



Level: M1

Module: Second Language Acquisition

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Lecture One: Introduction to Second Language Acquisition

1. Key Terms

Understanding Second Language Acquisition requires a precise command of its specialized terminology. The field, often considered a sub-discipline of applied linguistics, investigates how individuals learn a language subsequent to their native (first) language. Central to this study are several theoretical constructs that define the learning process and its outcomes.

Mother Tongue L1 Vs Second / Foreign Tongue L2

The term Mother Tongue (L1) refers to the first language acquired naturally in infancy, providing the cognitive and linguistic baseline. In contrast to L1, Second/Foreign Language (L2) refers to any language learned after the L1. The environment determines the distinction: a Second Language is learned in a community where it is widely spoken (e.g., an immigrant learning English in the US), whereas a Foreign Language is learned in a context where it is not the primary language of communication (e.g., an American student learning Japanese in the US).

Input Vs Output

Input refers to the language raw material or data a learner hears or reads. Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model posits that comprehensible input ($i+1$, where 'i' is the learner's current level) is the single necessary component for acquisition to occur. Input must be: Comprehensible: Meaning must be understood, even if not every word is known. Abundant: Learners require massive exposure to internalize patterns. Relevant: Input should relate to the learner's communicative needs and interests. Without sufficient, high-quality input, the cognitive mechanisms for language acquisition cannot operate effectively.

Output refers to the language a learner produces (speaking or writing). Merrill Swain's Output Hypothesis suggests that output is not merely a practice mechanism; it serves three critical functions beyond input: The Noticing Function: Forces learners to notice gaps between their interlanguage and

the target language. The Hypothesis Testing Function: Allows learners to test their tentative rules of the L2 and receive feedback.

Interlanguage

One of the most foundational concepts is Interlanguage (IL), introduced by Larry Selinker (1972). IL refers to the unique linguistic system a second language learner develops, which is structurally intermediate between the learner's L1 and the target L2. Interlanguage is not merely a collection of errors; it is systematic and rule-governed, evolving as the learner tests hypotheses about the target language. Key features of Interlanguage include:

Systematicity: Even errors are predictable and based on the learner's current internalized rules.

Permeability: The system is receptive to new L2 input, allowing for change and growth.

Variability: The learner's language use changes depending on context (e.g., more accurate in formal testing, less accurate in spontaneous conversation).

Transfer

The interplay between a learner's first language (L1) and the target language (L2) introduces the concept of Transfer. Transfer is the influence of L1 structures on L2 learning, which can be positive (facilitating learning) or negative (causing errors)

While, Positive Transfer occurs when L1 structure aligns with L2 structure, accelerating acquisition (e.g., cognates), Negative Transfer (Interference) Occurs when L1 structure conflicts with L2, leading to errors (e.g., word order, phonology).

Fossilization

A related, often perplexing, phenomenon is Fossilization. Selinker (1972) defines this as the cessation of interlanguage development before the learner reaches target language norms, despite continuous exposure to the L2 or further instruction. While some scholars debate the permanency and universality of fossilization, it remains a critical concept for explaining plateaus in learner progress, particularly in phonology and morphology. This process is generally attributed to internal mechanisms, potentially related to neural commitment or socio-psychological factors.

Hence, the concept of Interlanguage moved the focus of SLA research from merely identifying errors (Contrastive Analysis) to understanding the learner's unique, rule-governed system. Errors became then crucial data

Error vs Mistake

Two critical terms often confused are Error and Mistake, distinctions popularized by scholars like Corder. Recognizing the source of deviation in a learner's utterance is crucial for pedagogical intervention.

Error (Competence) : A systematic deviation made by a learner who has not yet mastered the target language rule. Errors reveal gaps in the learner's underlying knowledge or competence. They are typically resistant to self-correction.

Mistake (Performance): A random, non-systematic deviation due to factors like fatigue, inattention, or memory lapses. Mistakes reflect a lapse in performance, not a lack of competence, and the speaker can usually self-correct when prompted.

2. Language

Defining "language" is a complex task, as it is simultaneously a cognitive mechanism, a behavioral system, and a social construct. SLA theory must account for all three dimensions to fully capture the learning process.

Language as a Human Capacity: Rooted in Universal Grammar (Chomsky), this perspective views language as an innate, specialized cognitive faculty unique to humans. It is the mental system (competence) that allows for infinite productivity from finite means. This capacity governs the acquisition device, suggesting a biological predisposition for language learning.

Language as Human Behavior: Influenced by behaviorist traditions (Skinner), this views language as a set of observable verbal behaviors learned through imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habit formation (performance). While less dominant in modern SLA, this perspective highlights the importance of input, output, and practice in observable language use.

Language as Social Phenomenon : Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky) emphasizes that language is fundamentally a tool for social interaction and cultural mediation. Learning occurs through negotiation of meaning within a community of practice. This view prioritizes communication, context, and the roles of identity and power in shaping language acquisition.

In SLA, the term "language" is approached not just as a tool for communication, but as a complex cognitive system subject to universal principles. Key to this perspective is Noam Chomsky's distinction between Competence and Performance, which frames how we measure and interpret a learner's capacity.

Linguistic Competence: The underlying, often unconscious, knowledge of a language system—the rules of grammar, syntax, and morphology—that resides in the mind of the native or fluent speaker. In SLA, the goal of research is often to uncover the nature of the learner's evolving competence.

Linguistic Performance: The actual use of language in concrete situations. Performance is subject to nonlinguistic factors like fatigue, memory constraints, and distraction, meaning it is not a perfect reflection of underlying competence.

Communicative Competence: Dell Hymes (1972) expands on Chomsky, arguing that knowing a language involves not just grammatical rules, but also knowing when, where, and how to use language appropriately in social contexts. This includes sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

3. Acquisition

“Acquisition is the way people develop ability in a first language... Learning is the process that results in knowing about language.” Stephen Krashen

Learning is a conscious process resulting from formal instruction, studying grammar rules, and error correction. It is explicit, focusing on the form of the language. Learned knowledge functions primarily as a "Monitor" or editor for acquired language.

Acquisition is a subconscious process, similar to how children acquire their L1. It is implicit, meaning the learner is often unaware of the process itself, focusing instead on the meaning of the communication. It leads to spontaneous, fluent language use (the 'knower').

The learned knowledge (Monitor) can only be used to correct or polish language output that was generated by the acquired system. It can only operate when conditions are met: time, focus on form, and knowledge of the rule.

Quiz

A. True or False

1. According to Krashen, learning (conscious knowledge) can easily become Acquisition (subconscious competence).
2. Negative Transfer is also known as Interference, and it is a type of Error.

B. Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which term describes a systematic error that reveals a gap in the learner's competence?
A. Mistake B. Fossilization C. Error D. Positive Transfer

C. Critical Thinking

Consider the three definitions of language: as Capacity, as Behavior, and as Social Phenomenon. Which of these perspectives, in your view, is most relevant to addressing the issue of Fossilization in adult L2 learners, and why?

