

Second Language Acquisition: Where We are Heading to

*Jai Raj Awasthi**

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a relatively new discipline in the field of applied linguistics. Gass and Selinker (1994:4) define it as the term that “refers to the learning of a language *after* the learning of the native language. As with the phrase “second language”, L2 can refer to any language learned *after* learning the L1, regardless of whether it is the second, third, fourth or fifth language.” This definition has solved a long lasting controversy that persisted among language learners regarding the word *second* language. The multilingual language speakers count the languages they learned in turn in course of time as first, second, third and so forth. Making a difference between a second and foreign language which are often synonymously taken Gass and Selinker further state that “learning in a second language environment takes place with considerable access to speakers of the language being learned, whereas learning in a foreign language environment usually does not”(ibid: 5). Thus, learning environment plays a significant role in the acquisition of the first, second and foreign languages.

In recent years, SLA is trying to establish itself as a separate discipline in the field of linguistics. “SLA is thought of as a discipline devoted to discovery and characterizing how it is that a human being is able to learn a second language: what knowledge does he or she bring to the task, what set of learning procedures does he or she use, what strategies are appropriate for certain phenomena and not others, etc. (Schachter, 1993:173).” However, as a growing discipline, it is also drawing the knowledge from different disciplines. “SLA draws on multidisciplinary theoretical and empirical perspectives to address the specific issues of how people acquire a second language and the specific problem of why everyone does not do so successfully” (Larsen-Freeman 2000:165). What follows now is a brief history of SLA as to how it grew in the past and where it is heading to now.

Abstract

The present paper begins with the definition of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and briefly highlights its birth and growth in the historical perspectives. It also sheds light on the changes it has undergone keeping in view the issues that the researchers dealt with in course of time.

* Dr Awasthi is Professor at the Department of English Education, Tribhuvan University

The beginning of SLA

The birth of SLA ties up with the behaviourist psychology flourishing in the 1940s post war period and the American structuralism, the aim being “to study, discover and characterize the what and how of any language acquired to any degree after the putative first language (Block, 2003:8).” Behaviourism, as Block (2003) explains after Bloomfield is that children learn their first language via a sequence of events that involves the association of uttered sounds with positive and negative responses which led to reinforcement or a change of behaviour. Structuralists following behaviourism believe ‘the study of language learning to be exclusively about observable behaviour’ (ibid: 13). During the same period, Contrastive Analysis (CA) emerged with a view to comparing the native and target languages for predicting the areas of difficulties that the learners feel while learning the latter. After the publication of books like Fries’ *Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language* (1945), and Uriel Weinreich’s (1953) *Language in Contact*, CA obtained utmost importance in course of designing materials for the teaching and learning of a foreign language. These works also introduced the concepts of ‘transfer’ and ‘interference’.

In 1957 Robert Lado published the book *Linguistics Across Culture* “which brought together behaviourist psychology and structural linguistics in the development of CA as a rigorous means of deciding what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it” (Block 2003:14). The structural linguists practised Audiolingulism as a method of teaching second/foreign language which was backed by ‘a theory of language and a theory of language learning (ibid: 14)’. Syllabi and materials were designed based on the results of CA with the presumption that errors were the outcome of the mother tongue interference. However, Chomsky’s attack on *Verbal Behaviour* gave a blow to the behaviourist psychology and the theories/methods of language teaching based on it. Ellis (1994a:300) gives a candid summary of the impact of Chomsky’s review on *Verbal Behaviour* : “Chomsky’s review of Skinner’s *Verbal Behaviour* set in motion a re-evaluation of many of the central

claims. The dangers of extrapolating from laboratory studies of animal behaviour to the language behaviour of humans were pointed out. The terms ‘stimulus’ and ‘response’ were exposed as vacuous where language behaviour was concerned. ‘Analogy’ could not account for the language user’s ability to generate totally novel utterances. Furthermore, studies of children acquiring their L1 showed that parents rarely corrected their children’s linguistic errors, thus, casting doubt on the importance of ‘reinforcement’ in language learning... the demise of behaviourist accounts of language learning led to reconsideration of the role of L1 in L2 learning.”

The hay days of CA did not last long as the prediction made after comparing and contrasting the native and target languages often failed as the learners committed errors in non-predicted areas as well. This led the emergence of Error Analysis (EA) in 1960s. Corder (1967) in his article *The Significance of Errors* took a different role regarding the ‘conceptualisation and significance’ (Gass and Selinker, 1994:66) of errors. Since then errors were taken as the important aspects in language teaching. They symbolize the sign of imperfect learning rather than long held notion of addressing them as ‘unwanted’, ‘sin’, ‘to be eradicated’, etc. They present the learners’ attempt towards learning and a system that the learner generates himself/herself. In some sense, this is the beginning of the field of second language acquisition, which at point is beginning to emerge as a field of interest, not only for pedagogical implications that may result from knowing about second language learning.

The beginning of SLA led to the emergence of several methods and techniques in the field of second/foreign language teaching and as a result the 1980s was declared as the method era by applied linguists and ESL/EFL experts.

During 1970s the system that the learner develops in course of the acquisition of second language is named as ‘approximative system’ (Nemser, 1971), and Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). Selinker (1992:149) gives credit to Corder(1967) for the interest that his seminal paper aroused in SLA and Interlanguage. When “Corder made the point that learner errors

should not be seen as proof of incomplete learning, but as proof that learners at any given point in their L2 development possess some form of linguistic competence which is systematic." This paper further brought attitudinal change in the second language teachers with regards to their perception of learners' errors.

Sharwood Smith (1994) believes that these researchers including Corder (1967) came up with three basic assumptions regarding the learners' linguistic competence:

- that language learners are in possession of a complex and creative learning device;
- that learner's language competence at any given time is internally coherent and systematic; and
- that the learner's transitional competence or interlanguage is an idiolect.

Thus, the ground works of SLA started by these researchers. The primary phase moved to the direction of creative construction which refers to "a school of thought which maintained the view that L1 and L2 acquisition were similar and were driven by the same subconscious learning mechanisms unaffected by the conscious intervention and cross-linguistic influence" (Sharwood Smith, 1994:197). Several research studies, and particularly in the acquisition of morphemes and their order were carried out during the initial period. Brown (1973) and Dulay and Burt (1973, 1975) were some of the pioneers in this field. The two decades long misconception regarding errors as the result of L1 interference was refuted after several study results that showed that the major chunks of the errors were committed by the learners due to the intralingual complexities in the language itself or are developmental in nature. It was during the 1970s, attempts were also made based on the research results to equate L1 with L2 in terms of the order of acquisition. Krashen (1976) took this proposition very seriously and brought a theory/model of SLA made up of five interrelated hypotheses: acquisition and learning, natural order, input hypothesis, monitor model and affective filter hypothesis. But McLaughlin evaluates Krashen's theory. He

thinks that any SLA theory must "have definitional precision and explanatory power,...be consistent with what is currently known,...be heuristically rich in its predictions,... and.. . be falsifiable" (1987:55). Krashen's theory does not seem to meet these criteria. Whatever weaknesses labeled against Krashen, his contribution to SLA is exemplary in the sense that he pioneered the advancement of researchable questions. He "advanced the legacy of Corder by trying together what Selinker sees as the third epistemological database available to SLA researchers: the experimental, the observational and empirical", (Block 2003:23). In addition, his work advanced the research work further in a broad model. His *monitor* model strengthened the tradition laid down by Corder despite its weaknesses. "One of the things which had made(Krashen's monitor model) interesting and intriguing is that it reflects the complex nature of SLA, taking into account concerns of linguistic theory (through its 'natural order' hypothesis), social psychology theory(through its 'affective filter hypothesis'), psychological learning theory(through its 'acquisition learning hypothesis'), discourse analysis and sociolinguistic theory (through both the 'comprehensible input hypothesis and the 'monitor' hypothesis)" Lightbrown (1984: 245-56). It is because of all these reasons Krashen is well read by teachers and students in the field of applied linguistics, TESOL and SLA.

The 1980s and beyond

During this period several research works on SLA were carried out and several theories proposed and discussed. Many researchers also attempted to make SLA an autonomous discipline. Ellis (1994a:18) proposed the following model for the investigation of SLA.

Ellis through this model tries to see the development of SLA in course of time and the emphases that the researchers put while carrying out their research works. The initial research works concentrated on CA, EA and interlanguage studies but in course of time the area of studies diversified. Thus, the SLA study extended to the four areas mentioned above and beyond in course of time. Similarly, Ritchie and

<i>Focus Learning</i>		<i>Focus on the Learner</i>	
Description		Explanation	
Area 1 Characteristics of learner's language	Area 2 Learner external factors	Area 3 Learner internal mechanism	Area 4 Individual learner differences
Errors	Social context	L 1 transfer	Learner strategies
Acquisition orders and developmental sequences	Input and interaction	Learning process	
Variability		Communication strategies	
Pragmatic features		Knowledge of linguistics universals	

Bhatia (1996:19) make a survey of the discipline and identified the following questions that led the SLA studies during this period:

- What cognitive structures and abilities underlie the L2 learner's use of his or her L2?
- What properties of the *linguistic input* to the L2 learner are relevant to acquisition?
- What is the nature of the L2 learner's capacity for attaining the cognitive structures and abilities referred to in (a)?

We may simplify the above questions in the following way:

- What is the nature of the L2 learner's *overall capacity* for language acquisition?
- How is that capacity deployed in real time to determine the *course* of SLA?

In course of time, several theories and models of SLA have been proposed but it is very difficult to state their exact number. They range now from fifteen to over forty. Long (1985) recorded about twenty theories of SLA but along with Larsen-Freeman (1991) he records over forty theories. Long (1993:225) 'includes theories, hypotheses, models, metaphors, perspectives, theoretical claims, theoretical models, and theoretical perspectives' and the number comes from 40-60. However,

McLaughlin (1987) discusses five theories in his book *Theories of Second Language Learning*.

Input and interaction (Long, 1981) got prominence in SLA in the 1980s, a stretch of Krashen's comprehensible input as it required completion. A further stretch to it led to the emergence of output (Swain, 1985). It is output that receives feedback. However, 'it was Gass who has provided the most comprehensive model along these lines and it is therefore Gass who will serve as the model for what is meant by Input Interaction and Output (IIO) model' (Block, 2003: 26). Thus, the IIO model got prominence against the Krashen's exclusive input hypothesis model which got prominence in the 1970s. The journey is still on and we may see several SLA theories/ models in the days ahead.

Conclusion

SLA as a new discipline emerged with the practice of CA, EA and interlanguage. Several applied linguists contributed significantly to its growth. Many theories/models have been proposed and the researchers in the past have emphasized on various aspects of SLA in their studies. Starting with the monitor model and input hypothesis, SLA study has extended to input-interaction-output model in recent years.

References

- Block, D. 1991. Some thoughts on DIY materials design. *ELT Journal*, 45/3, 211-217.
- _____. 2003. *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Washington DC: George Town University Press.
- Brown, R. 1973. *A First Language: The Early Stages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press.
- Corder, S.Pit. 1967. The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL* 10:209-31.
- _____.1981. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: OUP.
- Dulay, H.C. & M.K. Burt. 1973. Should we teach children syntax? *Language Learning*. 23/2, 245-258.
- _____. 1974. You can't learn without goofing: an analysis of children's second language errors. In J. C. Richards (Ed.). 1974, 95-123.
- Fries, C.C. 1945. *Teaching and Learning English as Foreign Language*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ellis, R. 1994a. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gass, S.M. & L. Selinker. 1994. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Krashen, S.D.1976. Formal and informal linguistic environments in language acquisition and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*.10/2:157-68.
- Lado, R. 1957. *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Larsen-Freeman, D.&M.Long.1991.*An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 2000. Second language acquisition and applied linguistics. *IRAL* 20:165-181.
- Lightbrown, P.M. 2002. The role of SLA researches in L2 teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 23/4: 529-535.
- Long, M.H. 1981. Input, interaction and second language acquisition. In H. Winitz (ed.) *Native Language and Foreign Language Acquisition: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 379. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, pp.259-278.
- _____.1981. Input, interaction and second language acquisition. In H. Winitz(ed) *Native language and Foreign Language Acquisition*. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.379:259-78.
- _____.1985. Input and second language acquisition theory. In S.M. Gass and C. Madden (eds.). *Input in Second language Acquisition*. Rowley,MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.: 377-93.
- _____.1993. Assessment strategies for SLA theories. *Applied Linguistics*. 14/3:225-49.
- McLaughlin, B. 1987. *Theories of Second Language Learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Nemser, W. 1971. Approximative system of foreign language learners. *IRAL*, 5:161-9.
- Richie, W.C. & T. K. Bhatia. 1996. *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Schachter, J. 1993. Second language acquisition, perception and possibilities. *Second Language Research*.9/2:173-87.
- Selinker, L. 1972. Interlanguage. *IRAL*. 10:115-23.
- _____. 1992. *Rediscovering Interlanguage*. London: Longman.
- Sharwood Smith, M. 1994. *Second Language Learning: Theoretical Foundations*. London: Longman.
- Swain, M. 1985. "Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development". In S. Gass and C. Madden (eds.) *Input in Second language Education*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Weinreich,U. 1953. *Language in Contact*. The Hague: Mouton.