

## Second Language Acquisition: A Framework and Historical Background on Its Research

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### Abstract

Research shows many problems and ambiguities of second language acquisition (SLA), which have made learners and readers worldwide unsatisfied. Therefore, this study attempts to highlight theories and research that have comprehensive explanations of the problems and ambiguities of second language acquisition, which learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face while learning a second or foreign language. After that, the study discusses a framework discussion on second language acquisition (SLA). It discusses the historical background of SLA research on different decades and the most notable views of different scholars throughout the past decades on second language acquisition. This study is a longitudinal research that identifies the advantages that could be an assist to English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Longitudinal research is always based on the qualitative method. This study's data is based on the qualitative method that collects views, opinions, materials, and earlier studies on second language acquisition (SLA). It reveals the most significant theories which precisely connected to second language acquisition (SLA) and largely to applied linguistics. The study resulted in that: (i) second language acquisition still has several doubts and ambiguities in its many different aspects, (ii). In this study, the researcher summarizes second language acquisition (SLA) research's main goals and draws comparisons on the scholars' dissimilarities between language learning and second language acquisition (SLA) on different perceptions that could give insights towards learning of second and foreign languages easily by the English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

**Keywords:** English as foreign language (EFL), second language acquisition (SLA), ambiguities, theories

### 1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is one main branch of Applied Linguistics, which is well-known by the research and practices in other disciplines like Linguistics, Psychology, and Sociology. It is moderately a new and fresh area of research. Numerus studies on SLA have been done across the academic institutions. The field is still in a progressing stage, and “we are far from a complete theory of SLA, but there is development.” (Krashen, 2018; VanPatten, 2017; Gass and Selinker, 2008:1) As an interdisciplinary field, SLA mainly seeks to investigate the acquisition of a new language beyond the mother tongue or L1. “Second Language Research is a far wider sub-branch than first language acquisition research since it comprises, not just the progressive aspects of first language acquisition, but all the aspects of the L2 user’s language enclosed in other areas of linguistics and psychology” (Dornyei, 2013; Cook, 2002).

According to Mitchell, R., Myles, F., & Marsden, E. (2013) and Crystal (1997) second language (SL) can be well-defined as a non-native language that is broadly used for purposes of communication, commonly as a medium of education, government, or business. In other words, any language acquired after acquiring the mother tongue can be termed as a second language. The discipline of second language acquisition studies and developments in the learning of a second language after the mother tongue is acquired. Studies on the third language and fourth language and following languages are also included in second language acquisition (Gass and Selinker, 2008: 8).

## 2. Historical Background to SLA Research

Research in SLA is multi-disciplinary, affected by the progress in the fields of Linguistics, mother tongue/first language/L1 acquisition, Sociolinguistics, Psychology, Sociology, Neuro-linguistics, Education, and etc. Second language acquisition has developed in the study of mother tongue/first language acquisition. The initial 20th-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure laid the groundwork with the notions of 'langue' and 'parole' in the lively realm of first language acquisition development. Later Leonard Bloomfield (1933) methodically put across these systematic techniques in his landmark work 'Language'. Linguistic data initiated to be considered empirical, thereby giving the discipline a scientific method. Second language acquisition theories initiated "as an adjunct of language teaching pedagogy supported by behaviorism," the leading and pioneering theory in psychology (Myles, 2010:320). We also need to recall here the 'grammar-translation' method, which headed theoretically strong SLA. In this system, learners were taught a classical language in terms of translation and routine learning of grammar rules. Nevertheless, it had no theoretical related.

### 2.1 Second Language Acquisition Research during the 1950s and 1960s

As stated above, the area of SLA did not initiate as a separate area of study with its distinctiveness but as an addition to language teaching theories widespread at the time, primarily structuralism and behaviorism. The studies, which see the SLA from the viewpoint of first language acquisition/L1 acquisition, they first looked into the resemblances and then the variances between both L1 acquisition and SLA. Though, the researches could not account for all the complications and originality inherent in SLA. The studies in the fifties and the sixties focused on the descriptive analysis of source and target languages. The actual process of learning, output, the context, and separate differences were not taken into the concern. The Chomskian proposition of the Universal Grammar about L1 acquisition led to a model shift in comprehending SLA. Let us take a short-term over-view of some of the main theoretical methods that have shaped either directly or indirectly the growth of SLA as a sub-branch of language study. The comprehensive trajectory of the growth of SLA can be understood in Mitchell & Myles (1998), Mitchell & Myles (2004), Saville-Troike (2016), Ellis (1985), Gass & Selinker (2008) and Myles (2010) and essentially these works notify our overview of the area.

#### 2.1.1 The Behaviorist School of Second Language Acquisition

The publication of B.F. Skinner's influential work 'Verbal Behavior' in 1957 tried to account for the growth of human beings' language. He was influenced by the behaviorist works of Ivan Pavlov, a Russian scientist, John Watson, and Edward Thorndike, both initial twentieth-century American scientists. The behaviorists' view was based on psychological notions of 'stimulus' and response. Language, for that issue any skill, was realized as a product of repetitive reinforcement of anticipated responses. Before the publication of Skinner's obvious treatise on behaviorism, Fries (1945) had called for a repetition of practices that was needed for learning to yield position, and the audio-lingual method drills were made widespread as a means of teaching-learning. These drills were based on comparing of L1 and L2. The variances in L2 were made-up to help language acquisition to the learners. Lado (1957) gave his theory of 'Contrastive Analysis' based on the behaviorist tradition. The notion was to look into the variances between the languages and how these variances would be indicative of the difficulty level of, especially L2, which required particular consideration.

#### 2.1.2 The Early Structuralist School of Linguistics

Saussure's Course in 'General Linguistics', was published subsequently in 1916, emphasized on examining language as a fixed system of interconnected parts. Structural linguistics considered the structure of a language by collecting a group of expressions and then attempting to categorize all of unites of the groups of expressions at their diverse linguistic levels: morphemes, the phonemes, verb phrases, categories, lexical noun phrases, and sentence kinds (Searle, 1972). One of the structuralists' key approaches was to outline structures syntactically and lexically based on their difference with other structural parts. On the other hand, the behaviorist method implied that first language acquisition was a simple example of learning new habits, reacting to the stimuli in the environment, and a conscious re-placement of these habits with new ones, leading to a second language acquisition. This method of opposing the second language to the first language and learning the second language appeared to be recognized as a Contrastive Analysis (CA) (Fries 1945 and Lado 1957). Lado had used principles of both structural methods and behaviorist psychology of linguistics to explain CA. Audio-lingual drills were, therefore, made a portion of language teaching-learning. Thus, CA had its origins in Psychology, which united the Structuralist tradition of Linguistics. The supporters of this method demanded that second language (L2) structures be effortlessly learned if the same occurs in first language (L1) through positive transfer, i.e., similarities among two languages do not need learning and that the variances are what obligatory to be learned. CA was criticized as not all learner errors could be credited to or anticipated by the variances in L1.

The area of structural linguistics emphasizes the products of acquisition rather than the fundamental developments and internal dynamics of language acquisition. The need was felt to understand the inner aspects of language acquisition rather than purely preoccupied with its surface/structural aspects. Structuralism could not account for the originality inherent in natural language (Chomsky, 1957). This insufficiency of structuralism led linguists to study the inherent nature of language structures, thus heralding the beginning of mentalist/generative school of language acquisition.

### 2.1.3 The Mentalist/Generative School of Language Acquisition

The behaviorist method was challenged and interrogated by Noam Chomsky in his momentous work *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. This saw a move from structural linguistics to generative linguistics. Generative linguistics focused on the rule governed and original nature of language. Chomsky's criticism of Skinner's work (1959) can be taken as a new landmark in SLA's history. Chomsky's contributions (1957 and 1965) laid to the foundation of Transformational-Generative Grammar (TG). His idea of Universal Grammar (UG) suggested that all languages are comparable in their basic structures, with specific fundamental universal rules that let users innately acquire a language and allow them to use it rationally and productively. Thus, language acquisition approached to be seen as more than artificial or reinforcement as supposed by the behaviorists. Researchers started to see the child as "a lively participant" in the development of language acquisition rather than being "an inactive recipient of language stimuli". It directed to many researches on child language acquisition research in L1 and later came to be applied to SLA research. "The hypothesis that UG is the guiding force of child language acquisition has long been continued by many, but only in the past two decades has it been applied to SLA" (Gass and Selinker 2008:160). However, Chomsky's assumptions did not make any entitlement regarding language pedagogy, but his assumption was catalytic to changes in the area of SLA. Another method to be recalled here is that of Error Analysis (Corder, 1967; Riyaz 2020; Jeptarus & Ngene 2016). Corder assumed that errors were insights into the practice of SLA. Error Analysis (EA) is "the first method to study SLA, which contains an internal focus on learners' creative capability to hypothesis language. It is based on the explanation and investigation of actual learner errors in the second language, rather than on idealized linguistic structures credited to native speakers of L1 and L2 (as in CA)" (Saville-Troike, 2016). EA was partly a consequence of the disappointments of CA. He witnessed that learners had an inborn syllabus of their own and the errors they made, which were important in understanding the development of SLA. With the beginning of EA there was a move from the basic model of L1-L2 contrasts to a more active understanding of SLA. The creation or 'errors' of the learner's output initiated to be measured as a significant variety providing a vision to the growth of SLA.

## 2.2 *Second Language Acquisition Research during the 1970s*

### 2.2.1 Interlanguage Hypothesis

We have previously understood how learner's errors initiated to be treated equally significant to the development of SLA. Learner's errors or production initiated to be taken as a variety in itself. It came to be acknowledged under different terms like 'transitional competence' (Corder, 1967), 'approximate systems' (Nemser, 1971), 'inter-language' (Selinker, 1972), 'idiosyncratic dialect' (Corder, 1971) and 'language learner's systems' (Richards and Sampson, 1974). Between these different theories on intermediate stages of SLA, Inter-language theory was the most influential (Selinker 1972). The inter-language hypothesis was influenced by Error Analysis (Corder, 1967) but varied in the way errors were directed. According to Selinker (1972), errors were not to be taken as errors but as a part of the learning method. Inter-language is a step period before language acquisition, which perhaps is never completed but is always a development. It can be seen as a method of rules progressed in the brain of individual learning a second/foreign language. It is a transitional period between his/her native language and the target language. An inter-language could be well-defined as an evolving linguistic system that has been established by a learner of a second language. The learner has not yet become completely capable in the target language and his/her language, which could display some structures from his/her first language and the target language. An inter-language is sole to a specific learner based on the learners' understandings to the L2. The inter-language is formed of using different learning approaches such as language transfer, over-generalization and simplification and has a structure of rules of its own. The inter-language phase is measured to be a creative learning phase. The inter-language thus formed is also mentioned to as 'mental grammar.' The transition from L1 to L2 consequences in the creation of inter-language, which can even be measured as a third language on its own. The learner may sometimes not reach the wanted stage of L2 acquisition due to numerous reasons and get fossilized at some point. The phenomenon of not being capable of controlling correct target language use is called 'fossilization'. In fossilization, learners tend to convey with them linguistic objects, rules, and systems of the native language in their inter-language with respect to the target language, notwithstanding all the instruction and explanation, received (Selinker, 1972). Communicative and

Social needs are the reasons credited for this stunted progression development in SLA (Selinker, 1992) cited in Saville-Troike, 2006:42). When the learner is capable of conversing and becomes skillful in the target language, fossilization might set in. “Fossilization occurs when the learner has fulfilled the need for integration and or communication in the target language public, but this is a complex area, and the reasons for fossilization are very unlike to govern with any inevitability” (Lightbown 2000: 179). Few learners attain native-like adeptness, and discussions remain as to what should be considered satisfactory growth. Nevertheless, there are arguments about the precise nature of adeptness and whether it is right to consider ‘progress’ against native-speaker standard” (Saville-Troike, 2006).

### *2.3 Second Language Acquisition research during 1980s and 1990s*

Krashen’s theories have significantly influenced second Language Acquisition researches. Long had worked more on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (IH). He worked with couples of Native Speaker and Native Speaker (NS-NS) and Native Speaker-Non-native Speakers (NS-NNS) and framed his Interaction Hypothesis which notes that learners create use of “conversational tactics such as repetitions, comprehension checks, confirmation checks or clarification requests” to “maximize understanding, and negotiate their way through distress spots. The NS-NNS corporation is parenthetically fine-tuning the L2 input, to make it more applicable to the recent state of learner growth” (Long, 1996 in Mitchell and Myles 1998: 128). Long had offered to insert the hypotheses of acquisition’ and ‘interaction’ in his studies on SLA’s method (Long 1980, 1981, 1983a and 1996, in Mitchell and Myles 1998: 128, 134). This led to a new way that stressed the input learners received and how they were involved with it. Hence, learners were taken as active associates in L2 interactions and not ordinary recipients of L2. We also want to reference here the notion of ‘output’ in relation to the notions of ‘input’ and ‘acquisition.’ Swain (1985) claimed that it is of significance to the learners also to yield output to have the communicative capability in L2. The output is similarly significant to comprehensible language input for evolving competency in a language. There were advanced practical studies connecting acquisition and interaction (Guo, 2018; Pica, 1987; Loschky, 1994; and Gass and Varonis, 1994 in Mitchell and Myles 1998: 131).

## **3. Study Questions**

1. What are the most significant theories in SLA?
2. What is the research background of SLA in previous decades?
3. What are the essential goals of SLA?

### *3.1 Study Objectives*

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To give a framework discussion on second language acquisition (SLA).
2. To discuss the historical background of SLA research on different decades.
3. To improve the theoretical framework of second language acquisition.
4. To highlight theories and researches which have comprehensive explanations on the problems and ambiguities of SLA.
5. To explain the most important theories and terms of SLA.
6. To give a brief outline of the goals of second language acquisition.
7. To differentiate between language acquisition and language learning.

### *3.2 Significance of the Study*

This paper has the potential positive importance to move forward the viable capacity of English majors and their capacity to develop long lasting careers. Understanding the historical background of SLA and the differences among theories of SLA will help EFL learners as well as language instructors. It summarizes the main goals of SLA researches to understand the different views between SLA and language learning. It will contribute to the field of SLA by providing the languages educators and policy makers with the knowledge to design EFL programs.

## **4. Methodology**

This paper is longitudinal research, which is always based on the qualitative method. This study is based on the qualitative method, which collects views, opinions, materials, and previous studies on SLA and discusses them in this study. It elucidates the most significant theories which precisely connected to SLA and largely to applied

linguistics. Therefore, this study aims to bring the opinions of prior scholars and make them more explicit to be well-known and to be further known to learners.

## 5. Goals of Second Language Acquisition, Researches

The second language acquisition research has several goals. For example, it tries to define a phonological and grammatical system that inspires a learner's performance. It attempts to comprehend how a learner acquires another language after having mastered his mother tongue. It displays how a target language is being mastered by a learner deliberately in a classroom and subconsciously in an ordinary setting. It covers the growth of lexis, phonology, pragmatics, and grammar knowledge, where morpho-syntactic progress has much significance. It explores empirically how a learner obtains a second language proficiently. It focuses on second language learning approaches and systems used in second language teaching. It organizes the basis for the study of second language learning. It also supports to understand meanings and grammatical forms which help target language acquisition. It simplifies language learning-teaching developments. Schumann (1980) emphasizes that what we want to know is how the growth of different structures is interrelated.

### 5.1 Language Acquisition and Language Learning

Klein (1986: 20) differentiates between the two expressions. i.e., 'acquisition' and 'learning'. He states, "An equivalent distinction is that between 'acquisitions' and 'learning', the learning refers to planned, the acquisition to unplanned learning."

Experts in the area came to see that the terms 'acquire/acquisition' could be devoted to 'first language acquisition'. However, Krashen (1985; 2003; 2004; 2018) and Klein (1988), Tan and Shojamanesh (2019) and many others used 'acquisition' even for a second language. Chomsky (1996:13) also investigated the sub-system of the brain in language acquisition as follows:

*"It seems now reasonably well-established, that there is a special component of the human brain (call it 'the language faculty'), that is specifically dedicated to language. The subsystem of the brain (or the mind, from the abstract perspective), has an initial state which is genetically determined, like all other components of the body: the kidney, the circulatory system and so on..... A language faculty 'grows' 'from an initial state through childhood, reaching a relatively steady state at some stage of maturity. This is the process of language acquisition, sometimes misleadingly called 'language learning'. The process seems to bear little resemblance to what is termed 'learning'....."*

Burt, Dulay, and Krashen (1982) claim that there is a methodical and subjective indication to support the view that children are better at language acquisition than adults. The child acquires languages in natural situations, and hence, is a better speaker than an adult who may make greater development firstly. Singleton (1989:265) at the end of a long study on the influence of age on language learning finalizes:

*"It seems unlikely, in view of the evidence, that there is a particular point in a child's postnatal development where language acquisition can be said to truly begin. It is also unlikely that there is a particular point where the capacity to learn language goes into a general and rapid decline .....it does seem though, that first language acquisition normally continues in some of its aspects at least right into old age, and that a high degree of success in many respects of second language acquisition is possible at any age".*

Klein (1986:15) states that a second language can be acquired in a diversity of ways, at any age, for multi-purposes, and in different degrees. He defines two types of language acquisition. i.e., guided second language acquisition and spontaneous learning. The notion 'guided' (as opposed to 'natural') means to learn that is open to methodical and intentional influence. However, 'natural learning' is used to denote a second language acquisition in everyday communication in an ordinary way and free from systematic guidance.

## 6. Conclusion

This study offers a framework discussion on second language acquisition (SLA). It discusses the historical background of SLA research on different decades. It highlights the most notable views of different scholars throughout the past decades on SLA. This study is longitudinal research that identifies the advantages that could be useful for EFL learners. Longitudinal research is always based on the qualitative method. Therefore, this study is based on the qualitative method, which collects views, opinions, materials, and previous studies on SLA and discusses them in this study. It elucidates the most significant theories which precisely connected to SLA and largely to applied linguistics. The study resulted in that: (i) second language acquisition still has several doubts, and ambiguities in its many different aspects, (ii) The problems and the ambiguities of SLA have made learners and readers worldwide unsatisfied Klein (1988). In this study, the researcher attempted to highlight many types of research that have comprehensive explanations on the problems and the ambiguities of SLA, which learners of EFL face. Lastly, the study summarizes the main goals of SLA researches and draws comparisons on the dissimilarities between language learning and SLA on different perceptions of many researchers and scholars.

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