the learner is fully aware of what is being attended to. Some information processing theories suggest that language, like other skilled activity, is first acquired through intentional learning of what is called 'declarative knowledge' and that, through practice, the declarative knowledge can become 'proceduralized' and, Second language acquisition 115 with further practice, it can become 'automatic' (DeKeyser, 2003).

Other theorists make a similar contrast between ‘controlled’ and ‘automatic’ processing (Segalowitz, 2003). The difference is that controlled processing is not necessarily intentional. Controlled processing occurs when a learner is accessing information that is new or rare or complex. Controlled processing requires mental effort and takes attention away from other controlled processes. For example, a language learner who appears relatively proficient in a conversation on a familiar topic may struggle to understand an academic lecture, because the effort and attention involved in interpreting the language itself interferes with the effort and attention needed to interpret the content. Automatic processing, on the other hand, occurs quickly and with little or no attention and effort. Indeed, it is argued that we cannot prevent automatic processing and have little awareness or memory of its occurrence. Thus, once language itself is largely automatic, attention can be focused on the content. The information processing model offers a useful explanation as to why learners in the initial phases of learning seem to put so much effort into understanding and producing language. According to the information processing model, learning occurs when, through repeated practice, declarative knowledge becomes automatic. In addition to practice, it is also hypothesized that a process referred to as ‘restructuring’ may result in learners appearing to have made quite sudden changes in their interlanguage systems rather than gradually increasing the speed with which they use constructions that were already present. Restructuring is a cognitive process in which previously acquired information that has been somehow stored in separate categories is integrated and this integration expands the learner’s competence (McLaughlin, 1990; McLaughlin and Heredia, 1996). Sometimes the restructuring can lead learners to make errors that had not previously been present. For example, when a learner comes to understand that English question forms require inversion, there might be a period in which embedded questions (Do you know what the children are doing?) would be produced with inversion as well (*Do you know what are the children doing?). Some researchers working within information processing models of second language acquisition have argued that nothing is learned without ‘noticing’. That is, in order for some feature of language to be acquired, it is not enough for the learner to be exposed to it through comprehensible input. The learner must actually notice what it is in that input that makes the meaning. This idea has raised a considerable amount of interest in the context of instructed second language learning (Schmidt, 1990, 2001).

Connectionism Another psychological approach to understanding language learning is that taken in connectionist, emergentist and parallel distributed processing models (Ellis, 2003; Rumelhart and McClelland, 1986). These approaches are like the behaviourist approach in the sense that they hypothesize the development of strong associations between items that are frequently encountered together. According to these views, the brain creates networks which connect words or phrases to other words or phrases (as well as to events and objects) which occur at the same time. It is suggested that these links (or connections) are strengthened when learners are repeatedly exposed to linguistic stimuli in specific contexts. For example, when L2 learners produce *I go and she goes*, the latter does not reflect an underlying knowledge of a rule for the placement of *116 Spada and Lightbown 's'* with the third person singular. Rather, the connection between *she* and *goes* is thought to be established through high-frequency exposure to these co-occurring structures in the linguistic input. The pronoun *she* activates *goes* and the pronoun *I* triggers *go* because the learner has heard these forms in combination many many times. Research which has investigated connectionist explanations for first and second language learning has typically involved computer simulations of the learning of either artificial languages or small units of real language. Many of these studies provide evidence to support associative accounts of learning (Ellis and Schmidt, 1997). There is growing interest in this explanation for second language acquisition. Related to this approach is the observation that much of the language that even highly proficient speakers produce consists of chunks or strings of language that have a high probability of occurring together (Wray, 1999, 2007; see also Chapter 2, Grammar, and Chapter 3, Vocabulary). Researchers working within these frameworks are proposing that language is represented in the mind as a very large number of linguistic units with varying degrees of likelihood of co-occurrence, rather than as a set of linguistic rules for creating novel sentences.

Processability theory One of the central questions within psychological accounts of second language acquisition is why it is that L1 and L2 learners go through a series of predictable stages in their acquisition of grammatical features. Slobin (1973) proposed 'operating principles' to help explain what L1 learners found easier or harder to process and learn. Within second language acquisition, Processability Theory represents a way to relate underlying cognitive processes to stages in the L2 learner's development (Pienemann, 1998). Processability Theory was originally

developed as a result of studies of the acquisition of German word order and, later, on the basis of research with L2 learners of English (Pienemann, 1989). In this research, L2 learners were observed to acquire certain syntactic and morphological features of the L2 in predictable stages. These features were referred to as 'developmental'. Other features, referred to as 'variational', appeared to be learned by some but not all learners and, in any case, did not appear to be learned in a fixed sequence. With respect to the developmental features, it was suggested that each stage represented a further degree of complexity in processing strings of words and grammatical markers (Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley, 1988). For example, it seemed that learners would begin by picking out the most typical word order pattern of a language and using it in all contexts. Later, they would notice words at the beginning or end of sentences or phrases and would begin to be able to move these. Only later could they manipulate elements which were less salient because they were embedded in the middle of a string of words. Because each stage reflected an increase in complexity, a learner had to grasp one stage before moving to the next, and it was not possible to 'skip a stage'. One of the pedagogical implications drawn from the research related to Processability Theory is the 'Teachability Hypothesis': that learners can only be taught what they are psycholinguistically ready to learn.

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Some theorists who work primarily within a second language acquisition framework assume that a great deal of language learning takes place through social interaction, at least in part because interlocutors adjust their speech to make it more accessible to learners. Some of the L2 research in this framework is based on L1 research into children's interaction with their caregivers and peers. L1 studies showed that children are often exposed to a specialized variety of speech which is tailored to their linguistic and cognitive abilities (that is, child-directed speech). When native speakers engage in conversation with L2 learners, they may also adjust their language in ways intended to make it more comprehensible to the learner. Furthermore, when L2 learners interact with each other or with native speakers they use a variety of interaction techniques and adjustments in their efforts to negotiate meaning. These adjustments include modifications and simplifications in all aspects of language, including phonology, vocabulary, syntax and discourse. In an early formulation of this position for second language acquisition, Long (1985) hypothesized that, as Krashen (1982) suggests, comprehensible input is probably the essential ingredient for

interlanguage development. However, in his view, it was not in simplifying the linguistic elements of speech that interlocutors helped learners acquire language. Rather, it was in modifying the interaction patterns, by paraphrasing, repeating, clarifying or otherwise working with the L2 speaker to ensure that meaning was successfully communicated. Thus, he hypothesized, interactional adjustments improve comprehension, and comprehension allows acquisition. Considerable research has been done to document the negotiation of meaning in native/non-native interaction, and there is increasing work to investigate the effects of interaction on second language development (Mackey, 2007). Most of this work has been motivated by Long's (1996) reformulation of the interaction hypothesis that acknowledges the need for learner attention and implicit negative feedback to bring L2 learners to higher levels of lexical and syntactic performance