

**University of Tikrit**  
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**Department of English**  
**Post-Graduate Studies**



**A Course in Applied Linguistics**  
**M.A. in English Language and Linguistics**

**(Second Language Acquisition)**

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## **What is second language acquisition?**

Second language acquisition examines how people learn and use a new language when they already know at least one other language. This is important because it helps us understand how the mind stores and processes language compared to other types of information. Additionally, knowing more about how languages are learned can improve teaching methods. It can also assist politicians in setting realistic goals for language programs. This field explores linguistic and psychological theories, how learners acquire and use a second language, the impact of previously learned languages, and the role of instruction in language development.

### **Theories of L2 learning**

#### **Linguistic perspectives**

##### **Universal grammar**

Universal Grammar (UG) is a perspective that focuses on the innate linguistic competence of language users, rather than their observable linguistic performance. Researchers use indirect methodologies, such as grammar judgment tasks, to examine an individual's linguistic knowledge, even if they are not used in actual language use. Chomsky introduced UG to explain children's language learning abilities, positing that they possess an innate language module called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) or Universal Grammar (UG), which aids them in acquiring language effortlessly during a critical period of development. UG is believed to encompass fundamental principles common to all languages, enabling children to grasp the structural patterns and rules inherent in their native language. However, the extent to which UG influences second language acquisition remains a subject of debate among researchers. While UG plays a significant role in shaping first language acquisition, its impact on second language acquisition is less clear. Some scholars argue that the mechanisms involved in second language learning may differ from those used in first language acquisition, suggesting a more nuanced influence.

## **Monitor Theory**

Monitor Theory, developed by Krashen, focuses on how people learn a second language. It suggests that there are two ways to pick up a language: "acquisition" happens naturally while using the language to communicate, and "learning" involves consciously studying the rules and forms of the language. The theory proposes that learners can use what they've learned to correct their speech if they pay attention to accuracy. Exposure to understandable language input, slightly above the learner's current level, is key to language development according to this theory. Motivation and being open to learning are also crucial for successful language acquisition. While Monitor Theory has faced criticism for being hard to test empirically, its ideas have influenced language teaching significantly. Many teachers and students find its distinction between "learning" and "acquisition" relatable, especially in classrooms that focus more on talking about the language rather than using it actively.

## **Psychological perspectives**

### **Behaviorism**

Behaviorism was a dominant theory in psychology and education until Chomsky challenged it in the late 1960s. Behaviorism believed that all learning, including language acquisition, happened through imitation, practice, and reinforcement. According to behaviorists, learners formed habits by repeating correct language they heard in the environment. However, Chomsky argued that children create new and original language expressions, indicating that language acquisition was not just copying. This criticism led to a decline in the popularity of behaviorist theories.

The idea that the first language could interfere with second language learning was also examined through the *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* (CAH), which suggested that similarities between languages would aid learning, but research showed this was not entirely accurate. Later studies recognized that the influence of the first language on second language acquisition is more subtle and changes as proficiency in the second language increases.

## **Cognitive psychology**

Psychological theories of how we learn languages have become popular again since the late 1980s. Unlike linguistic theories, cognitive psychologists don't think special parts of our brain are needed just for language learning. They believe that learning a second language, similar to learning other things, requires attention and effort from the learner, even if the learner doesn't realize they're learning. Some theories suggest that initially, we consciously learn language rules (declarative knowledge) and with practice, this knowledge becomes automatic. There's a difference between deliberate, focused processing (controlled) and quick, effortless processing (automatic). Automatic processing happens when a skill becomes so practiced that it no longer needs much attention. For language learners, this shift to automatic processing allows them to focus more on the content of what they're reading or hearing. The process of restructuring also plays a role, where learners integrate separate language knowledge into a more comprehensive system, sometimes leading to temporary errors as they refine their understanding. Some researchers believe that learners need to actively "notice" language features in input to truly learn them, not just be exposed to them passively. This idea has sparked interest in how we teach second languages effectively.

## **Connectionism**

In addition to traditional behaviorist theories, there are newer ideas in psychology about how we learn languages. These connectionist models suggest that our brains build strong connections between words and phrases that are often used together. When learners repeatedly hear certain word combinations, like "she goes," their brains link the words together. It's not about consciously knowing grammar rules but about forming these automatic connections through exposure. Research using computer simulations supports this view of language learning, showing that learners store language as chunks or common phrases rather than rules to build sentences from scratch. Instead of memorizing rules, the brain stores a vast number of word combinations based on how likely they are to occur together.

## **Sociocultural perspectives**

### **Learner language**

In the '70s, researchers recognized non-random "interlanguage" patterns in L2 learners' speech, despite deviating from the target language. Selinker coined the term "interlanguage" for this evolving L2 system. Error analyses revealed that while some mistakes stemmed from L1 influences, others did not. Dismissing traditional contrastive analysis, certain scholars claimed L2 learners didn't solely depend on their native languages as sources of L2 hypothesis formation. Contrastively, behaviorist approaches to language learning often downplayed the role of L1, leading some researchers to shift focus towards commonalities across diverse L2 learners rather than differences due to L1 background.

### **Instruction and second language acquisition**

Instruction is crucial for second language acquisition, enhancing learning speed and long-term proficiency. It can accelerate the process and improve language use accuracy. Scholars debate the role of instruction, with some advocating for comprehensible input and others aligning it with learners' developmental stages. Effective teaching tailored to the next stage can enhance progress, but instruction cannot skip stages in the language acquisition process. Using communicative and content-based language teaching can provide natural language input, fostering better comprehension and communication skills. However, classroom settings may have limitations in offering a complete range of linguistic features. Teaching about language rules directly or indirectly can be helpful, as students learn better in classes with clear usage and instructions.