Chapter 13 Second language acquisition
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"Delving Deeper"

SLA in generative grammar

The application of generative approaches to L2 acquisition began relatively late, in the early 1980s. As linguistic theories have evolved, so too have the questions related to late acquisition.

As we all recognize, L2 learners hardly ever reach a native-like level of proficiency, although a small number of speakers do. For example, many L2 learners of English often omit the agreement and tense morphemes. In languages such as Spanish, French, German and Portuguese, acquisition of gender and gender agreement is often difficult. In many languages that include articles these are omitted or misused by learners whose first language does not include them.

An explanation for why there are differences between native and L2 acquisition is at the centre of generative approaches and debates, and, since early days, the question has revolved around whether second language learners, particularly adult learners, still have access to the principles and parameters of Universal Grammar (UG). There are three main schools of thought.

Fundamental difference between L1 and L2 acquisition

According to some researchers (Meisel, 2011), UG is no longer available in L2 acquisition. As a consequence, not only is the production and comprehension of the L2 by adult learners deficient, but the underlying grammar is too. This does not mean you can never learn to communicate efficiently in a second language, it simply means that you will be using non-linguistic approaches to learning and perhaps different types of memory (Paradis, 2004).

Partial access to UG

According to this school of thought (Hawkins, 2001), UG is available but the learner is constrained by the parameters of the first language. The L2 grammar will be a natural language, with no violations of UG principles, but it will differ from the target language that the learner is attempting to acquire in that some of the rules of their L1 will be present in the L2 grammar. For example, imagine an English speaker is learning German. In German, the verb moves to C, while in English the verb remains within the verb phrase, as you learned in Chapter 5 Syntax. According to the Partial Access approach, adult L2 speakers will never violate any of the universal principles of language, but they will always tend to leave the verb within the verb phrase, which will lead to errors in German word order. L2 learners may not do this all the time, after all we are all intelligent enough to learn almost anything, but there will be a certain amount of optionality in L2 German. How often the error is made will depend on the learners' level of proficiency.

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Full Access to UG

The most common view within this school of thought is referred to as *full transfer/full access* (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996), because it is assumed that the learner transfers the full grammar of the L1 in the initial stage. As new input is received, learners adapt the L1 structure to approximate the L2. In some cases the input will be so strong that the change almost seems to be instantaneous, in other cases the input is more confusing and it will take more time. For example, a Japanese learner of English may change the subject-object-verb word order of Japanese to the English subject-verb-object order very quickly because the input is clear and unambiguous: English never places the object before the verb. On the other hand, a French L1 speaker learning that the English verb stays in the verb phrase may take more time as verb raising vs. no verb movement involves many factors: do-support and the position of modals in questions and negation, and the placement of adverbs.

In recent approaches the focus on general parameters has lost importance as the role of functional morphology has become significant. Different properties of a particular morpheme have to be teased apart by the learners, and this may be considerably more difficult than learning very general rules. For example, in Chapter 5 Syntax you learned that some languages may not include determiners. However, even languages that do include determiners may differ from each other in how they are used. Consider the English examples in (1).

(1) a. Tigers are aggressive.
b. The tigers are aggressive.

The interpretation of sentence (1a) is that aggressivity is a property of tigers in general. In (1b) we interpret the sentence to mean that a particular set of tigers is aggressive. Compare these two sentences to Spanish (2).

(2) a. *Tigres son agresivos.
tigers are aggressive
'Tigers are aggressive.'

b. Los tigres son agresivos.
the tigers are aggressive

As (2a) shows, omitting the article in Spanish is ungrammatical. Therefore, (2b) is ambiguous: it can be interpreted as meaning either that tigers are aggressive in general, the equivalent of English (1a), or that a particular group of tigers is aggressive, the equivalent of (1b). Now consider how you could deduce this if you are learning Spanish as a L2. Whenever you hear the sentence you will be faced with tigers that are aggressive. You would need a great deal of input to tease apart the rules for Spanish.

As with L1 acquisition, we have come a long way in understanding the problems faced by L2 learners, but we still have a lot to do.

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Early Pedagogies in SLA

In the 1800s, second language learning predominately was seen as a procedure which was facilitated by memorizing lists of vocabulary and learning grammatical rules which could then be subsequently practiced extensively through translation. The main objectives for learning a second language in this time period was for literary translation and research although it was very much believed to be a learning task that improved logic skills and reasoning. This method was known as the **grammar translation approach** and, unlike some contemporary teaching methods, this approach did not discourage the use or reliance on the first language. The end result of the grammar translation approach was not to train learners how to orally communicate in the second language, but to foster the ability to read, write, and translate written language.

By the late 1800s, as the need for oral communication and fluency became increasingly important, the **direct method** emerged as a favorable alternative to the grammar translation approach. This method, largely developed by Charles Berlitz, who later started a chain of private language institutes, emphasized speaking and listening skills. According to the direct method, it was believed that, like first language learners, second language learners did not need explicit instruction of grammatical rules, rather natural spoken interaction. The direct method argued that if teachers made every effort, without using the L1, to present information using actions and pictures, second language learners would have the necessary input needed to acquire the second language naturally and directly.

Although the direct method was favoured for a few decades, it never took hold as the predominant and preferred teaching method in public school systems in North America. By the mid-1900s and up until the 1970s, the **audiolingual method** dominated second language pedagogical approaches and focused on the importance of intensive exposure to accurate input in the second language. Because it was heavily grounded in behaviourist theories which viewed learning as habit formation, the audiolingual method showcased grammatical drills, memorization, and language laboratory practice with oral skills and accurate pronunciation. Little attention was given to the explicit instruction of grammar or focus on content or meaning.

With the shift away from behaviourism in linguistics in the 1960s largely due to Chomsky's ground-breaking theories on the creative potential of language, the audiolingual method was replaced by a learner-centred view of second language teaching. These "humanistic language teaching approaches," as they were known, valued the intricate relationship and social interaction of humans as an important piece of second language learning. Drawing on education and psychology and sociocultural theories, one teaching approach known as **community language learning** idealized teachers as counselors whose role was to provide a warm, nonthreatening, and welcoming environment in which language learners could lower their affective filter (i.e., perhaps by eliminating insecurities and reducing anxiety levels) in order to acquire the language. At around the same time that community language learning was gaining popularity, the **Silent Way** also emerged. Developed by Caleb Gattegno, 1963), in the silent way, the teacher only talks when it is absolutely necessary, pushing learners to make meaningful learning connections and raise awareness of the second language on their own. Essentially, the silent way identifies the importance of autonomous learners who have an active role in their own learning, a process in which learners' efforts are constantly monitored by teachers.

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Another second language teaching pedagogy that took hold in the 1980s is the **Natural Approach**. Based on Krashen's monitor model, the natural approach argues that learners must be exposed to massive amounts of comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. The natural approach drew on several of the previously mentioned teaching approaches but it perhaps differentiated itself from the rest by emphasizing the importance of meaningful communication in non-threatening learning environments.

Early approaches to studying SLA: Behaviourism, Contrastive Analysis, and Error Analysis

As discussed in the Chapter 12 First Language Acquisition, behaviourism was the predominant line of thought in psychology in the 1950s. Under the influence of Skinner, its main defender, many researchers at first thought that behaviourism held explanatory power when it came to language acquisition. Some of the first theoretical approaches to second language acquisition in the 1950s and 60s were based on behaviourist hypotheses and argued that second language acquisition, like first language acquisition, was a learned behaviour that was shaped by procedures of imitation, repetition, and reinforcement. Consequently, second language teaching in these decades focussed on rote memorization of grammatical structures and repetition of phrases.

Around the same time that behaviourism was thriving, Lado's (1957) **Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis** gained popularity in the up-and-coming field of second language acquisition. This hypothesis argued that a comparative analysis of the structure of two languages would reveal areas of divergence which could then in turn be used to predict problematic grammatical areas during second language acquisition. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis posits positive transfer from a first language to a second language when structures in the two languages are the same and negative transfer (or no transfer) when structures are different. This hypothesis is aimed at predicting, explaining, and correcting areas of difficulty during second language acquisition. It is interesting to note that as a methodology, the idea that comparing languages allows us to predict learner outcomes is at the basis of a great deal of Universal Grammar- (UG) based research. Recall that UG is a theory which argues that not only do all human languages share certain universal characteristics (e.g., all languages have vowels), it views language acquisition as an innate ability for humans that emerges without being taught. The table below shows examples of structures that may be erroneously produced by an English first language speaker learning a second language and some possible utterances that could be expected based on the negative transfer from the first language.

Table. Predicting potential second language errors using the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

L1 structure	L2 structure	Predicted error	Explanation
I see Maria.	Veo a María.	*Veo María.	The Spanish personal "a" (English: "to") is needed to introduce an animate direct object. Because this structure does not exist in English, it may be left out.

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Jim has a blue car.	Jim a une voiture bleu.	*Jim a une bleu voiture.	French adjectives normally follow the nouns that they describe. Because adjectives precede nouns in English, incorrect syntax may occur.
I will throw away the trash.	Ich werde den Müll wegwerfen.	*Ich werde wegwerfen den Müll.	German verbs sometimes are placed at the end of a sentence. Because English does not allow for this structure, the verb may be incorrectly placed.

Although the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis did not make any direct arguments against behaviourism, the **Error Analysis** approach helped to identify some major weaknesses regarding the validity and applicability of behaviourism to second language acquisition. In fact, while Contrastive Analysis suggested that it was ideal to avoid making errors when speaking a second language, Pit Corder in the 1960s and 70s argued that errors made by second language learners could be used as a window to understand language acquisition processes. The Error Analysis methodology studies the types of L2 errors produced and their causes and commonly classifies them according to:

- modality (i.e., proficiency level of a specific language skill)
- linguistic levels (i.e., pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic)
- form (e.g., deletion, insertion, substitution)
- type (systematic vs. occasional errors)
- cause (e.g., cross-linguistic interference, interlanguage)

Many studies of error analysis have indicated that, while nearly half of errors made in spoken and written language can be traced back to the first language, the other half cannot. Further studies revealed that errors were one of two types: Interlingual (because of negative first language transfer) or intralingual (because of overgeneralizing second language rules).

The earliest approaches to studying second language acquisition are quite different from how researchers view and investigate the field today. Perhaps one could say that although each of the approaches discussed have had implications for what we know about how second languages are acquired, each has its drawbacks which may be why they eventually fell out of popularity among researchers. For instance, those who argued against behaviorism felt that second language acquisition was not simply a collection of reinforced habits in which second language learners reproduce only what they have heard. On the contrary, as we have seen in Chapter 12 First Language Acquisition, second language learners often use their non-native language creatively by producing and comprehending things they have never heard before. One of the criticisms of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was that in addition to not being able to predict subjective difficulty (e.g., whether a second language learner easily produces an erroneous form or struggles to produce a correct form), researchers began to take note that many of the second language errors that learners actually produced were not predicted to occur. In other words, second language learners produce errors that cannot be traced back to their L1.

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What was most critical of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was that the transfer of habits from the L1 to L2 is not necessarily consistent across languages. One famous example comes from Zobl's study (1980) in which the placement of object pronouns in English and French was studied. In English, object pronouns (underlined) come after the verb (*I see them*) and in French, they generally come before the verb (*Je les vois*). According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, it is predicted that French learners of English, at least at early stages, would produce erroneous constructions such as **I them see* and English learners of French may produce errors such as **Je vois les*. However, Zobl's study demonstrated that French learners of English failed to commit a predicted error but English learners of French did. It was apparent that L1 transfer and the prediction of errors in an L2 were not as straightforward as researchers had hoped. An analysis of the origin of the errors, instead of trying to predict them, became popular with the introduction of the Error Analysis method. Although the Error Analysis method is also no longer common among researchers today, the shift from viewing the L1 as being the only explanation for L2 development allowed research to focus on second language acquisition as a systematic development of an L2 grammar, a dynamic set of abstract rules.

Like many theories in linguistics, those pertaining to SLA have developed and taken shape in the context of a dynamic interdisciplinary field. In early approaches, behaviorism and methods of comparing and contrasting the L1 with the L2 were favoured but quickly fell out of popularity among researchers as they began to take note of some of their limitations and inaccurate predictions that were discussed above. While these early approaches are no longer favourites among researchers today, it is undeniable that each has had a significant impact on our knowledge of how non-native languages are systematically and dynamically acquired.

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