

An interdisciplinary endeavour: Introducing Second Language Acquisition

Muriel Saville-Troike, *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. ix + 218. Paperback £23.99, ISBN 9781107648234

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Forming part of the series *Cambridge Introductions to Language and Linguistics*, this book is intended as a ‘brief but comprehensive’ introduction to the study of second language acquisition (SLA), primarily for undergraduate students. Taking a broad, interdisciplinary approach, it investigates the light that linguistic, psychological and social perspectives have thrown on three questions which recur throughout the text: What does the learner need to know? How does the learner acquire this knowledge? Why are some learners more successful than others?

Each of the seven chapters is framed by a preview and a summary. Chapters 1 to 6 include activities for readers to check their understanding and/or for class discussion, and Chapters 2 to 6 include annotated suggestions for further reading. Key terms are listed at the beginning of chapters and highlighted with explanations and examples in the text. As well as a list of references and an index, the end matter includes an answer guide to the self-study questions and a very useful glossary of around 220 terms. A rather endearing feature of the book is the inclusion, at various points in the text, of short biographies of some of the key figures mentioned, with photos. Additional downloadable resources include further questions to stimulate critical thinking, a further reading list for advanced students, and listings of relevant professional organisations, journals and institutes.

The main change from the first edition of the book is the addition of material on simultaneous bilingualism in early childhood, non-verbal aspects of language, linguistic interfaces in the Chomskyan tradition, complexity theory and computer-mediated communication, which is redefining the concept of a ‘speech

community’. The author considers that the last three of these fields are likely to make a substantial contribution to the study of SLA in the foreseeable future.

Chapter 1 ‘Introducing Second Language Acquisition’ presents basic concepts such as SLA, first and second language (L1 and L2), formal and informal learning, competence and performance. It also introduces the book’s three central questions (see above) and some of the different aspects focused on by researchers from different fields (linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, social psychology) and positions the book as an attempt to integrate these perspectives. Finally, it outlines some of the variables which may impinge on the process of acquiring a second language.

Chapter 2 ‘Foundations of Second Language Acquisition’ begins by pointing out the prevalence of multilingualism in the world and describing similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learning, including the roles of natural ability, social experience, interlanguage, language transfer and facilitating conditions such as feedback, aptitude, motivation and instruction. It goes on to outline linguistic, psychological and social perspectives on SLA and some of the theories and emphases which have been important for each, and which are to be developed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 ‘The linguistics of Second Language Acquisition’ considers what knowledge and skills are required for fluent language use, and then surveys the history of linguistic approaches to SLA. It begins with contrastive analysis and the associated concepts of positive and negative transfer, which were studied with the primary aim of making language teaching more effective. The focus then turned to learner-internal processes and an interest in creative construction, interlanguage, error analysis, morpheme order studies, the



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natural order hypothesis, the monitor model and universal grammar. Later still, interest moved on to systemic linguistics, functional typology, function-to-form mapping and information organisation; these have an external focus on the functions of language which emerge in SLA.

Chapter 4 'The psychology of Second Language Acquisition' addresses issues concerning language and the brain (e.g. How is language located and organised in the brains of monolinguals and multilinguals who have acquired second languages at different ages?), learning processes (e.g. Is there a specialised language faculty in the brain, or is language learning essentially the same as all other kinds of learning?) and learner differences (e.g. How do factors such as age, sex, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, personality and learning styles contribute to differential achievement?)

Chapter 5 'Social contexts of Second Language Acquisition' asks how learners achieve communicative competence, and considers them as members of groups and communities; the microsocial perspective focuses on their immediate surroundings, including opportunities for input and interaction, while the macrosocial relates SLA to cultural, political and educational conditions.

Chapter 6 'Acquiring knowledge for L2 use' integrates the concerns of the previous three chapters and describes the knowledge learners need for academic and interpersonal purposes, for command of language systems (phonology, morphology, vocabulary, syntax,

discourse) and for using language skills (speaking, listening, writing, reading).

Chapter 7 'L2 learning and teaching' summarises and contrasts different conceptions, based on different theoretical orientations, of what L2 learners learn, how they acquire this knowledge, and why some are more successful than others. It draws a few cautious implications for L2 teaching, and concludes by re-emphasising the need for SLA to be recognised as an interdisciplinary endeavour.

Introducing Second Language Acquisition covers a huge amount of ground in less than 200 pages of text. It is, by and large, clearly written and accessible; many points are introduced by asking readers to reflect on their own experience of using and learning – or attempting to learn! – languages, for example. The compression of so much material into so few pages does mean, however, that some steep learning curves are unavoidable; consider this sentence, from pages 26–7, for instance: 'The Minimalist Program adds distinctions between lexical and functional category development, as well as more emphasis on the acquisition of feature specification as a part of lexical knowledge.' Nevertheless, the intrepid reader who perseveres, with the help of the end-of-chapter activities and, especially, in the context of a taught course, will be very well informed and in a strong position, if so desired, to venture further into the subject.