

INTRODUCTION

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In the past century major changes in the study of language learning, and its attendant effects on language instruction, derived from the espousal of behavioral psychology by structural linguistics of the Bloomfieldian persuasion. Did not the founder of this strand of structuralism, who collaborated in the Army language manual for the teaching of Russian under the revealing pseudonym of I. M. Lisnin, declare: “Language learning is overlearning, nothing else is of any use”? Noam Chomsky’s (1959) brilliant demonstration of the reductionism of the most extreme form of behaviorism—Skinner’s operant conditioning (Review of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*, *Language*, 35, 26–58)—triggered the demise of the influence of behavioristic views of language acquisition. This demise was accompanied by that of the structural approach to second language teaching associated with such applied linguists as Robert Lado, although it must be acknowledged that the combination of these two theoretical strands did lead to significant changes in foreign language classrooms—for example, the abandonment of grammar translation and a shift of focus from written texts to speech. However, what applied linguists of that generation failed to do was to observe how actual second language learners in both naturalistic and instructed contexts process and reorganize linguistic input, how they intake it, and how they turn it into output in communicative interactions. It was not until the impact of Chomskian-inspired studies of first language acquisition and Pit Corder’s (1967) seminal “The significance of learners’ errors” (*International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5, 161–170) that the second language learner came into focus and that the field of second language acquisition research began to flourish. In this connection, it is noteworthy that bringing to a wider international audience the proceedings of the Neuchâtel colloquia led by Corder served as a catalyst for the launching of *SSLA*.

In the last couple of decades the innatist view has dominated the fields of first and second language acquisition. In the latter domain, particularly in recent years, one of the central issues debated by researchers was whether the innate language acquisition device that determined the course of first language development among children was still available to adults acquirers of a second language. Convergence of research from a variety of disciplines—discourse and corpus-based text analysis, cognitive science, psycholinguistics, and so forth—has led to a rejection of uncompromising linguistic innatism in favor of views that recognize certain commonalities between all types of human learn-

ing. One of these is associative learning, in which frequency effects play a large role: Learners are sensitive to regularities in the linguistic input and to co-occurrent combinations and extract from these probabilistic patterns.

For that reason, the editorial staff of *SSLA* decided to depart from the prototypical pattern for the annual thematic issue established over more than 20 volumes. In the guise of the thematic issue it offers a discussion about associative learning and frequency effects and their implications for all aspects of second language acquisition. We invited one of the leading proponents of this view, Nick Ellis, to state the case for associative learning and the role of frequency in language acquisition in a position paper designed to elicit comments from fellow SLA researchers associated with a broad range of theoretical perspectives. The contributors of these responses were selected by mutual agreement between the *SSLA* editorial staff and the author of the lead piece. The latter was then invited to draft, as a coda, a reflection to the various commentaries.

This multilateral discussion touches on the link between frequency effects and a broad array of current issues in SLA research: the relationship between associative learning and abstract rule systems; the validity of the postulated progression from formula to constructions via low-scope patterns; the relationship between implicit and explicit learning; the effect of form-focused instruction on implicit learning; phonological reduction; the relationship between frequency and saliency; the importance of noticing and learner attention; the relationship between implicit learning and production; and the isomorphy between comprehension and production grammars.

The diversity of the commentaries cannot but evoke the story of the blind men and the elephant, for indeed a comprehensive theory of second language acquisition still remains elusive and far off in the distance. However, it is the hope from the editor's desk that this thematic issue will stimulate continued interaction between alternative perspectives and constitute a valuable step toward the ultimate goal of our field.