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What Should I Know about Second Language Acquisition?

- *Do you think that some languages are easier to learn than others?*
- *Does it matter whether you learn a language in a classroom or within a community where it is spoken?*
- *What kinds of practice are helpful in language learning?*

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

This chapter and the next will discuss two essential topics for language teachers: second language acquisition theories and language teaching methodologies. Although there are many ways that these topics overlap, they generally discuss different issues and offer different kinds of advice for language teachers. Language teachers study the academic field of second language acquisition to understand how humans learn new languages so that they can plan activities and experiences for their students that are consistent with what scholars have discovered about the nature of language learning. Second language acquisition considers how people learn second languages and what factors influence their learning. It addresses questions such as, What role does a learner's first language play in learning a second language? Why are some people more successful as language learners than others? And do children and adults learn

languages differently? Language teaching methodologies (the topic of Chapter 3) are much more specific about what language teachers should do in the classroom. They suggest specific types of activities and instructional sequences.

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA) theories are descriptions of how people learn second languages and the factors that help or hinder language learning. To be useful to teachers, these theories should offer explanations of how languages are learned and why some learners are more successful than others. This chapter will describe four types of second language acquisition theories that have been most widely applied in language teaching and discuss how they can be applied in language teaching. They are First Language Theories, Attention Theories, Experience Theories, and Social Theories.

First Language Theories

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis: Some Important Concepts

- | | |
|--|--|
| Target Language | • The language that the learner is trying to learn. Often referred to as second language and abbreviated as L2. |
| First Language | • Usually the home language and the learner's strongest language. When learners grow up in a bilingual home, they can have more than one "first" language. Often abbreviated as L1. |
| Behavioral Psychology (Behaviorism) | • A learning theory associated with B. F. Skinner which maintains that learning is achieved through reinforcement. |
| Habit-Formation | • In behavioral psychology, behaviors can become habits when they are reinforced. |
| Reinforcement | • A reward or other positive response to an action. |
| The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis | • An early SLA theory that maintained that the structure of the learner's first language either helped or hindered the learning of a second language. |
| Interference | • When a grammatical structure or sound is different in the first language and the target language, the first language may intrude and cause difficulty in producing the new form. Also known as negative transfer . Positive transfer is the opposite process and occurs when there |

are similarities between the first language and the target language.

Fossilization

- In the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, errors that are reinforced become permanent or at least *extremely* resistant to change.

First language theories view the learner's native language as a major source of difficulty in second language learning and advocate that students practice specific sounds and grammatical patterns in the target language to overcome potential errors. The degree of similarity between the first language and the target language is seen as very important in these theories. For example, first language theories would expect that it would be relatively easy for Spanish-speakers to learn English but relatively difficult for Chinese-speakers to do so since the grammar, vocabulary, and sound systems of Spanish and English are much more similar than those of Chinese and English.

The **Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis** is an early first language theory which emerged in the 1960s along with the **Audiolingual Method** of language teaching (discussed in Chapter 3). Both the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and the Audiolingual Teaching Method are associated with the behavioral learning theories of the psychologist B. F. Skinner. Skinner believed that any human behavior followed by a reward would become *reinforced* and thus more likely to occur in the future. With sufficient reinforcement, the behavior would become a *habit*. Language teachers thought of the sounds and grammatical structures of their target language as the behaviors they needed to reinforce. In the box below, Mrs. Ortega responds to Sara's question with a warm compliment and rewards her by agreeing to her *correctly phrased* request. In Skinnerian terms, Sara's request is the "behavior" and Mrs. Ortega's response is the reinforcement. By reinforcing Sara's grammatically correct English question the child should be more likely to use those same language forms correctly in the future.

Voices from the Classroom

Sara: Can I get a book, please?

Mrs. Ortega: Wonderful Sara! Of course, you can go get a book.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis maintained that the learner's first language could either facilitate or hamper the learning of the sounds and the grammar of the new language and suggested that language teachers and textbook writers compare students' native languages with the specific target language to identify potential areas of difficulty. When the native language and the target language contrasted, it was believed that the first language would cause problems or **interfere** with the learning of the new language. Based on a comparison of the

learners' first language with the target language, language drills could be developed to give students practice and reinforcement to overcome interference from their native language. Overcoming interference was seen as essential by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis because without correction interference errors would become fossilized, or permanent. When the structures of the first language coincided with the structures of the target language, relatively little reinforcement would be needed to establish the new language habits, but when the structures of the second language differed from those of the first, much reinforcement would be needed to avoid **fossilization**. Drills would also help learners take advantage of opportunities for **positive transfer** when their native language and the target language were similar.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis had many impractical implications for language teaching, especially in second language settings where language classes often have students from a wide range of language backgrounds. Its stress on the specific pair of first and target languages required that language classes and learning materials be limited to students of the same first language background.

*SLA Theories in
the Classroom*

**Helping Students
Be More Successful**

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

- Give students practice in target language sounds and grammatical forms to overcome interference from their first language.
- Reinforce grammatically correct responses and native-like pronunciation.
- Students will need different practice depending on their native language.

Universal Grammar Theory: Some Important Concepts

**Universal Grammar
Theory**

- A second language acquisition theory based on Chomsky's theory of Language Universals and Marked Features. In learning a new language, students must reset the parameters of their L1 to achieve the features of the new language.

**Language
Universals**

- Basic patterns or principles shared by all languages. For example, all languages have verbs.

Markedness

- Language features that are more consistent with language universals are referred to as **unmarked** while those that differ from the universal are called **marked**.

Nativism

- The perspective that the human brain contains language universals, which direct the acquisition of language. This position contrasts with the behavioral view that all aspects of language are learned through practice and reinforcement.

- | | |
|--|--|
| Language Acquisition Device (LAD) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The human capacity for learning a first language. According to this view, all babies are born with the same language universals “hard-wired” in their brains. Scholars differ as to whether and to what extent the LAD is available to second language learners. |
| Parameter-(Re-) Setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A child’s brain “selects” the form of each universal feature (parameter) that corresponds to his or her L1 group. In the Universal Grammar Theory, second language learners reset their L1 parameters to those of the new language. |
| Critical Period | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The idea that babies are born with the ability to learn language but that their innate language learning ability either decreases or is lost at a certain point or points in human development. |

Based on the work of the famous linguist Noam Chomsky, the **Universal Grammar Theory** emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Chomsky observed that similarities and differences among languages were not quite as straightforward as linguists had previously thought. He noted that there were a number of aspects common to all languages across the world and called these commonalities **language universals**. Variation in human languages is accounted for by the way each language expresses the universal properties. For example, all languages have subjects, but the subject is expressed in different ways in different languages. In some languages the subject appears as a separate term in a sentence, while in others a verb ending functions as the subject. Features that are more consistent with language universals are referred to as **unmarked** while those that differ from the universal are called **marked**. According to the Universal Grammar Theory, differences between the marked features in the learner’s first and second languages as well as the degree of **markedness** (distance from the universal) could cause language learning difficulties.

Chomskyan scholars say that babies are born with the capacity for human language. By that they mean that the infant brain is pre-wired with the universal aspects of language. Babies are seen as having a **language acquisition device**, or **LAD**, containing language universals, which directs their acquisition of a first language. This position is often referred to as **nativist**, since language universals are believed to already reside in the human brain, and contrasts sharply with the behavioral position that all aspects of language are learned through practice and reinforcement. When applying the concept of language universals to second language acquisition, it is important to point out that the theory is originally based on first language acquisition, and since children develop their first language without being “taught,” a number of scholars have reservations about its applicability to second language *teaching*.

If all children are born with the same language acquisition device, it is reasonable to ask why babies from around the world end up speaking languages with

a wide array of marked features. Scholars believe that the universal features contained in the LAD are not set linguistic features but rather a range of possible features. When children are born into a language community, their brains “select” the form of each universal feature that corresponds to the specific language they are being exposed to. This process is called **parameter setting**. The brain selects the appropriate parameter for the child’s particular language environment. This process is analogous to setting a station button on a car radio. At first you can access any of the possible stations. After you set the button, however, one specific station is fixed. From the perspective of second language learning, this means that learners will be starting out with parameters already pre-set for their native language.

Resetting first language parameters to achieve the marked features of the target language is currently the subject of widespread interest and controversy in second language acquisition research. Much current research is focusing on which, if any, parameters can be reset, how to reset them, whether instruction can have an effect on the resetting of parameters, and how age is related to the possibility of resetting parameters. The answers to these questions will likely have important implications for second language acquisition theories and language teaching methodologies in the future. Scholars are also trying to determine if there is a **critical period** for language learning after which the ability to learn language either decreases or changes. Difficulties resetting first language parameters would be consistent with the existence of a critical period for language learning. (The possibility of a critical period for language learning will be discussed later in this chapter.)

SLA Theories in the Classroom

Helping Students Be More Successful

Universal Grammar Theory

- Language universals should transfer from the L1 to the L2.
- Students will have different needs and learning difficulties depending on their native language. For example, native speakers of Spanish and Korean will have different marked features to change when learning English.

Attention Theories

Attention Theories: Some Important Concepts

Meaningful Learning

- Learning that involves the connection of new material to the learner’s existing knowledge or schema.

Schema (Schemata) Information Processing

- Mental representations of knowledge.
- How the human brain sorts and deals with the incoming information it receives at any given moment.

Focal Attention

- Concerted attention. When a behavior needs so much attention that it is difficult to do anything else at the same time.

Peripheral Attention	• Background attention. When a behavior is sufficiently automatic that the individual can focus on something else simultaneously.
Controlled Processing	• Using language in a limited and conscious way before the learner is able to use it automatically.
Automatic Processing	• Spontaneously using language without the conscious manipulation of rules.
Explicit Linguistic Knowledge	• Knowledge about the language. Being able to talk about the language.
Implicit Linguistic Knowledge	• Linguistic knowledge that is automatically used when speaking or writing.

Just as Chomsky's ideas have replaced **structural linguistics** in the field of **linguistics**, in psychology, cognitive learning replaced behaviorism to explain how learning takes place. This approach is associated with the work of the cognitive psychologist David Ausubel who distinguishes simple rote learning from **meaningful learning**. Meaningful learning involves the connection of new material to the learner's existing knowledge or **schema**. Behaviorism maintained that behaviors that are reinforced will be learned. So if learners practiced "He went to the store," "She went to the store," "They went to the store," enough times, and each recitation was reinforced by the teacher acting happy and saying, "Great," it was expected that learners would learn to produce the form "went" rather than "go" or "goed" when they spoke or wrote in English. *Understanding* of regular and irregular past tense formation was not seen as necessary. Cognitive learning theories, in contrast, insist that understanding is required for the learning of complex material like language and that learners would be less likely to learn "went" if they did not explicitly understand what it meant and that it was an irregular verb.

Attention Theories differ from many other second language acquisition theories in an important way. Many second language acquisition theories view language learning as different from other kinds of learning; they believe that the human brain, because of the language acquisition device, learns language differently than it learns things. In other words, many other SLA theories take a nativist approach to language learning. Attention Theories, in contrast, view second language learning as very similar to learning other types of material such as mathematics or history. Thus, whatever is generally helpful in learning any subject matter should be helpful in language learning.

Attention theories of second language acquisition center around the concepts of attention and automatic control of the language. The two scholars most often associated with these theories are Barry McLaughlin and Ellen Bialystok. McLaughlin's approach, called **Information Processing**, is concerned with the way learners gain automatic control of the language and emphasizes the role of attention in the process. At first, learners must pay close attention (**focal attention**, in McLaughlin's terms) as they produce the language, searching their memories for vocabulary words and remembering to use grammatical rules correctly. This is called

controlled processing. At this stage, learners' capacity to produce language is limited because the amount of information they must process exceeds their attention capacity. With practice, however, the use of many aspects of the language will become automatic, and learners will not have to devote so much direct attention to producing sentences—for example, they will no longer have to search their memories for each word. This process is similar to the learning of other skills. When you first learn to knit, for example, you must pay close attention to putting the needle in the correct loop, properly wrapping the yarn around the needle, and so forth. Later, the process becomes more automatic, and you only need to use **peripheral attention** while knitting; you have sufficient attention capacity left over to be able to do other things at the same time, like talk or watch TV. With respect to language, at first the information processing load will be so great that learners will need to pay close attention (controlled processing) as they talk and only be able to produce speech haltingly. As they gain automatic control of more sounds, words, and grammatical rules, they will be able to speak more easily (**automatic processing**).

Similar to McLaughlin's distinction between automatic and controlled processing, Bialystok contrasts the concepts of **implicit** and **explicit linguistic knowledge**. Explicit knowledge refers to knowledge about the language that the learner is able to state, while implicit knowledge is the internalized knowledge that the learner can use to produce language automatically without thinking about grammatical rules. Unlike the Input Hypothesis, which will be discussed in the next section, Bialystok maintains that explicit linguistic knowledge can become implicit through practice.

SLA Theories in the Classroom

Helping Students Be More Successful

Attention Theories

- Make practice *meaningful*.
- Draw students' attention to a grammatical structure *before* they practice it.
- Activate students' background knowledge or schema related to the new material.
- Link new lessons to the student's current understanding of the language.
- Give students substantial amounts of realistic language practice to help them increasingly gain automatic control over the language.

Experience Theories

The Input Hypothesis: Some Important Concepts

Acquisition

- In the Input Hypothesis, acquisition refers to the unconscious development of a language through exposure. Acquisition results in true language proficiency. To use

	Bialystok's terms, acquisition results in implicit linguistic knowledge.
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">In the Input Hypothesis, learning refers to conscious effort to develop the language through study and practice. Learning only results in the development of conscious knowledge about the language, which Krashen calls the <i>monitor</i>. In Bialystok's terms, learning <i>only</i> leads to explicit linguistic knowledge. It does <i>not</i> contribute to the development of implicit linguistic knowledge.
Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Material to listen to or read in the target language.
The Affective Filter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The <i>affective filter</i> is made up of people's feelings about language learning and determines whether they acquire the language when they have the opportunity.
The Monitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Similar to Bialystok's explicit linguistic knowledge, the monitor refers to the learner's knowledge <i>about</i> the target language. According to the Input Hypothesis, the monitor is the result of language <i>learning</i> rather than language <i>acquisition</i>.

The Input Hypothesis

The **Experience Theories** hold that second languages are learned through direct experiences with the target language. That is, people learn second languages by using that language. Foremost among these theories is the **Input Hypothesis** of Stephen Krashen. The distinction between second **language acquisition** and second **language learning** explained in Chapter 1 is the core of this theory. Krashen views second language acquisition rather than learning as the basis of all true language development, and he therefore disagrees strongly with the attention theories that explicit linguistic knowledge and controlled processing can become automatic. Also unlike the Attention Theories, his theory maintains that second language learning is very different from other types of learning. He agrees with the Universal Grammar Theory's assertion that children are born with a language acquisition device, but he believes that all learners regardless of age use the LAD when acquiring but *not* learning a new language.

Since language acquisition involves the LAD, it is similar to the way children develop their first language. It might best be explained as a result of successful listening or reading comprehension. For acquisition to take place, language learners must listen to or read material in the target language that is comprehensible to them. For example, when a language learner who has no background in Russian downloads a pod-cast from Radio Moscow, it is unlikely that acquisition will occur because the learner will have no way to understand the Russian. But when students listen to their teacher speak in English and the teacher is careful to speak expressively, capitalize on vocabulary that is similar in the two languages, and use

props and gestures, it is possible for students to *acquire* English. Language learning includes activities such as memorizing vocabulary, listening to grammatical explanations, and practicing grammatical structures. Although these activities are commonplace in many language classrooms across the world, according to the Input Hypothesis true second language proficiency only results from second language *acquisition*. Language learning, in contrast, only leads to the development of a **monitor**, an accumulation of conscious knowledge *about* the language. Classrooms that follow the Input Hypothesis have an abundance of high-interest listening and reading materials to provide **input** for learners.

If contact with listening and reading material causes people to develop second language proficiency, it is natural to ask why people with the same amount of contact are not equally successful. According to Krashen's theory, learners have an **affective filter** which influences whether acquisition actually takes place. The affective filter is made up of the learner's feelings about language learning. Learners with low affective filters have positive dispositions toward the target language: high motivation, low anxiety, lack of negative stereotypes, and the like, and are therefore receptive to language input when they encounter it. Learners with high affective filters—low motivation, high anxiety, prejudice toward the target language group—are not open to target language listening and reading experiences, so they do not "take-in" input even when they have the opportunity. Thus, for these learners input does not become **in-take**.

*SLA Theories in
the Classroom*

Input Hypothesis

**Helping Students
Be More Successful**

- Work to decrease the affective filter by fostering positive language learning emotions so that students will "take-in" target language input.
- Offer many opportunities for listening and reading interesting materials at an appropriate level of difficulty.

Conversation Theories: Some Important Concepts

Scaffolding

- When a more proficient speaker supports and maintains a conversation so that speakers with limited linguistic resources are able to participate.

Feedback

- A response which gives a conversational partner information about whether a previous comment has been understood and possibly offers suggestions for improvement.

**Negotiation of
Meaning**

- Conversational partners must collaborate to come to an agreement about the subject of their conversation. Conversation Theories maintain that negotiation can assist the learner's linguistic development by pointing out connections between words and phrases and their meanings.

Conversation Theories

A second type of Experience Theory emphasizes the importance of conversation in learning a new language. **Conversation Theories** maintain that people learn to speak in a new language by participating in conversations. Although it might seem puzzling to think of people who do not speak the language as participating in conversations, there are many ways to participate in a conversation without actually talking. At first, a learner might simply look in the direction of the speaker and appear interested. Later, a learner might participate by interjecting a word or short phrase. In addition to oral practice, conversations offer comprehensible and interesting input which is probably more consistent with the individual's interests and needs than typical classroom input.

The most useful conversations include a process called **scaffolding**, where a better speaker, such as a native speaker, a teacher, or a more advanced language learner, helps the learner participate in the conversation. Scaffolding includes paying close attention to the conversational partner, repeating the learner's words to indicate understanding, asking open-ended questions or making comments to encourage the learner to speak, and interpreting or expanding the learner's comments. Even speakers with limited linguistic resources can participate in conversations when there is a conversational partner who provides good scaffolding. In first language acquisition, it is common for parents to scaffold their children's conversational attempts. When a baby coos and the mother responds, "Oh you like your teddy" the mother is scaffolding a very early conversation for her child by putting the baby's coo and facial expression into words.

Consider the following conversation between Takahiro, a Japanese child learning English, and an English-speaking adult:

Voices from the Classroom

<i>Takahiro:</i>	This broken
<i>Adult:</i>	Broken.
<i>Takahiro:</i>	broken This /ez/ broken. broken
<i>Adult:</i>	Upside down.
<i>Takahiro:</i>	upside down this broken upside down broken. (Peck, 1978, p. 385)

This conversation illustrates the benefits of scaffolded conversations as well as how conversational partners **negotiate** their understanding of a conversation. At the beginning of the conversation, the adult repeats the most important part of Takahiro's sentence, "broken." This shows that she is listening to Takahiro and understands what he is trying to say. It encourages Takahiro to continue to talk. It appears that Takahiro and the Adult have now agreed that they are talking about something that is broken. In fact, Takahiro's next offering is considerably more complex, "broken. This /ez/ broken. broken." At this point, the adult finally understands what Takahiro is attempting to communicate by "broken" and intervenes. By saying that it was "broken," Takahiro had been trying to say that there was something wrong with the object he was describing, but he did not know the proper phrase. Fortunately, the adult was able to infer what Takahiro was trying to say and offered the correct phrase "upside down." Instead of being broken, Takahiro really meant that the object was upside down.

It is easy to see how scaffolded conversations could "teach" language. The adult in this example closely follows the child's utterances, determines his communicative intentions, gives **feedback** when she does not understand, and ultimately offers the needed English phrase. Takahiro had a specific communicative need; he wanted to communicate that the object he was talking about was upside down, but he did not know the phrase. The adult provided the exact English phrase that Takahiro needed at the exact moment that he needed it. The conversation "taught" Takahiro that the kind of "broken" that he was talking about is called "upside down." By creating a scaffold for the conversation, the adult was able to help clarify the child's thoughts and supply the specific vocabulary item he needed.

SLA Theories in the Classroom

Helping Students Be More Successful

Conversation Theories

- Involve students in natural conversations and tasks that require negotiation of meaning.
- "Scaffold" students' conversations by listening carefully and rephrasing what they are trying to say. Ask questions and make comments to encourage students to talk.
- Do not require full sentence responses. Allow students to participate in conversations in any way they are able (one-word responses, gestures, facial expressions, etc.).

Social Theories

Social Theories: Some Important Concepts

Acculturation

- Refers to the process of learning to function and becoming comfortable functioning within the target language culture.

Psychological Distance

- Includes the learner's motivation, anxiety, feelings about the target language and culture, as well as other

emotional traits. It is similar to the affective filter in the Input Hypothesis. High psychological distance is seen as an impediment to language learning.

Culture Shock

- A state of anxiety, tension, and / or disorientation resulting from being exposed to or living within a different culture.

Social Distance

- The relative dominance (economic, political, and social power) of the learning and target groups. The contact stance, degree of enclosure, degree of cohesiveness, size of the learning group, ethnic stereotypes, and amount of time the learning group intends to remain in the target language area contribute to the social distance between the learning and target groups. High social distance is seen as an impediment to language learning.

Social Theories of second language acquisition differ from other second language acquisition theories because they explain second language learning from the multiple perspectives of the learner, the learner's first language group, and the target language group. In contrast, First Language, Attention, and Experience Theories focus almost entirely on the individual who is doing the language learning and the type of language experiences provided by the language class. If learners are not successful, it is because they started out with the "wrong" native language, did not get the right kind of practice, had a high affective filter, did not receive scaffolding, and so forth. In essence, either the language learner or the language teacher is blamed for any failure. Social Theories, in contrast, view language learning within larger sociological and even political and economic contexts and are more likely to ask questions about why learners are not motivated, or how state graduation exams might cause teachers to concentrate on grammatical analysis when they really prefer communicative teaching approaches. Social Theories examine how societal forces such as cultural patterns, ethnic prejudices, access to schooling, and the global economy influence the outcome of language learning by both individuals and particular learning groups.

The most well-known Social Theory of SLA is John Schumann's **Social Distance Hypothesis**, also known as the **Acculturation Theory**. The Social Distance Hypothesis is similar to Krashen's Input Hypothesis in how it views individual language learners. Learners are believed to be successful because of their emotional receptiveness to language learning. Good learners are motivated, empathetic to native speakers, flexible, and experience relatively little culture shock. Thus, in terms of the Input Hypothesis, they have a low affective filter. The Social Distance Hypothesis calls this openness to language learning low **psychological distance**.

Schumann points out, however, that in addition to individual traits, there are many social incentives and deterrents to language learning. For example, a learner may live in a society that values language learning or in a society that

views second language learning as an assault against the native language. Moreover, the willingness of the target language group to accept language learners of particular first language backgrounds is an essential component of this theory. Many people observe, for example, that English-speaking Americans seem to be more receptive to immigrants from some countries than from others. In addition, people are often receptive to small groups of immigrants from a particular country or first language background but become less welcoming when the number of immigrants from that country grows. Thus, according to the Social Distance Hypothesis, a learner with low (positive) psychological distance may have difficulty obtaining good language learning experiences due to high social distance.

The relationship between the learning group and the target group in Schumann's theory is called **social distance**, and social distance determines in large part the learner's opportunities for **acculturation**. Acculturation refers to the process of becoming a functioning member of the target language culture. Schumann maintains that people learn to talk by acculturating. That is, as learners have experiences in the target community, they will hear and have opportunities to use the target language.

Schumann provides an interesting set of criteria for examining the amount of social distance between the learning group and the target language group. These characteristics help to explain why some groups tend to acculturate and achieve useful levels of language competence while others do not (Schumann, 1976). The characteristics that make up social distance include:

1. The relative dominance (economic, political, and social power) of the learning and target groups.
2. The "contact stance" of the learning group. That is, does the group wish to preserve its own culture entirely, adapt to the new culture to some extent, or assimilate entirely?
3. The degree of enclosure of the learning group. Does the learning group have separate schools, stores, churches, etc.?
4. The degree of cohesiveness of the learning group. How much do members of the learning group live, work, and socialize together?
5. The size of the learning group.
6. The degree to which the cultures of the two groups are similar (congruence).
7. The ethnic stereotypes by which the two groups either positively or negatively view each other.
8. The amount of time the learning group intends to remain in the target language area.

This list of characteristics includes a number of factors that would contribute to successful language learning and acculturation, and a number that would work against them. Group size is a simple example. When the learning group is relatively small, the members would be more likely to learn the new language because their native language would have a relatively small amount of usefulness. Swedes, for example, are seen as highly successful language learners possibly because few people in the world speak Swedish, thus forcing them to learn other languages if

they want to participate in world commerce. Spanish-speakers, on the other hand, constitute a relatively large English-learning group in the United States. The size of the Spanish-speaking group makes possible the existence of many Spanish-speaking institutions such as stores and churches. From Schumann's perspective, the availability of Spanish-speaking services would result in less contact with English-speakers and might make the learning of English seem less urgent. In addition, English-speaking Americans (the target group) may feel threatened by such a large non-English-speaking group. Any negative perceptions on the part of either Spanish-speakers or English-speakers toward the other group would also discourage language learning.

Unique among second language acquisition theories, the social distance perspective recognizes that in addition to the prejudices and stereotypes the learning group might hold toward the target group, the responses of the target language group also play a critical role in successful language learning. For example, the degree of similarity between the two groups makes members of the target community either more or less eager to accept members of a particular learning group. The learning group might be extremely enthusiastic about language learning, but the target group may not be receptive to their learning attempts, and therefore their learning opportunities would be limited.

In assessing social distance between groups today, it is important to note that Schumann composed his list of characteristics contributing to social distance before people commonly used the Internet. It would seem that people who use the Internet would have less social distance than other members of their language group. For example, use of the Internet can circumvent enclosure to some extent, and learners have the possibility of communicating with native speakers without identifying themselves as members of a particular language group. For these reasons, it would probably be a good idea to add "access to the Internet" to Schumann's original list of factors contributing to social distance.

Although the Social Distance Hypothesis appears to focus on language learning outside the classroom, it has important implications for language teaching especially in a *second* language setting. There are many social, economic, and political forces that affect the services that English Language Learners receive and even how teachers may teach.

SLA Theories in the Classroom

Helping Students Be More Successful

Social Theories

- Decrease students' psychological distance by working to increase their motivation to learn the language and to decrease their anxiety and stereotypes of the new culture.
- Decrease students' social distance by arranging cultural experiences and opportunities to get to know members of the new culture.
- Help students to better understand the new culture. Give them opportunities to ask about the target culture and talk about their experiences with native speakers.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

Strictly speaking, the Critical Period Hypothesis is not a second language acquisition theory in the same way the previously discussed theories are. A **critical period** is a biological concept that states that there is a specific moment during the lifespan of many animals when a particular ability must be learned. For example, birds who have broken wings at the moment they are supposed to learn to fly remain flightless. The idea of a critical period for language learning was proposed first by Penfield and Roberts and later by Eric Lenneberg and has traditionally been associated with the onset of puberty. Lenneberg maintained that the human brain remains relatively plastic and flexible until puberty when **brain lateralization** takes place. Brain lateralization refers to the assignment of specific functions to the left or right hemisphere of the brain. For example, in right-handed people, language is assigned primarily to the left hemisphere of the brain. This loss of brain flexibility was believed to contribute to a loss of second language learning ability especially in the area of accent.

At this moment, there is great controversy among second language acquisition scholars as to whether a critical period exists for language learning, and if so, whether it exists for all areas of language. For example, more research studies have found evidence for a critical period for accent than for grammar. The current controversy centers primarily on the issue of accessibility to the language acquisition device and universal grammar. If universal grammar remains available to older learners there should not be a critical period. Older learners would still be able to learn a second language similarly to the way children learn their first language. Unfortunately, scholars differ greatly on both *if* and *when* children may lose their inborn language learning ability, with estimates for a loss of language learning ability ranging from birth, to six to nine months, to six years, to puberty. Recently, David Birdsong has argued that it is more appropriate to speak of age differences in general terms—*younger being better*—than a strict critical period or cut-off age for language learning ability. Other scholars such as Stephen Krashen maintain that language learners of *all* ages have access to universal grammar and that therefore there is not a critical period for language learning.

How the Theories Differ on Important Language Teaching Issues

Language teachers are often most interested in several practical questions about second language acquisition: “Why are some language learners more successful than others?” “How should errors be handled?” and “Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults?” (In other words, “Is there a critical period for language learning?”) Not surprisingly, the various theories have different positions on each of these questions.

The First Language Theories

Many language learners and teachers are particularly interested in understanding why some learners are more successful than others. The First Language Theories see differences in individual achievement as resulting primarily from the learner's first language and how similar or different it is from the language being learned. Whether learners have had the practice they need to overcome the influence of their native language also helps these theories explain why some learners are more successful than others. Thus, the closer the learners' first and second languages and the more practice they have had, the more likely it is that they will be successful.

With respect to learner errors, the First Language Theories generally favor correction. These theories hypothesize that it would be very unlikely for learners to overcome their errors if they are allowed to practice incorrect utterances without feedback. Grammatical patterns or sounds influenced by their native language would be particularly difficult to change. Thus, language teachers are urged to have students produce error-free utterances whenever possible and to swiftly correct any errors.

The original Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis does not envision clear child-adult differences because all learners are believed to learn language through behavioral reinforcement. Thus, child and adult learners with the same first and second language would have the same opportunities for positive transfer and would have to overcome the same instances of interference. It is possible, however, that children would need fewer practice opportunities and less reinforcement since their first language habits would be less well established due to their young age. In contrast, the Universal Grammar Theory recognizes the possibility of child-adult differences since unlike babies, second language learners already have pre-set language parameters. But as already noted, scholars do not agree about whether or when children lose their access to universal grammar as they get older.

First Language Theories

Why are some learners more successful than others?

- Learners are successful when their native language is close to the target language and they practice new language patterns to overcome interference from their first language.

Should errors be corrected?

- Yes. To avoid fossilization and to help students become aware of differences between their native language and the target language.

Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults?

- As children get older, they may lose their innate language learning ability, but the age at which this loss might occur is controversial among SLA scholars.

Attention Theories

The Attention Theories do not have as clear positions on these issues as other second language acquisition theories. Differences in success could be explained by people's different amounts of background knowledge (schema) and the quality of practice they have. Practice must be meaningful and relate to the learners' background knowledge, but Attention Theories would also recognize that negative emotions could interfere with learning by taking up some of the learner's available attention.

With respect to learner errors, Attention approaches clearly suggest feedback and correction. Learners need feedback so that they can correct any misconceptions in their explicit linguistic knowledge, and practice of incorrect forms could lead to the automatic production of incorrect forms. Finally, with respect to child-adult learning differences, children would have the advantages of fewer demands on their attention and the need to perform less complex language tasks, but adults would have more general background knowledge and more explicit knowledge about the language. It is also likely that children would have more opportunities for meaningful practice and be more willing to take advantage of those opportunities.

Attention Theories

- | | |
|--|--|
| Why are some learners more successful than others? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learners are successful when they have meaningful practice opportunities so that their use of the language becomes automatic.• Learners with more background knowledge about the language would also be expected to be more successful. |
| Should errors be corrected? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes. So that misconceptions about the language can be corrected and so that learners do not practice incorrect forms. |
| Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children have less complex language tasks to perform.• Children have fewer demands on their attention.• Children have more opportunities for meaningful practice and are willing to take advantage of those opportunities. |

The Experience Theories

It is not surprising that the Input Hypothesis disagrees with the First Language and Attention Theories with respect to these important issues. Since in this theory learners develop language proficiency through listening and reading, explicit error correction is seen as unnecessary. Errors will disappear naturally when students have acquired enough language. Error correction might actually have negative consequences from the perspective of the Input Hypothesis. If errors are strictly

corrected, students may become fearful of speaking and increase their affective filters thus interfering with further language acquisition. In addition, since error correction contributes to conscious learning, it may give learners the false impression that they should spend time *learning* rather than *acquiring* the target language.

Conversation Theories take a different position on error correction. Error correction is seen as appropriate, even essential, for language learning, but the correction must focus on meaning and be tailored to the specific conversational context. In the conversation with Takahiro, the adult corrected Takahiro's use of the word "broken" and offered the phrase the child was trying to communicate, "upside down." The Input Hypothesis and the Conversation Theories agree that learner errors are a natural part of language learning which should not be regarded with alarm by language teachers. These theories are not concerned that learners will develop fossilized errors.

The Input Hypothesis and Conversation Theories also differ with respect to why some learners are more successful than others. Krashen would attribute individual differences in language achievement to the student's amount of language acquisition. The amount of acquisition would, in turn, depend upon how much comprehensible target language input the learner has received through listening and reading as well as on the learner's affective filter. Conversation Theories, in contrast, see individual differences as a result of the number and quality of the conversations the learner has participated in. Conversation Theories would also attribute differences in success to the learner's own ability to manage conversations. Some learners concentrate more and are more talented at making conversations work than others.

Finally, the Experience Theories would agree that child-adult differences result primarily from environmental differences. That is, children generally have greater access to comprehensible input and scaffolded conversations in school and playground settings than do adults. In addition, children likely have lower affective filters and are, thus, more receptive to input.

Experience Theories

Why are some learners more successful than others?

Should errors be corrected?

Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults?

The Input Hypothesis

- More successful learners have received more comprehensible input and are more receptive to the available input because of their low affective filter.

- No. Errors will go away naturally as acquisition proceeds, and error correction may increase the affective filter.
- Children receive more comprehensible input and have lower affective filters.

Experience Theories

Why are some learners more successful than others?

Should errors be corrected?

Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults?

Conversation Theory

- More successful learners have had access to more conversations and received better scaffolding when they participated in conversations.

- Yes. Errors should be corrected in the context of a conversation as the conversational participants negotiate the course of the conversation.

- Children have access to more and better conversations. Proficient second language speakers are more likely to offer scaffolding to children than to older learners.

Social Theories

Schumann's Social Distance model of SLA makes similar assumptions about error correction, individual differences and child-adult differences to the Experience Theories. Specifically, error corrections within conversations might be useful if the learner has low psychological distance and *wants* to become acculturated into the second language community. Individuals who are more motivated would seek out more language input and conversations, and children might be at an advantage for language learning because of their greater access to advantageous language learning settings. However, the social aspect of Schumann's theory points to an important additional consideration to these explanations: the receptiveness of the language learning environment. It is possible that learners of different ages or ethnic groups receive different types of error correction and have access to more or less comprehensible input and different kinds of conversations. Many scholars believe that children typically receive better input and more and better conversational opportunities than older learners. Thus, it is possible to view the children in any learning group as having less social distance than the adults from the same learning group. With respect to individual differences, both the learner's community and the target community must be considered in addition to the individual characteristics of the learner and differences in the language experiences the learner has had. That is, an individual learner might be very motivated to seek out excellent learning opportunities, but the target group may not wish to allow learners of that particular type (age, race, country of origin, etc.) to join its daily interactions. It is also possible that the target group would be more receptive to certain subgroups within the learner community, such as children or people of a higher social class, and that those people might get better learning opportunities than other members of the learning group. Moreover, the learner's own group might have predispositions against its members learning a particular language and as a result put up barriers to learning. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon during the Cold War for American students of Russian to have their patriotism questioned.

Social Theories of SLA do not have a clear position on error correction, but to the extent that they are consistent with the experience models of SLA, natural error correction in the context of a meaningful conversation would be favored. In addition, if acculturation is the primary force for language learning, learners who wish to acculturate may seek out error correction or monitor their language output carefully and self-correct so that they can make their language as native-like as possible. More acculturated individuals would likely also have access to more sophisticated conversations where they would have the opportunity to communicate more complex ideas and receive feedback from individuals who are more invested in understanding them. Specifically, learners who are more acculturated are more likely to have conversations with friends, co-workers, or even family members in situations where successful negotiation of meaning is valued by all the participants in the conversation.

Social Theories

Why are some learners more successful than others?

- More successful learners have lower psychological and social distance.

Should errors be corrected?

- Maybe. If errors are corrected, learners may be better able to acculturate.

Why do children tend to be more successful language learners than adults?

- Children have access to more opportunities for acculturation. Some communities may be more receptive to child language learners than adult learners.

Implications for Language Teaching

The array of second language acquisition theories and their disagreements about important language teaching issues can be very frustrating to teachers. It is clear that the First Language Theories, the Attention Theories, the Experience Theories, and the Social Theories take very different positions on why learners are successful and how teachers should deal with errors. You should review the “SLA Theories in the Classroom” sections in this chapter for suggestions about how to help your students be more successful. In general, the First Language Theories emphasize the need for teachers to understand how a learner’s first language might influence their language learning, and the Attention Theories stress the importance of meaningful language practice. The Experience and Social Theories are more concerned with the learner’s emotions and “natural” language experiences.

Although the theories all offer very different explanations of how languages are learned, they also agree on a number of things that teachers can do to help their students. Teachers should pay attention to learners and their L1 backgrounds (First

Language Theories), their knowledge about the new language (Attention Theories), and their feelings about language learning (Experience and Social Theories). In other words, the theories agree that how and what is taught should depend on the particular group of learners. The theories also agree that students must have as much contact with the new language as possible and that language learning activities should be realistic and meaningful. The First Language Theories suggest practice focusing on specific sounds and grammatical forms, the Attention Theories encourage meaningful practice, the Input Hypothesis recommends listening and reading, the Conversation Theories require scaffolded conversations, and the Social Theories propose contact with native speakers. In fact, most language teachers are **eclectic**, which means that they use approaches from more than one second language acquisition theory, and most language classes include all of these activities advocated by the various theories but in different amounts and proportions. The next chapter concerns language teaching methodologies, which are more specific and comprehensive about what teachers should do in the classroom. Some of the methodologies are closely associated with the second language acquisition theories described here, and some are not.

FINDING YOUR WAY

Reflections

How have your ideas about how people learn languages changed as a result of reading this chapter?

Which SLA theory(ies) most closely coincides with your own beliefs about language learning?

Does eclectic language teaching mean that language teachers should teach in any way they want?

What questions do you still have about how people learn languages?

Planning for Your Classes

What do you want to remember from this chapter to use in your own classroom?

What social, economic, or political trends in your teaching setting might influence the way you will teach?

In Your Journal

- What language learning experiences especially contributed to your personal second language development?
- What specific social, economic, and/or political factors influenced your own language learning?
- Do you experience interference from your first language when you speak in a second language? Is the interference in the area of **phonology** (sound) or **syntax** (grammar)?

Projects

- Compare and contrast the SLA theories in this chapter with respect to their ability to explain how people learn second languages. In your opinion, which theory(ies) offers the most reasonable explanation?
- Complete the BALLI (Appendix A) again and compare your responses with your original responses. Have you changed your mind on any items?

Teaching Checklist

Yes No

- I think about SLA theories when I choose language teaching materials.
- I think about SLA theories when I choose teaching activities.
- I read about SLA. SLA journals include *The TESOL Quarterly*, *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *Bilingual Research Journal*, NABE (National Association for Bilingual Education) *Journal of Research and Practice*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and *System*.
- I talk to other teachers about SLA.
- When I hear about new approaches to language teaching, I consider whether they are consistent with what I already know about second language acquisition.

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