

**A brief introduction to some of the main themes in Second Language  
Acquisition research, as promised on p. 198 of *Mapping Applied  
Linguistics* (Hall, Smith & Wicaksono, 2011)**

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Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the study of *how* additional languages are learned, is a major area of enquiry in both general and applied linguistics, with its own journals, associations, university courses, and book series. In a detailed review of how the field is construed in a variety of institutional contexts, Claire Kramsch (2000, p. 322) concludes:

[SLA] might be called a theory of the practice of [second] language acquisition and use. The theory of [second] language study makes explicit or implicit claims as to how languages can or should be taught in classrooms. The practice of [second] language study reveals models of action that serve to confirm or disconfirm the theory.

This approach, from theory to practice and back to theory, is attractive. But it is important to recognise that research in SLA is not always conducted for the purpose of generating implications for the additional language classroom. Indeed, many scholars study SLA for the same purpose that their colleagues down the corridor study first language acquisition: not to “solve” the practical problem which confronts the prelinguistic child and her caregivers, but to contribute to our understanding of human language and human development. Similarly, the process of SLA may be studied purely as an academic subject, independently of the desire to help learners and teachers. With this in mind, and in line with our problem-solving approach in *Mapping Applied Linguistics*, we provide only a brief overview of the discipline here.

To understand current contributions of SLA theory to SLA practice, it's perhaps useful to look at the way in which different theories came and went

during the last century. Essentially, we can identify three major trends of theory building:

- linguistic approaches, oriented toward language structure and “accuracy”;
- cognitive approaches, embracing universal and individual elements of the psychology of learning;
- sociocultural approaches, focusing on language use in social contexts.

Figure 1 depicts these trends, and lists some examples of movements or objects of study within each approach.

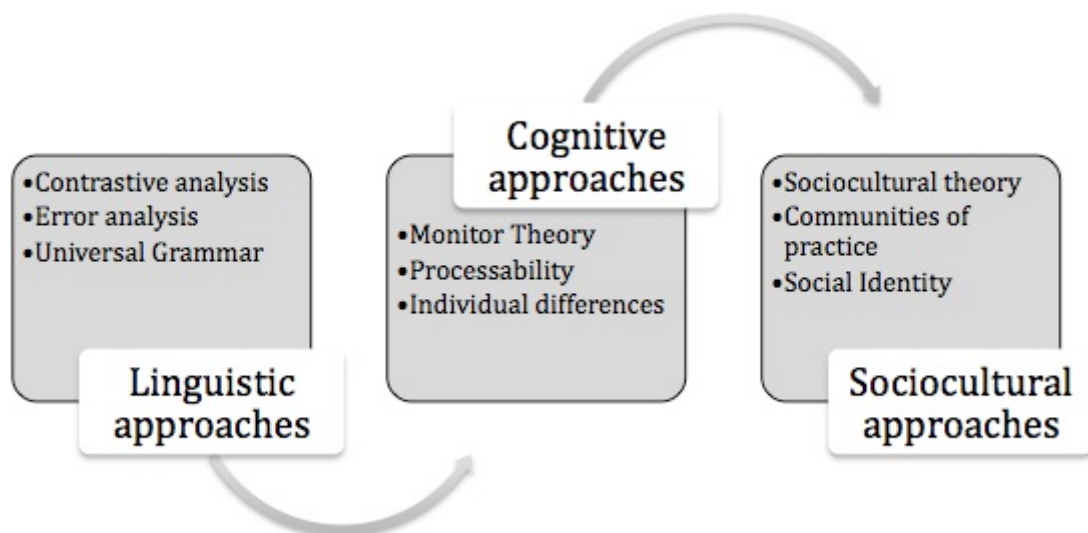


Figure 1: The ebb and flow of SLA theories during the twentieth century

As we have already pointed out, the acquisition of a second language can occur with or without teaching, and furthermore teaching can be more or less oriented toward knowledge transmission or to encouraging student discovery, and more or less focused on language structure or language use. In the first half of the last century, SLA wasn't yet established as a separate field of enquiry. Scholars interested in the process were very language-focused, inspired in the structuralist tradition of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who highlighted the abstract formal systematicity of languages. In line with

contemporary theory that first-language habits could “interfere” with the second language, leading to errors, the **contrastive analysis** of L1 and L2 grammatical systems led to the prediction of errors, and **error analysis** yielded evidence for the process by which the new system was assimilated.

In the 1970s, SLA came into its own and was highly influenced by Noam Chomsky’s developing theory of grammatical competence. Chomsky conceived the central task of linguistics to be the resolution of the “logical problem” of child language acquisition, namely how children came to acquire such a complex system in so short a time and on the basis of such limited evidence from the speech input they were exposed to. The conclusion Chomsky reached was that human beings come equipped with innate mental knowledge of the possible grammatical and phonological resources available to human languages and the ways in which these resources can be configured. For example, all human languages have techniques for nesting phrases within phrases, like Russian matryoshka dolls or the concentric layers of an onion (“this is the cat that chased the rat that ate the corn ...”). Chomsky’s theory of human language was centred around his concept of **Universal Grammar** (UG), the genetic endowment that allows human beings to acquire the grammar of any particular language. Although the theory was based primarily on intuitive judgements of grammaticality in “standard” varieties of English, and was confined to a description of the rules which govern syntactic structure, his work had a profound impact on the study of the changing structure of learners’ L2 knowledge (Selinker’s notion of **interlanguage**) and ultimate attainment (for example, White 2003).

The 1980s saw SLA theory develop rapidly, as scholars increasingly recognised that the process couldn’t be just a re-run of first language acquisition, but was governed by a more complex array of factors, both social and

psychological. Stephen Krashen (e.g. Krashen, 1981) distinguished between unconscious processes of acquisition, such as those governing children’s linguistic development, from deliberate acts of learning, which are prominent in adult second language development, especially when the additional language is *taught*. His **Monitor Theory** revolves around the idea that *learning* is not the process by which most L2 knowledge develops (it serves only to allow learners to monitor their output for accuracy). Instead, he argued, the key to successful additional language learning is how the mind unconsciously extracts grammatical regularities from **comprehensible input**.

Krashen’s concern with input was followed by a stream of research and theory exploring how learners process the speech and text they encounter and produce, and how this performance feeds into developing competence. Peinemann’s **processability** hypothesis, for example, held that learners operate according to an inbuilt mental curriculum which constrains the acquisition of certain grammatical structures to the appropriate developmental stage, as illustrated for English in Table 1.

Stage	Processing principle or strategy	Example structures
1	Memorisation	(a) single words (b) formulas
2	Canonical word order strategy	(a) SVO (b) <i>no</i> + SVO
3	Initialisation / Finalisation: Distinguishing between beginnings and ending of strings	(a) adverb-fronting (b) initial <i>do</i>
4	Recognising different categories within the string	(a) 3 <sup>rd</sup> person <i>-s</i> (e) dative <i>to</i>
5	Subordinate clause strategy: Breaking elements within a string into substrings	embedded clauses

Table 1: An example of learners' developmental stages according to Processability Theory (adapted from Pienemann & Johnston, 1987)

So far, we've been concentrating on universal processes in SLA, based on the notion that the human brain (where ultimately linguistic knowledge is stored - see Chapter 13 of *Mapping Applied Linguistics*) has the same basic structure in all members of our species. But the research on what happens in learners' minds has also embraced **individual differences**, such as aptitude and motivation. These studies continue to play a central role in the development of approaches to the practice of additional language teaching, and are discussed in greater depth in section 9.4 of *Mapping Applied Linguistics*.

The explosion of work on individual differences reflected wider dissatisfaction with purely linguistic approaches to SLA like those derived from Universal Grammar. As most speakers of additional languages know, success in the language depends on so much more than the development of **grammatical competence** and "accuracy" in performance. The anthropologist Dell Hymes had proposed in the 1970s the notion of **communicative competence**, which extended Chomsky's notion of competence to include knowledge of how to use language appropriately and strategically in actual situations of use. This struck a chord with second language researchers and teachers, who were dissatisfied with the narrow preoccupation of the cognitivists with decontextualised language knowledge and processing. So the focus shifted from what language *is* and how it *works* to what it *does*: mediate situated, sociocultural action and meaning. It was hypothesised that additional language learners would respond better to the challenge if their objective was not simply accurate deployment of grammar and vocabulary, but rather the fluent and effective negotiation of meanings in context.

Sociocultural approaches to SLA propose that language is acquired in specific contexts of use, bringing with it, and making possible, certain ways of seeing, remembering, planning, developing and learning. The work of Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev (published in Russia in the 1920s and 30s and first translated into English in the 1970s) provide the main principles and constructs of **sociocultural theory** (SCT), which began to inform SLA in the mid-1980s (for example, Frawley & Lantolf, 1985). While other approaches to SLA assume a separation between the individual (within whom the psychological processes of language acquisition operate) and the social (where language use happens and where meaning is created through the use of language to refer to reality that pre-exists language), SCT reconfigures the relationship. For Vygotsky and other socio-cultural theorists, language emerges from social and cultural activity and only later becomes reconstructed as an individual, psychological phenomenon. In this way of thinking, SLA theory should be centred not so much on the process of acquiring new sounds and structures and then using them to communicate, but rather on the learner's participation in social activities such as talking to classmates and teachers or having out-of-class conversations.

Other sociocultural approaches to SLA include the use of **communities of practice** theory (the idea that acquiring a language is a gradual process of becoming a user of accepted ways of communicating within the group(s) to which a learner aims to gain membership, based on Lave & Wenger, 1991) and explorations of the relationships between the social identities of learners and their learning. The role of the language learner's identity in SLA is examined in more detail on pp. 215-6 of *Mapping Applied Linguistics*.

To conclude this brief introduction, we stress again that although SLA theorists may be interested in knowing more about how learners learn (for example how motivation affects learning), they don't necessarily consider how

this might be relevant for the practice of additional language learning and teaching. This means that when the consumer of this research is a classroom teacher, she may be left to decide what the specific pedagogical implications of the research are for her students.

## **Glossary**

**Contrastive analysis** was used to attempt to identify areas of convergence and divergence between the L1 and the L2 in order to predict elements of the L2 which would be easier or harder for the learner to learn. So, for example, with respect to word order, Mandarin Chinese should be easier to learn than Japanese for English-speaking learners, since the former is subject-verb-object, but the latter is subject-object-verb.

**Error analysis** of learners' spoken and written output involved identifying and explaining mismatches with "native-speaker norms" in order to uncover how learners (failed to) learn. So for example, if an English-speaking learner of Japanese produced sentences with the object after the verb, then one might conclude that their L1 syntax was being (mis-)used to order L2 words.

Noam Chomsky used the term **Universal Grammar** to label the innate system that he believes constrains the shape of human languages and allows children to learn them on the basis of limited, incomplete or off-target input. In its guise as mental toolbox for first or second language acquisition, it is known as the **Language Acquisition Device** (LAD).

The term **interlanguage** was coined in the 1970s by Larry Selinker to describe his notion that an additional language learner's knowledge of the L2 was a dynamic linguistic system which could be studied in its own right. An example would be Japanese words ordered using English syntax.

Stephen Krashen's **Monitor Model** is a collection of hypotheses which together seek to provide a unitary framework for understanding additional language learning. The framework is too complex to summarise here, but is neatly summarised on Vivian Cook's website at <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/index.htm>.

**Comprehensible input** is language that learners are exposed to which they are able to understand because it is used in contexts which are meaningful to them. It is the key ingredient in Stephen Krashen's (much challenged) recipe for effective additional language learning, which calls for input only slightly ahead of the learner's current competence. Krashen called this " $i+1$ ", where  $i$  = interlanguage.

L2 input is **processable** when the learner has the necessary knowledge and cognitive resources to unpack its structure and extract the intended meaning from it. At the beginning, little is processable. For example, learners of French might not be able to isolate the definite article in a phrase like "Ouvrez la fenêtre" ("Open the window"). (Indeed, one of us thought for much of their first few months of French classes that the word for *window* was *lafenêtre*.)

**Individual differences** between learners are those which potentially account for the wide variety of paths followed and ultimate outcomes achieved in additional language learning. An EU project called "Don't Give Up" (<http://dontgiveup.eu/>) provides examples of best practice for giving adult language learners motivation, one of the biggest differences between successful and unsuccessful learners.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's **Communities of practice** are groups of people participating in situated social activity. Newcomers engage with the group in the role of



apprentices, and thereby learn the practices of the community and construct new social identities.

Your **grammatical competence** in a language is the stock of words and parts of words that you know and the rules you use to combine them. Your **communicative competence**, on the other hand, is what you know in order to *use* your grammatical competence effectively in interaction with others. So you know that to ask a question in English you can put the auxiliary verb before the subject (e.g. "Can you help me?"); but you also know that you have to add *please* to a stranger and that you're not looking for a yes/no answer.

**Sociocultural theory**, most closely associated with Lev Vygotsky, is an approach to human development which claims that our higher order functions (like problem-solving or language) are the product of exposure to, and participation in, social interaction.

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