CHAPTER

1 Introducing Second Language Acquisition

CHAPTER PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
Second language (L2)
Informal L2 learning
Formal learning
Linguistic competence
Linguistic performance
First language/ native language/ mother tongue (L1)
Simultaneous multilingualism
Sequential multilingualism

When you were still a very young child, you began acquiring at least one language – what linguists call your **L1** – probably without thinking much about it, and with very little conscious effort or awareness. Since that time, you may have acquired an additional language – your **L2** – possibly also in the natural course of having the language used around you, but more likely with the same conscious effort needed to acquire other domains of knowledge in the process of becoming an "educated" individual. This book is about the phenomenon of adding languages. In this introductory chapter, we will define a few of the key terms that we will use and present the three basic questions that we will explore throughout the book.

What is SLA?

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a **second language (L2)**, even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a **target language (TL)**, which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. The scope of SLA includes **informal L2 learning** that takes place in naturalistic contexts, **formal L2 learning** that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. For example, "informal learning" happens when a child from Japan is brought to the USA and "picks up" English in the course of playing and attending school with native English-speaking children without any specialized language instruction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native English speakers or with co-workers who speak English as a second language. "Formal learning" occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French, when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic, or when an attorney in Colombia takes a night class in English. A combination of formal and informal learning takes place when a student from the US takes Chinese language classes in Taipei or Beijing while also using Chinese outside of class for social interaction and daily living experiences, or when an adult immigrant from Ethiopia in Israel learns Hebrew both from attending special classes and from interacting with co-workers and other residents in Hebrew.

In trying to understand the process of second language acquisition, we are seeking to answer three basic questions:

(1) *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know?
(2) *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge?
(3) *Why* are some learners more successful than others?

There are no simple answers to these questions – in fact, there are probably no answers that all second language researchers would agree on completely. In part this is because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars studying SLA come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods. The multidisciplinary approach to studying SLA phenomena which has developed within the last half-century has yielded important insights, but many tantalizing mysteries remain. New findings are appearing every day, making this an exciting period to be studying the subject. The continuing search for answers is not only shedding light on SLA in its own right, but is illuminating related fields. Furthermore, exploring answers to these questions is of potentially great practical value to anyone who learns or teaches additional languages.

SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily from within linguistics and psychology (and their subfields of applied linguistics,

psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology), as a result of efforts to answer the *what*, *how*, and *why* questions posed above. There are corresponding differences in what is emphasized by researchers who come from each of these fields:

- Linguists emphasize the characteristics of the differences and similarities in the languages that are being learned, and the **linguistic competence** (underlying knowledge) and **linguistic performance** (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition.
- Psychologists and psycholinguists emphasize the mental or cognitive processes involved in acquisition, and the representation of language(s) in the brain.
- Sociolinguists emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and extend the scope of study to communicative competence (underlying knowledge that additionally accounts for language use, or pragmatic competence).
- Social psychologists emphasize group-related phenomena, such as identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social contexts of learning.

Applied linguists who specialize in SLA may take any one or more of these perspectives, but they are also often concerned with the implications of theory and research for teaching second languages. Each discipline and subdiscipline uses different methods for gathering and analyzing data in research on SLA, employs different theoretical frameworks, and reaches its interpretation of research findings and conclusions in different ways.

It is no surprise, then, that the understandings coming from these different disciplinary perspectives sometimes seem to conflict in ways that resemble the well-known Asian fable of the three blind men describing an elephant: one, feeling the tail, says it is like a rope; another, feeling the side, says it is flat and rubbery; the third, feeling the trunk, describes it as being like a long rubber hose. While each perception is correct individually, they fail to provide an accurate picture of the total animal because there is no holistic or integrated perspective. Ultimately, a satisfactory account of SLA must integrate these multiple perspectives; this book is a step in that direction. As in the fable of the elephant, three different perspectives are presented here: linguistic, psychological, and social. We make no presumption that any one perspective among these is "right" or more privileged, but believe that all are needed to provide a fuller understanding of the complex phenomena of SLA.

What is a Second Language?

We have broadly defined the scope of SLA as concerned with any phenomena involved in learning an L2. Sometimes it is necessary for us to make further distinctions according to the function the L2 will serve in our lives, since this may significantly affect *what* we learn. These differences may determine the specific areas of vocabulary knowledge we need, the

level of grammatical complexity we have to attain, and whether speaking or reading skills are more important. The following are distinctions commonly made in the literature:

- A **second language** is typically an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes. It is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively. In this more restricted sense, the term is contrasted with other terms in this list.
- A **foreign language** is one not widely used in the learners' immediate social context which might be used for future travel or other cross-cultural communication situations, or studied as a curricular requirement or elective in school, but with no immediate or necessary practical application.
- A **library language** is one which functions primarily as a tool for further learning through reading, especially when books or journals in a desired field of study are not commonly published in the learners' native tongue.
- An **auxiliary language** is one which learners need to know for some official functions in their immediate political setting, or will need for purposes of wider communication, although their first language serves most other needs in their lives.

Other restricted or highly specialized functions for "second" languages are designated **language for specific purposes** (such as *French for Hotel Management*, *English for Aviation Technology*, *Spanish for Agriculture*, and a host of others), and the learning of these typically focuses only on a narrow set of occupation-specific uses and functions. One such prominent area is *English for Academic Purposes* (*EAP*).

We begin this book with the traditional inclusion of all languages learned subsequent to L1 as "second languages." However, we recognize that there may be some significant differences in learning a second, third, fourth, or even a fifth language for both cognitive and social reasons. In the chapters which follow, we will discuss a few of the theoretical and applied issues that may be involved in what we call multiple "second" language acquisition.

What is a First Language?

There is also sometimes a need to distinguish among the concepts **first language**, **native language**, **primary language**, and **mother tongue**, although these are usually treated as a roughly synonymous set of terms (generalized as **L1** to oppose the set generalized as **L2**). The distinctions are not always clear-cut. For purposes of SLA concerns, the important features that all shades of L1s share are that they are assumed to be languages which are acquired during early childhood – normally beginning before the age of about three years – and that they are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them. Acquisition of more than one language during early childhood is called **simultaneous multilingualism**, to

be distinguished from **sequential multilingualism**, or learning additional languages after L1 has already been established. ("Multilingualism" as used here includes bilingualism.) Simultaneous multilingualism results in more than one "native" language for an individual, though it is undoubtedly much less common than sequential multilingualism. It appears that there are significant differences between the processes and/or results of language acquisition by young children and by older learners, although this is an issue which is still open to debate, and is one of those which we will explore in chapters to follow.

Diversity in Learning and Learners

As already noted, the circumstances under which SLA takes place sometimes need to be taken into account, although they are perhaps too often taken for granted and ignored. *What* is learned in acquiring a second language, as well as *how* it is learned, is often influenced by whether the situation involves informal exposure to speakers of other languages, immersion in a setting where one needs a new language to meet basic needs, or formal instruction in school, and these learning conditions are often profoundly influenced by powerful social, cultural, and economic factors affecting the status of both languages and learners.

The intriguing question of *why* some L2 learners are more successful than others requires us to unpack the broad label "learners" for some dimensions of discussion. Linguists may distinguish categories of learners defined by the identity and relationship of their L1 and L2; psycholinguists may make distinctions based on individual aptitude for L2 learning, personality factors, types and strength of motivation, and different learning strategies; sociolinguists may distinguish among learners with regard to social, economic, and political differences and learner experiences in negotiated interaction; and social psychologists may categorize learners according to aspects of their group identity and attitudes toward target language speakers or toward L2 learning itself. All of these factors and more will be addressed in turn in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) involves a wide range of language learning settings and learner characteristics and circumstances. This book will consider a broad scope of these, examining them from three different disciplinary perspectives: *linguistic*, *psychological*, and *social*. Different approaches to the study of SLA have developed from each of these perspectives in attempts to answer the three basic questions: *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know? *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge? *Why* are some learners more (or less) successful than others?

Activities

Questions for Self-Study

1. Match the following terms to their definitions:

1. target language	a. has no immediate or necessary practical application, might be used later for travel or be required for school
2. second language	b. the aim or goal of language learning
3. first language	c. an officially or societally dominant language (not speakers' L1) needed for education, employment, or other basic purposes
4. foreign language	d. acquired during childhood

2. The underlying knowledge of language is called _____.
3. Actual production of language is called _____.

Active Learning

1. List all of the languages that you can use. First classify them as L1(s) and L2(s), and then further classify the L2(s) as "second," "foreign," "library," "auxiliary," or "for specific purposes." Finally, distinguish between the ways you learned each of the languages: through informal exposure, formal instruction, or some combination of these.
2. Do you think that you are (or would be) a "good" or a "poor" L2 learner? Why do you think so? Consider whether you believe that your own relative level of success as a language learner is due primarily to linguistic, psychological, or social factors (social may include type of instruction, contexts of learning, or attitudes toward the L1 and L2).
3. Do you know people who don't feel like native speakers of their first language acquired? Or people who feel like native speakers of a language acquired later in life? What do you attribute this feeling to?

Discuss and Debate

In your life, what has been the most effective way to learn a foreign language? Discuss your own experience and anecdotal evidence to support your position, as well as any theoretical or empirical evidence you have knowledge of.

Further Reading

Hummel, K. M. (2014). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition: Perspectives and Practices*. Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons.

This text covers theories of second language acquisition, contexts of language acquisition, language teaching methods, and individual differences in learners. To illustrate concepts throughout in an engaging manner, it includes stories of fictitious language learners' L2 acquisition.

Mackey, A. & Gass, S. M. (2016). *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design* (Second Edition). New York: Routledge.

A basic guide to research, this new edition treats methodology and design, including data collection, coding and write-up for qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as mixed methods. It also includes sample consent forms and information about common transcription practices, and an updated review of fundamental topics in second language acquisition.