

Note to teachers

This book provides an introduction to the application of second language acquisition (SLA) research to language teaching suitable for language teachers, student teachers and students on MA courses in applied linguistics, TESOL, methodology of modern language teaching, and so on. It presupposes no previous background and provides explanations and glossaries of important terms. Most sections of each chapter start with focusing questions and keywords and end with summaries of the area and of its application, as well as presenting discussion topics and further reading.

The scope of the book ranges from particular aspects of language and language teaching to broader contexts of second language acquisition and general ideas of language teaching. After the general background in Chapter 1, the next four chapters look at how people learn particular aspects of the second language: grammar in Chapter 2, vocabulary in Chapter 3, pronunciation in Chapter 4, and the writing system in Chapter 5. The next three chapters treat learners as individuals, dealing with learners' strategies in Chapter 6, listening and reading processes in Chapter 7, and individual differences in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 examines the characteristics of language teaching in classrooms. The remaining chapters adopt a wider perspective. Chapter 10 looks at the nature of the L2 user and the native speaker, Chapter 11 at goals of language teaching, and Chapter 12 at models of second language acquisition. The final Chapter 13 discusses different styles of language teaching and looks for their foundations in SLA research.

From my own teaching of this material I have found that the teaching sequence needs to vary to suit the interests and experience of the particular students on a course. For some it is better to start with the factual language materials in Chapters 2–5; those with more theoretical interests may start with the general models of second language acquisition in Chapter 12; students with less experience of teaching may need to start with sections of Chapter 13, which provide a quick background in teaching methods of the twentieth century; others may want to concentrate on the more controversial society-related issues of Chapters 10 and 11. Apart from the introductory Chapter 1, the chapters can stand alone and do not depend on previous chapters, though cross-references are made when necessary and a glossary of all key terms is given online.

The writing of the fourth edition has been guided largely by feedback from students, teachers and colleagues at Newcastle University. The broad framework and approach of the third edition have been maintained. An additional feature has been added, namely links to the website. For some time my website *SLA Topics* (<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/index.htm>) has offered a wide range of materials for SLA research. Recently, a portal has been created for users of this book which can be found at www.hodderplus.com/linguistics. This site contains support materials, notes, questionnaires, a glossary of keywords, samples of research techniques, further reading and lists of other related sites. The various questionnaires, summaries, data, and so on provided in the chapters are available online and can be downloaded and printed, usually as Microsoft® Word files. Links to a specific page on the website are indicated in the book by the mouse symbol. The links to other people's sites mentioned in the text are included on a single page of useful links on the website.



Background to second language acquisition research and language teaching

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Language is at the centre of human life. We use it to express our love or our hatred, to achieve our goals and further our careers, to gain artistic satisfaction or simple pleasure, to pray or to blaspheme. Through language we plan our lives and remember our past; we exchange ideas and experiences; we form our social and individual identities. Language is the most unique thing about human beings. As Cicero said in 55 BC, 'The one thing in which we are especially superior to beasts is that we speak to each other.'

Some people are able to do some or all of this in more than one language. Knowing another language may mean: getting a job; a chance to get educated; the ability to take a fuller part in the life of one's own country or the opportunity to emigrate to another; an expansion of one's literary and cultural horizons; the expression of one's political opinions or religious beliefs; the chance to talk to people on a foreign holiday. A second language affects people's careers and possible futures, their lives and their very identities. In a world where probably more people speak two languages than one, the acquisition and use of second languages are vital to the everyday lives of millions; monolinguals are becoming almost an endangered species. Helping people acquire second languages more effectively is an important task for the twenty-first century.

1.1 The scope of this book

The main aim of this book is to communicate to those concerned with language teaching some of the ideas about how people acquire second languages that emerge from second language acquisition (SLA) research, and to make suggestions of how these might benefit language teaching. It is not a guide to SLA research methodology itself, or to the merits and failings of particular SLA research techniques, which are covered in other books, such as *Second Language Learning Theories* (Myles and Mitchell, 2004). Nor is it an overall guide to the methods and techniques of language teaching; only to those which are related to an SLA research perspective. It is intended for language teachers and trainee teachers. Most of the time it tries not to take sides in reporting the various issues; inevitably my own interest in the multi-competence approach is hard to conceal.

Much of the discussion concerns the L2 learning and teaching of English, mainly because this is the chief language that has been investigated in SLA research. English is used here, however, as a source of examples rather than forming the subject matter itself. The teaching and learning of other modern languages are discussed when appropriate. It should be remembered that the English language is often in a unique situation, being the only language that can be used almost anywhere on the globe

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between people who are non-native speakers. Most sections of each chapter start with focusing questions and a display of defining keywords, and end with discussion topics and further reading.

Contact with the language teaching classroom is maintained in this book chiefly through the discussion of published coursebooks and syllabuses, usually for teaching English. Even if good teachers use books only as a jumping-off point, they can provide a window into many classrooms. The books and syllabuses cited are taken from countries ranging from Germany to Japan to Cuba, though inevitably the bias is towards coursebooks published in England for reasons of accessibility. Since many modern language teaching coursebooks are depressingly similar in orientation, the examples of less familiar approaches have often been taken from older coursebooks.

This book talks about only a fraction of the SLA research on a given topic, often presenting only one or two of the possible approaches. It concentrates on those based on ideas about language, that is, applied linguistics, rather than those coming from psychology or education. Nevertheless it covers more areas of SLA research than most books that link SLA research to language teaching, for example, taking in pronunciation, vocabulary and writing, among other areas. It uses ideas from the wealth of research produced in the past twenty years or so, rather than just the most recent. Sometimes it has to go beyond the strict borders of SLA research itself to include topics such as the position of English in the world and the power of native speakers over their language.

The book is linked to an extensive website: www.hoddereducation.com/viviancook. This contains pages for this book, such as questionnaires, displays, language data, summaries, lists of links, and so on, as well as a great deal of other SLA information not specific to the book. The pages can be downloaded and printed. The main entry point is the index. The mouse symbol in the book indicates that there is a particular aspect available online; the more general pages are not signalled every time they might be useful.



1.2 Common assumptions of language teaching

Focusing question

- Answer the questionnaire in Box 1.1 to find out your assumptions about language teaching.

Keywords

first language: chronologically the first language that a child learns

second language: 'A language acquired by a person in addition to his mother tongue' (UNESCO)

native speaker: a person who still speaks the language they learnt in childhood, often seen as monolingual

Glosses on names of teaching methods are provided at the end of the chapter. Explanations of keywords throughout the book are available in the keyword glossary on the website.



Box 1.1 Assumptions of language teaching

Tick the extent to which you agree or disagree with these assumptions

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 Students learn best through spoken, not written language.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Teachers and students should use the second language rather than the first language in the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Teachers should avoid explicit discussion of grammar.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 The aim of language teaching is to make students like native speakers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a revolution took place that affected much of the language teaching used in the twentieth century. The revolt was primarily against the stultifying methods of grammatical explanation and translation of texts which were then popular. (In this chapter we will use 'method' in the traditional way to describe a particular way of teaching, with its own techniques and tasks; Chapter 13 replaces this with the word 'style'.) In its place, the pioneers of the new language teaching, such as Henry Sweet and Otto Jespersen, emphasized the spoken language and the naturalness of language learning, and insisted on the importance of using the second language in the classroom rather than the first (Howatt, 2004). These beliefs are largely still with us today, either explicitly instilled into teachers or just taken for granted. The questionnaire in Box 1.1 tests the extent to which the reader actually believes in four of these common assumptions.

If you agreed with most of the statements in Box 1.1, then you share the common assumptions of teachers over the past 120 years. Let us consider them in more detail.

Assumption 1: The basis for teaching is the spoken, not the written language

One of the keynotes of the nineteenth-century revolution in teaching was the emphasis on the spoken language, partly because many of its advocates were phoneticians. The English curriculum in Cuba, for example, insists on ‘The principle of the primacy of spoken language’ (Cuban Ministry of Education, 1999). The teaching methods within which speech was most dominant were the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods, which insisted on presenting spoken language from tape before the students encountered the written form. Later methods have continued to emphasize the spoken language. Communication in the communicative method is usually through speech rather than writing. The total physical response method uses spoken, not written, commands, and storytelling, not story reading. Even in the recent task-based learning approach, Ellis (2003: 6) points out: ‘The literature on tasks, both research-based or pedagogic, assumes that tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking.’ The amount of teaching time that teachers pay to pronunciation far outweighs that given to spelling.

The importance of speech has been reinforced by many linguists who claim that speech is the primary form of language, and that writing depends on speech. Few teaching methods in the twentieth century saw speech and writing as being equally important. The problem with accepting this assumption, as we see in Chapter 5, is that written language has distinct characteristics of its own, which are not just pale reflections of the spoken language. To quote Michael Halliday (1985: 91), ‘writing is not speech written down, nor is speech writing that is read aloud’. Vital as the spoken language may be, it should not divert attention from those aspects of writing that are crucial for students. Spelling mistakes, for instance, probably count more against an L2 user in everyday life than a foreign accent.

Assumption 2: Teachers and students should use the second language rather than the first language in the classroom

The emphasis on the second language in the classroom was also part of the revolt against the older methods by the late nineteenth-century methodologists, most famously through the direct method and the Berlitz method, with their rejection of translation as a teaching technique. In the 1990s the use of the first language in the classroom was still seen as undesirable, whether in England – ‘The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern language course’ (DES, 1990: 58) – or in Japan – ‘The majority of an English class will be conducted in English’ (MEXT, 2003). This advice is echoed in almost every teaching manual: ‘the need to have them practising English (rather than their own language) remains paramount’ (Harmer, 1998: 129). One argument for avoiding the first language is that children learning their first language do not have a second language available, which is irrelevant in itself – infants do not play golf, but we teach it to adults. Another argument is that students should keep the two languages separate in their minds rather than linking them; this adopts a compartmentalized view of the languages in the same mind, which is not supported by SLA research, as we see everywhere in this book. Nevertheless, many English classes justifiably avoid the first language for practical reasons, whether

because of the mixed languages of the students or because of the teacher's ignorance of the students' first language.

Assumption 3: Teachers should avoid explicit discussion of grammar

The ban on explicit teaching of grammar to students also formed part of the rejection of the old-style methods. Grammar could be practised through drills or incorporated within communicative exercises, but should not be explained to students. While grammatical rules could be demonstrated through substitution tables or situational cues, actual rules should not be mentioned. The old arguments against grammatical explanation were, on the one hand, the question of conscious understanding – knowing some aspect of language consciously is no guarantee that you can use it in speech – and, on the other, the time involved – speaking by consciously using all the grammatical rules means each sentence may take several minutes to produce, as those of us who learnt Latin by this method will bear witness. Chapter 2 describes how grammar has recently made something of a comeback.

Assumption 4: The aim of language teaching is to make students like native speakers

One of the assumptions that is most taken for granted is that the model for language teaching is the native speaker. Virtually all teachers, students and bilinguals have assumed that success is measured by how close a learner gets to a native speaker, in grammar, vocabulary and particularly pronunciation. David Stern (1983: 341) puts it clearly: 'The native speaker's "competence" or "proficiency" or "knowledge of the language" is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in language teaching.' Coursebooks are based on native language speakers; examinations compare students with the native speaker. Passing for a native is the ultimate test of success. Like all the best assumptions, people so take this for granted that they can be mortally offended if it is brought out into the open and they are asked, 'Why do you want to be a native speaker in any case?' No other possibility than the native speaker is entertained.

As we shall see, many of these background assumptions are questioned by SLA research and have sometimes led to undesirable consequences. Assumption 1, that students learn best through spoken language, leads to undervaluing the features specific to written language, as we see in Chapter 6. Assumption 2, that the L1 should be minimized in the classroom, goes against the integrity of the L2 user's mind, to be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 10. Assumption 3, on not teaching grammar, explicitly implies a particular model of grammar and learning, rather than the many alternatives shown in Chapter 2. The native speaker assumption 4 has come under increasing attack in recent years, as described in Chapter 10, on the grounds that a native speaker goal is not appropriate for all circumstances and is unattainable for the vast majority of students. Nevertheless, even if for the most part these assumptions are unstated, they continue to be part of the basis of language teaching, however the winds of fashion blow.

1.3 What *is* second language acquisition research?

Focusing questions

- Who do you know who is good at languages? Why do you think this is so?
- Do you think that everybody learns a second language in roughly the same way?

Keywords

Contrastive Analysis: this research method compared the descriptions of two languages in grammar or pronunciation to discover the differences between them; these were then seen as difficulties for the students that needed to be overcome

Error Analysis (EA): this method studied the language produced by L2 learners to establish its peculiarities, which it tried to explain in terms of the first language and other sources

As this book is based on SLA research, the obvious question is: what *is* SLA research? People have been interested in the acquisition of second languages since at least the ancient Greeks, but the discipline itself only came into being around 1970, gathering together language teachers, psychologists and linguists. Its roots were in the 1950s studies of Contrastive Analysis, which compared the first and second languages to predict students' difficulties, and in the 1960s Chomskyan models of first language acquisition, which saw children as creators of their own languages. Together these led to SLA research concentrating on the learner as the central element in the learning situation.

In the early days much attention focused on the language the learner produced. The technique of Error Analysis looked at the differences between the learner's speech and that of native speakers (Corder, 1981); it tried to establish what learner speech was actually like. The next wave of research tried to establish stages of development for the learner's language, say, the sequence for acquiring grammatical items like 'to', 'the' and '-ing', to be discussed in Chapter 2. Now people started to get interested in the qualities that learners brought to second language acquisition and the choices they made when learning and using the language. And they started to pay attention to the whole context in which the learner is placed, whether the temporary context of the conversation or the more permanent situation in their own society or the society whose language they are learning.

Nowadays SLA research is an extremely rich and diverse subject, drawing on aspects of linguistics, psychology, sociology and education. Hence it has many aspects and theories that are often incompatible. Most introductory books on second language acquisition will attest to the great interest that SLA researchers have in grammar. Yet many researchers are concerned exclusively with phonology or vocabulary, with their own specialist books and conferences. And still other groups are concerned with how Vygotsky's ideas link to modern language teaching, or how discourse and Conversation Analysis are relevant to second language

acquisition. Much teaching-oriented SLA research now takes place at the interface between cognitive psychology and educational research, called 'usage-based learning' by Michael Tomasello (2003), leading to task-based learning. Though some SLA research is intended to be applied to teaching, most is either 'pure' study of second language acquisition for its own sake, or uses second language acquisition as a testing ground for linguistic theories.

The present book tries to be eclectic in presenting a variety of areas and approaches that seem relevant for language teaching rather than a single unified approach. Here are some 'facts' that SLA research has discovered; some of them will be explained and applied in later chapters; others are still a mystery:

- *English-speaking primary school children who are taught Italian for one hour a week learn to read better in English than other children.*

Such a small exposure to a second language as one hour a week can have useful effects on other aspects of the child's mind and is potentially an important reason for teaching children another language. Language teaching affects more than the language in a person's mind.

- *People who speak a second language are more creative and flexible at problem solving than monolinguals (e.g. Einstein, Nabokov).*

Research clearly shows L2 users have an advantage in several cognitive areas; they think differently and perceive the world differently. This benefit is discussed in Chapter 10.

- *Ten days after a road accident, a bilingual Moroccan could speak French but not Arabic; the next day Arabic but not French; the next day she went back to fluent French and poor Arabic; three months later she could speak both.*

The relationship between the two languages in the brain is now starting to be understood by neurolinguists, yet the diversity of effects from brain injury is still largely inexplicable. The effects on language are different in almost every bilingual patient; some aphasics recover the first language they learnt, some the language they were using at the time of injury, some the language they use most, and so on.

- *Bengali-speaking children in Tower Hamlets in London go through stages in learning verb inflections; at 5 they know only '-ing' (walking); at 7 they also know /t/ 'walked', /d/ 'played' and 'ate' (irregular past tenses); at 9 they still lack 'hit' (zero past).*

Learners all seem to go through similar stages of development of a second language, whether in grammar or pronunciation, as we see in other chapters. This has been confirmed in almost all studies looking at the sequence of acquisition. Yet, as in this case, we are still not always sure of the reason for the sequence.

- *The timing of the voicing of /t~d/ sounds in 'ten/den' is different in French people who speak English, and French people who do not.*

The knowledge of the first language is affected in subtle ways by the second language that you know, so that there are many giveaways to the fact that you speak other languages, whether in grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary. L2 users no longer have the same knowledge of their first language as the monolingual native speaker.

- *L2 learners rapidly learn the appropriate pronunciations for their own gender, for instance, that men tend to pronounce the '-ing' ending of the English continuous form 'going' as '-in', but women tend to use '-ing'.*

People quickly pick up elements that are important to their identity in the second language, say, men's versus women's speech – even if the teacher is probably

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unaware of what is being conveyed. A second language is a complex new addition to one's roles in the world.

- *Remembering a fish tank they have been shown, Chinese people who also speak English will remember the fish more than the plants to a greater extent than Chinese monolinguals.*

Different cultures think in different ways. Our cultural attitudes may be changed by the language we are acquiring; in this case, the Chinese attention to 'background' plants is altered by impact with the English attention to 'foreground' fish.

1.4 What a teacher can expect from SLA research

Focusing questions

- How do you think SLA research could help your teaching?
- Have you seen it applied to language teaching before?
- Who do you think should decide what happens in the classroom – the government, the head teacher, the teacher, the students, the parents, or someone else?

Let us take three examples of the contribution SLA research can make to language teaching: understanding the students' contribution to learning, understanding how teaching methods and techniques work, and understanding the overall goals of language teaching.

Understanding the students' contribution to learning

All successful teaching depends on learning; there is no point in providing entertaining, lively, well-constructed language lessons if students do not learn from them. The proof of the teaching is in the learning. One crucial factor in L2 learning is what the students bring with them into the classroom. With the exception of young bilingual children, L2 learners have fully formed personalities and minds when they start learning the second language, and these have profound effects on their ways of learning and on how successful they are. SLA research, for example, has established that the students' diverse motivations for learning the second language affect them powerfully, as we see in Chapter 8. Some students see learning the second language as extending the repertoire of what they can do; others see it as a threat.

The different ways in which students tackle learning also affect their success. What is happening in the class is not equally productive for all the students because their minds work in different ways. The differences between individuals do not disappear when they come through the classroom door. Students base what they do on their previous experience of learning and using language. They do not start from scratch without any background or predisposition to learn language in one way or another. Students also have much in common by virtue of possessing the same human minds. For instance, SLA research predicts that, however

advanced they are, students will find that their memory works less well in the new language, whether they are trying to remember a phone number or the contents of an article. SLA research helps in understanding how apparently similar students react differently to the same teaching technique, while revealing the problems that all students share.

Understanding how teaching methods and techniques work

Teaching methods usually incorporate a view of L2 learning, whether implicitly or explicitly. Grammar-translation teaching, for example, emphasizes explanations of grammatical points because this fits in with its view that L2 learning is the acquisition of conscious knowledge. Communicative teaching methods require the students to talk to each other because they see L2 learning as growing out of the give-and-take of communication. For the most part, teaching methods have developed these ideas of learning independently from SLA research. They are not based, for example, on research into how learners use grammatical explanations or how they learn by talking to each other. More information about how learners actually learn helps the teacher to make any method more effective and can put the teacher's hunches on a firmer basis.

The reasons why a teaching technique works or does not work depend on many factors. A teacher who wants to use a particular technique will benefit by knowing what it implies in terms of language learning and language processing, the type of student for whom it is most appropriate, and the ways in which it fits into the classroom situation. Suppose the teacher wants to use a task in which the students spontaneously exchange information. This implies that students are learning by communicating, that they are prepared to speak out in the classroom and that the educational context allows for learning from fellow students rather than from the teacher alone. SLA research has something to say about all of these, as we shall see.

Understanding the goals of language teaching

The reasons why the second language is being taught depend on overall educational goals, which vary from one country to another and from one period to another. One avowed goal of language teaching is to help people to think better – brain training and logical thinking. Others are appreciation of serious literature; the student's increased self-awareness and maturity; the appreciation of other cultures and races; communication with people in other countries, and so on. Many of these have been explored in particular SLA research. For example, the goal of brain training is supported by evidence that people who know two languages think more flexibly than monolinguals (Landry, 1974). This information is vital when considering the viability and implementation of communicative goals for a particular group of students. SLA research can help define the goals of language teaching, assess how achievable they may be, and contribute to their achievement. These issues are debated in Chapter 11.

SLA research is a scientific discipline that tries to describe how people learn and use another language. It cannot decide issues that are outside its domain. While it may contribute to the understanding of teaching goals, it is itself neutral between them. It is not for the teacher, the methodologist or any other outsider to dictate whether a language should be taught for communication, for brain training, or whatever purpose, but for the society or the individual student to decide. One

country specifies that group work must be used in the classroom because it encourages democracy. Another bans any reference to English-speaking culture in textbooks because English is for international communication, not for developing relationships with England or the USA. A third sees language teaching as a way of developing honesty and the values of good citizenship; a speaker at a TESOL conference in New York proclaimed that the purpose of TESOL was to create good American citizens (to the consternation of the British and Canadians present in the audience). SLA research as a discipline neither commends nor denies the value of these goals, since they depend on moral or political values rather than science. But it can offer advice on how these goals may best be achieved and what their costs may be, particularly in balancing the needs of society and of the individual.

Teachers need to see the classroom from many angles, not just from that of SLA research. The choice of what to do in a particular lesson depends on the teacher's assessment of the factors involved in teaching *those* students in *that* situation. SLA research reveals some of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular teaching method or technique and it provides information that can influence and guide teaching. It does not provide a magic solution to teaching problems in the form of a patented method with an attractive new brand name.

Insights from SLA research can help teachers, whatever their methodological slant. Partly this is at the general level of understanding; knowing what language learning consists of colours the teacher's awareness of everything that happens in the classroom and heightens the teacher's empathy with the student. Partly it is at the more specific level of the choice of teaching methods, the construction of teaching materials, or the design and execution of teaching techniques. The links between SLA research and language teaching made here are suggestions of what *can* be done rather than accounts of what *has* been done or orders about what *should* be done. Since SLA research is still in its early days, some of the ideas presented here are based on a solid agreed foundation; others are more controversial or speculative.

While this book has been written for language teachers, this is not the only way in which SLA research can influence language teaching. Other routes for the application of SLA research include:

- 1 Informing the students themselves about SLA research so they can use it in their learning. This has been tried in books such as *How to Study Foreign Languages* (Lewis, 1999) and *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner* (Rubin and Thompson, 1982).
- 2 Basing language examinations and tests on SLA research, a vast potential application but not one that has yet been tried on any scale, examination designers and testers usually following their own traditions.
- 3 Devising syllabuses and curricula using SLA research so that the content of teaching can fit the students better. We shall meet some attempts at this in various chapters here, but again, SLA research has not usually been the basis for syllabuses.
- 4 Writing course materials based on SLA research. Some coursebook writers do indeed try to use ideas from SLA research, as we shall see.

Often these indirect routes may have a greater influence on teaching than the teacher.

1.5 Some background ideas of SLA research

Focusing questions

- Do you feel you keep your two languages separate or do they merge at some point in your mind?
- Do you think students should aim to become as native-like as possible?

Keywords

multi-competence: the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind

the independent language assumption: the language of the L2 learner can be considered a language in its own right rather than a defective version of the target language (sometimes called ‘interlanguage’)

L2 user and L2 learner: an L2 user uses the second language for real-life purposes; an L2 learner is acquiring a second language rather than using it

second and foreign language: broadly speaking, a *second* language is for immediate use within the same country; a *foreign* language is for long-term future use in other countries

When SLA research became an independent discipline, it established certain principles that underlie much of the research to be discussed later. This section presents some of these core ideas.

SLA research is independent of language teaching

Earlier approaches to L2 learning often asked the question: which teaching methods give the best results? Is an oral method better than a translation method? Is a communicative method better than a situational one? Putting the question in this form accepts the status quo of what already happens in teaching rather than looking at underlying principles of learning: ‘Is what happens in teaching right?’ rather than ‘What should happen in teaching?’ A more logical sequence is to ask: how do people *learn* languages? Then teaching methods can be evaluated in the light of what has been discovered, and teaching can be based on adequate ideas of learning. The first step is to study learning itself; the second step is to see how teaching relates to learning, the sequence mostly followed in this book.

The teacher should be told from the start that there is no easy link between SLA research and language teaching methods, despite the claims made in some course-books or by some researchers. The language teaching approaches of the past 50 years, by and large, have originated from teaching methodologists, not from SLA research. The communicative approach, for example, was only remotely linked to the theories of language acquisition of the 1960s and 1970s; it came chiefly out of the insight that language teaching should be tailored to students’ real-world communication needs. SLA research does not provide a magic solution that can be applied instantly to the

contemporary classroom so much as a set of ideas that teachers can try out for themselves.

The new field did not blindly take over the concepts previously used for talking about L2 learning. Language teachers, for example, often contrast *second* language teaching (which teaches the language for immediate use within the same country, say, the teaching of French to immigrants in France) with *foreign* language teaching (which teaches the language for long-term future uses and may take place anywhere, but most often in countries where it is not an everyday medium, say, the teaching of French in England). While this distinction is often convenient, it cannot be taken for granted that learners in these two situations necessarily learn in two different ways without proper research evidence. Indeed, later we shall look at many other dimensions to the learning situation (see Chapter 10). (Also there seems to be some variation between British and American usage of 'foreign' and 'second'.)

The term *second language (L2) learning/acquisition* is used in this book to include all learning of languages other than the native language, in whatever situation or for whatever purpose: second simply means 'other than first'. This is the sense of *second language* defined by UNESCO: 'A language acquired by a person in addition to his mother tongue'. Nor does this book make a distinction between language 'acquisition' and language 'learning', as Stephen Krashen does (e.g. Krashen, 1981a).

A more idiosyncratic use here is the distinction between *L2 user* and *L2 learner*. An *L2 user* is anybody making an actual use of the second language for real-life purposes outside the classroom; an *L2 learner* is anybody acquiring a second language. In some cases a person is both user and learner – when an L2 learner of English in London steps out of the classroom, they immediately become an L2 user of English. The distinction is important for many countries where learners do not become users for many years, if ever. The prime motivation for the term *L2 user*, however, is the feeling that it is demeaning to call someone who has functioned in an L2 environment for years a learner rather than a user, as if their task were never finished. We would not dream of calling a 20-year-old adult native speaker an L1 learner, so we should not call a person who has been using a second language for 20 years an L2 learner!

The different spheres of SLA research and language teaching mean that the concepts of language they use are often different. The danger is when both fields use the same terms with different meanings. To SLA researchers, for instance, the term 'grammar' mostly means something in people's heads which they use for constructing sentences; to teachers it means a set of rules on paper which can be explained to students. The type of grammar used in SLA research has little to do with the tried and true collection of grammatical ideas for teaching that teachers have evolved, as will be illustrated in Chapter 2. It is perfectly possible, for example, for the same person to say 'I hate grammar' (as a way of teaching by explaining rules) and 'I think grammar is very important' (as the mental system that organizes language in the students' minds). It is dangerous to assume that words used by teachers every day, such as 'vocabulary', 'noun' or 'linguist', have the same meaning in the context of SLA research.

L2 learning is independent of L1 acquisition

Teaching methods have often been justified in terms of how children learn their first language, without investigating L2 learning directly. The audio-lingual method of teaching, for instance, was based primarily on particular views of how children learn their first language.

There is no intrinsic reason, however, why learning a second language should be the same as learning a first. Learning a first language is, in Halliday's memorable phrase, 'learning how to mean' (Halliday, 1975) – discovering that language is used for relating to other people and for communicating ideas. Language, according to Michael Tomasello (1999), requires the ability to recognize that other people have points of view. People learning a second language already know how to mean and know that other people have minds of their own. L2 learning is inevitably different in this respect from L1 learning. The similarities between learning the first and second languages have to be established rather than taken for granted. In some respects, the two forms of learning may well be rather similar, in others quite different – after all, the outcome is often very different. Evidence about how the child learns a first language has to be interpreted with caution in L2 learning and seldom in itself provides a basis for language teaching.

L2 learners, in fact, are different from children learning a first language since there is already one language present in their minds. There is no way that the L2 learner can become a monolingual native speaker *by definition*. However strong the similarities may be between L1 acquisition and L2 learning, the presence of the first language is the inescapable difference in L2 learning. So our beliefs about how children learn their first language cannot be transferred automatically to a second language; some may work, some may not. Most teaching methods have claimed in some sense to be based on the 'natural' way of acquiring language, usually meaning the way used by L1 children; however, they have very different views of what L1 children do, whether derived from the theories of language learning current when they originated or from general popular beliefs about L1 acquisition, say, 'Children are good at imitation, therefore L2 learners should have to imitate sentences.'

L2 learning is more than the transfer of the first language

One view of L2 learning sees its crucial element as the transfer of aspects of the first language to the second language. The first language helps learners when it has elements in common with the second language and hinders them when they differ. Spanish speakers may leave out the subject of the sentence when speaking English, saying 'Is raining' rather than 'It is raining', while French speakers do not. The explanation is that subjects may be omitted in Spanish, but they may not be left out in French. Nor is it usually difficult to decide from accent alone whether a foreigner speaking English comes from France, Brazil or Japan.

But the importance of such transfer has to be looked at with an open mind. Various aspects of L2 learning need to be investigated before it can be decided how and when the first language is involved in the learning of the second. Though transfer from the first language indeed turns out to be important, often in unexpected ways, its role needs to be established through properly balanced research rather than the first language taking the blame for everything that goes wrong in learning a second.

Learners have independent language systems of their own

Suppose a student learning English says, 'Me go no school'. Many teachers would see it as roughly the same as the native sentence, 'I am not going to school', even if they would not draw the student's attention to it overtly. In other words, this is what the student might say if he or she were a native speaker. So this student is

'really' trying to produce a present continuous tense 'am going', a first person subject 'I', a negative 'not', and an adverbial 'to school', ending up with the native version 'I am not going to school'. But something has gone drastically wrong with the sentence. Perhaps the student has not yet encountered the appropriate forms in English or perhaps he or she is transferring constructions from the first language. The assumption is that the student's sentence should be compared to one produced by a native speaker. Sometimes this comparison is justified, as native-like speech is often a goal for the student.

This is what many students *want* to be, however, not what they *are* at the moment. It is judging the students by what they are *not* – native speakers. SLA research insists that learners have the right to be judged by the standards appropriate for them, not by those used for natives. 'Me go no school' is an example of learner language that shows what is going on in their minds. 'Me' shows that they do not distinguish 'I' and 'me', unlike native English; 'no' that negation consists for them of adding a negative word after the verb, unlike its usual position before the verb; 'go' that they have no grammatical endings such as '-ing', and so on. All these apparent 'mistakes' conform to regular rules in the students' own knowledge of English; they are only wrong when measured against native speech. Their sentences relate to their own temporary language systems at the moment when they produce the sentence, rather than to the native's version of English.

However peculiar and limited they may be, learners' sentences come from the learners' own language systems; their L2 speech shows rules and patterns of its own. At each stage learners have their own language systems. The nature of these learner systems may be very different from that of the target language. Even if they are idiosyncratic and constantly changing, they are nonetheless systematic. The starting point for SLA research is the learner's own language system. This can be called the 'independent language assumption': learners are not wilfully distorting the native system, but are inventing a system of their own. Finding out how students learn means starting from the curious rules and structures which they invent for themselves as they go along – their 'interlanguage', as Larry Selinker (1972) put it. This is shown in Figure 1.1.

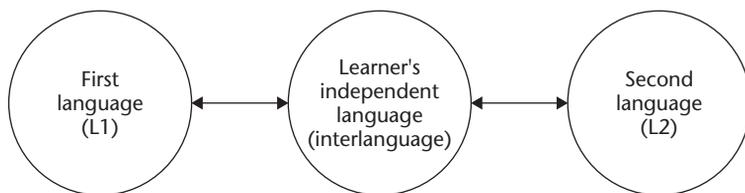


Figure 1.1 The learner's independent language (interlanguage)

The interlanguage concept had a major impact on teaching techniques in the 1970s. Teaching methods that used drills and grammatical explanations had insisted on the seriousness of the students' mistakes. A mistake in an audio-lingual drill meant the student had not properly learnt the 'habit' of speaking; a mistake in a grammatical exercise meant the student had not understood the rule. The concept of the learner's own system liberated the classroom and in part paved the way for the communicative language teaching methods of the 1970s and 1980s, and the task-based learning of the 1990s. Learners' sentences reflect their temporary language systems rather than their imperfect grasp of the target language. If a student

makes a 'mistake', it is not the fault of the teacher or the materials or even of the student, but an inevitable and natural part of the learning process. Teachers could now use teaching activities in which students talked to each other rather than to the teacher, because the students did not need the teacher's vigilant eye to spot what they were doing wrong. Their mistakes were minor irritants rather than major hazards. They could now work in pairs or groups, as the teacher did not have to supervise the students' speech continuously to pinpoint their mistakes.

In my own view, not yet shared by the SLA research field as a whole, the independent grammars assumption does not go far enough. On the one hand, we have the user's knowledge of their first language; on the other, their interlanguage in the second language. But these languages coexist in the same mind; one person knows both. Hence we need a name to refer to the overall knowledge that combines both the first language and the L2 interlanguage, namely *multi-competence* (Cook, 1992) – the knowledge of two languages in the same mind (shown in Figure 1.2). The lack of this concept has meant SLA research has still treated the two languages separately rather than as different facets of the same person, as we see from time to time in the rest of this book.

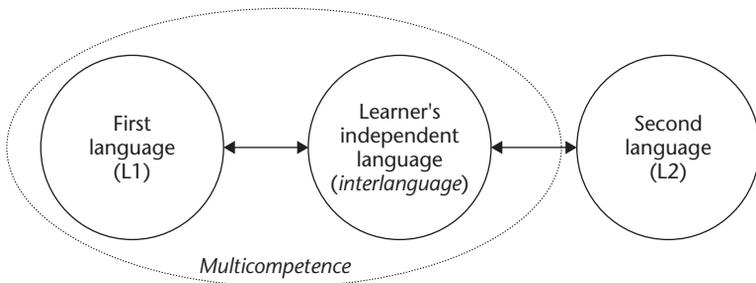


Figure 1.2 Multi-competence

Multi-competence

As this chapter has illustrated, one of the snags in discussing language teaching is the very word 'language', which has many meanings to many people. The opening sentence of this chapter said that 'language is at the centre of human life'; here 'language' is an abstract, uncountable noun used for a general property of human life (Lang₁), like vision, the meaning at stake in discussions of whether other species can use language. The next paragraph said, 'Some people are able to do all of this in more than one language'; here 'language' is a countable noun – there is more than one of it (Lang₂); this meaning covers the English language, the French language, and so on; that is to say, an abstraction describing one particular group of people, often a nation, rather than another. Later in this chapter we said that 'knowing some aspect of language consciously is no guarantee that you can use it in speech'; here 'language' has shifted meaning to the psychological knowledge in an individual human mind, what Chomsky (1965) meant by 'linguistic competence' (Lang₅). Then we talked about 'the language the learner produced', where 'language' now means the actual sentences that someone has said or written (Lang₃). Later still we commented that 'language is used for relating to other people'; 'language' also means something that is used for social reasons as part of society (Lang₄).

It is always important, therefore, when discussing language teaching and language acquisition, to remember which meaning of language we have in mind (Cook, 2007) – and there are doubtless many more meanings one could find. Sometimes misunderstandings occur simply because people are using different meanings of ‘language’ without realizing it. For example, an individual native speaker may know the English language in the psychological sense, but probably knows only a fraction of the words in any dictionary of the English language; students often feel frustrated because they measure their knowledge of a language against the grammar book and the dictionary (Lang₂) rather than against what an individual speaker knows (Lang₅).

Box 1.2 Meanings of ‘language’ (Cook, 2007)

- Lang₁: a representation system known by human beings – ‘human language’
- Lang₂: an abstract entity – ‘the English language’
- Lang₃: a set of sentences – everything that has been or could be said – ‘the language of the Bible’
- Lang₄: the possession of a community – ‘the language of French people’
- Lang₅: the knowledge in the mind of an individual – ‘I have learnt French as a foreign language for eight years’

Discussion topics

- 1 What do you think is going on in the student’s head when they are doing, say, a fill-in exercise? Have you ever checked to see if this is really the case?
- 2 In what ways are coursebooks a good source of information about what is going on in a classroom, and in what ways are they not?
- 3 Do your students share the language teaching goals you are practising or do you have to persuade them that these are right? Do you have a right to impose the goals you choose on them?
- 4 Why do you believe in the teaching method you use? What evidence do you have for its success?
- 5 Are there more similarities or dissimilarities between L1 acquisition and L2 learning?
- 6 What should an L2 speaker aim at if not the model of the native speaker?
- 7 What factors in a teaching technique do *you* think are most important?
- 8 What is wrong with the following sentences from students’ essays? If you were their teacher, how would you correct them?
 - a Anyone doesn’t need any deposit in my country to rent an apartment. (Korean student)
 - b I play squash so so and I wish in Sunday’s morning arrange matches with a girl who plays like me. (Italian)
 - c Everytimes I concentrate to speak out, don’t know why always had Chinese in my mind. (Chinese)



- d Raelly I am so happy. I wold like to give you my best congratulate. and I wold like too to till you my real apologise, becuse my mother is very sik. (Arabic)
- e I please you very much you allow me to stay with you this Christmas. (Spanish)

Further reading

Good technical introductions to L2 learning and bilingualism can be found in Myles and Mitchell, *Second Language Learning Theories* (2004) and VanPatten and Williams (2006) *Theories in Second Language Acquisition*; a brief overview can be found in 'Linguistics and second language acquisition: one person with two languages' (Cook, 2000) in *The Blackwell Handbook of Linguistics*. Useful books with similar purposes but covering slightly different approaches to second language acquisition are: Lightbown and Spada (2006) *How Languages are Learned* and Cohen (1990) *Language Learning*. Some useful resources to follow up SLA and teaching on the web are the *Second Language Acquisition Bibliography* (SLABIB) at <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/Vivian%20Cook.htm>; the *European Second Language Association* (EUROSLA) at <http://eurosla.org>; and Dave's ESL Café at www.eslcafe.com. Those interested in the nineteenth-century revolution in language teaching should go to Howatt (2004) *A History of English Language Teaching*. More information is available on the website for this book, www.hoddereducation.com/viviancook. The issue of the meanings of 'language' is treated at greater length in Cook (2007).

Glosses on language teaching methods

audio-lingual method: this combined a learning theory based on ideas of habit formation and practice with a view of language as patterns and structures; it chiefly made students repeat sentences recorded on tape and practise structures in repetitive drills; originating in the USA in the 1940s, its peak of popularity was probably the 1960s, though it was not much used in British-influenced EFL (**Note:** it is not usually abbreviated to ALM since these initials belong to a particular trademarked method)

audio-visual method: this used visual images to show the meaning of spoken dialogues and believed in treating language as a whole rather than divided up into different aspects; teaching relied on filmstrips and taped dialogues for repetition; it emerged chiefly in France in the 1960s and 1970s

communicative teaching: this based language teaching on the functions that the second language had for the student and on the meanings they wanted to express, leading to teaching exercises that made the students communicate with each other in various ways; from the mid-1970s onwards this became the most influential way of teaching around the globe, not just for English

direct method: essentially any method that relies on the second language throughout

grammar-translation method: the traditional academic style of teaching which placed heavy emphasis on grammar explanation and translation as a teaching technique

task-based learning: this approach sees learning as arising from particular tasks the students do in the classroom and has been seen increasingly as a logical development from communicative language teaching

The details of many of these are discussed further in Chapter 13.