Overview of Approaches to Second Language Acquisition

Craig Dicker, Ph.D.
U.S. Department of State
True-False Questions

• 1. Children learn second languages more easily and rapidly than adults.
• 2. Most errors made in a second language can be attributed to the learner’s first language.
• 3. L2 learning is more effective when learned from a native speaker of the target language.
• 4. Certain personality types are more effective language learners than others.
• 5. Learners who produce language early in the language learning process become more proficient speakers/writers than those who don’t.
• 6. By focusing on grammar, learners eventually become more accurate users of the language.
Approaches to SLA

- Psycholinguistic
- Sociolinguistic
- Neurolinguistic
- Classroom Research
Psycholinguistic Questions

• How does one learn a second language system? What are the processes involved?

• What roles do first languages (L1) play in second language acquisition?

• What constitutes a “good language learner”?
Selinker’s 5 Processes Responsible for Creation of Interlanguage

- Language transfer (transfer of rules from L1 to L2)
- Transfer of training from being over-drilled in a particular form in a language class
- Strategies for L2 learning
- Strategies for L2 communication
- Overgeneralization of target language
Sociolinguistic Questions

• Assuming that interlanguage variation is systematic, what social variables impact on it?

• Does a learner’s interlanguage change over time?

• What is the role of sociolinguistic transfer in L2 development?

• What is the nature of L2 communicative competence?

• What are the causes of variation in interlanguage
5 Sociolinguistic Approaches

- Labov’s “Attention to Speech Paradigm”
- Bickerton’s “Dynamic Paradigm”
- Hymes’ “Communicative Competence Paradigm”
- Giles’ “Speech Accommodation Theory”
- Lambert’s “Attitudes and Motivations” approach
Neuropsychological Questions

• How are languages (L1 and L2) organized in terms of brain hemispheres?

• How are languages with different characteristics represented differently in the brain?

• Does age and the corresponding level of the individual’s mental (and, in terms of the brain, physical) development matter in SLA?
Classroom Research Questions

• Are there differences in terms of patterns of language acquisition between natural and instructed learners?

• How does instruction impact on the processes of acquisition? The sequence of acquisition? The rate of acquisition? The level of language proficiency ultimately reached?
Age and SLA

• Younger learners outperform older learners in terms of ultimate attainment of SL skills (and only children younger than age 7 can attain native-like phonological proficiency in L2)

• Adults acquire second language (at least morphology and syntax) faster than children or adolescents (however, the differences disappear within a year)
Sources of L2 Errors

• Interlingual Errors: negative transfer from L1
• Intralingual Errors: overgeneralization of a rule in the L2 (I wonder where are you going)
• Simplification Errors: reduction of redundancy (e.g. two year)
• Communication Based Errors: based on record of successful, uncorrected communication using incorrect language structures, word selection, etc.
Role of the linguistic Environment

• Conversational practice in NNS-NNS groups is as effective for SLA as NNS-NS groups

• Participation in conversations/interactions in the TL contributes to the acquisition of SL syntax

• There is some relationship between the frequency of a structure in the linguistic environment and the rate which it is acquired and accurately applied

• Elaborative (interactional structure) alterations to language input (oral and written) were superior to simplification alternations in terms of BOTH comprehension and SLA
Studies on Personality Type and SLA

- **Risk Taking**: High risk takers tend to have better SLA track records.

- **Anxiety and Empathy**: mixed results w/ relation to SLA.

- **Self-Esteem (global, context-specific and task specific)**: Achievement-Self-Esteem strongly correlate, particularly for task-specific self-esteem.

- **The better learners have a moderately high tolerance for ambiguity and their own errors.**
Silent Period and Comprehensible Input

- There is some evidence that "input-oriented" methods are more effective for some kinds of learners during the early stages of SLA
- Caretaker speech/Foreigner Talk can be as effective in SLA as in L1 acquisition
- Immersion programs which maximize the quantity of time exposed to comprehensible input have, in some contexts, produced superior results
- Without making the requisite modifications to input rendering it comprehensible to the learner, acquisition does not take place
Grammar Focus and SLA

• Interlanguage developmental sequences do NOT mirror instructional sequences, thereby indicating an underlying universal acquisition order.
• Instruction can influence rate of development.
• In order for linguistic forms to be acquired in a “natural” fashion, they must first be noticed by the learner in the linguistic input—formal grammar instruction can serve to raise such awareness.
• Morphological and syntactic errors persist among students who are never exposed to the TL’s structures (e.g. French Immersion students).
Studies in SLA: relevant or not for language teachers?

- Error Analysis and Correction Techniques
- Guiding classroom interaction patterns
- Developing and selecting appropriate learning tasks
- Selecting language input
- Developing and adapting course content and curriculum