

New Retrospect of Second Language Research: A Review of Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction

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Abstract

The book **Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction** is an introduction to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which is organized around eight underlying questions driving the L2 research. This book reviews the empirical research in SLA on each question by illustrating the related assumptions and exemplary studies. Adopting the generative approach, the authors elaborate on how a second language is acquired and the outcome of acquisition. Theoretically, this book could offer novel insights and theoretical guidance for scholars and learners interested in Second Language Acquisition. Practically, the basic facts in the book may be informative for teachers' second language teaching in the classroom.

Keywords

Second Language Acquisition; Underlying questions; Generative approach.

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) as a field of empirical and theoretical research has its origin in the late 1960s. Interest in the field of study is on a sharp rise since that time, which can find evidence in abundant publications and emerging approaches. This introductory volume is an endeavor contributed by Bill VanPatten, Megan Smith, and Alessandro G. Benati.

Compared with the works which offer the depth of scholarship in SLA (Doughty and Long 2008; Gass and Mackey 2013; Herschensohn and Young-Scholten 2014), the book provides a thorough and broad overview of SLA research. Adopting a generative approach, this work has demonstrated that second language (L2) acquisition is not equal to the mechanical learning of rules in the textbooks, but a gradual development of underlying language system. The overview of empirical research on the key questions can not only help learners of second language to correct their misconceptions of how L2 language is acquired, but also provide guidance for foreign language teachers to design a class.

2. Book Description

The introductory volume contains prologue, epilogue and eight chapters with each dealing with a single question in SLA. The prologue serves as an introduction to the underlying question that drives the field of SLA research and the major concerns of each chapter. The eight chapters can be divided into three parts. The first part (Chapter 1) raises the fundamental question of whether L2 acquisition is similar to or different from first language (L1) acquisition. The second part (Chapters 2, 4, and 5) examines the process of second language acquisition from the initial state to the development until the ultimate attainment. The third part (Chapters 3, 6, 7, and 8) explores the roles of input and output, instruction, explicit learning, and individual differences in L2 acquisition. In the epilogue, the authors return to the fundamental question and draw the conclusion from two aspect. Moreover, all key terms that appear in text are bolded and

underlined, and a full glossary is also provided following the epilogue to give an explanation to the terms, which responds to the volume's aim of being accessible to readers who are reading about SLA for the first time.

The eight chapters in the book (Chapters 1-8) all follow an identical structure: An introduction and brief overview provide background for the topics that are addressed in the chapter. Following each chapter, the writers offer a recap to review the major issues in the present chapter, as well as a list of references and readings. Following-up questions and exercises provide additional material for novice students or instructor to consider.

Chapter one discusses the question "What are the origins of second language acquisition as a research field?" The authors make clear that second language acquisition has its roots in linguistics and first language (L1) acquisition. The authors have displayed some typical publications and theories to show the revolution from structural linguistics and behaviorism to Chomsky's generative linguistics. From generative perspective, it is more plausible to regard language as an abstract and complex system which evolves in the mind of speakers rather than a set of observable patterns mimicked from the environment. Based on this revolution, L2 research field have achieved rapid development in that more and more L2 scholars have sprung up with their seminal books, for instance, S. Pit. Corder with his essay *The Significance of Learner's Errors* (1967), Larry Selinker with his essay *Interlanguage* (1972), and Stephen Krashen with his studies on ordered development.

Chapter two is entitled as "What does development look like?", it centers on ordered and staged development in the acquisition of formal elements of language. To examine ordered development more exactly, this chapter reviews four major research areas in L2 research, namely, morpheme orders, developmental sequences, U-shaped development as well as markedness relationships. Following the explanation of the four aspects, the authors have also touched upon variation in such ordered development and observed L1 influence on this development. As is the case throughout the book, brief description of key notions is always followed some related instances or scenarios, and more importantly, some empirical studies, which allows readers to form their own opinion about what the results of studies suggest and whether the positions of scholars should be followed.

Chapter three is devoted to the roles of input and output. It starts with the definition of input as communicatively embedded input (CEI) which is illustrated by three scenarios respectively in L1, L2 classroom and L2 non-classroom. In addition, the second section illustrate the role of input as the basic data for language acquisition by introducing two broad categories of theories, namely, nativist theory and non-nativist theory. The former theory is generative tradition, which argues that people are genetically endowed to acquire language and equipped with Universal Grammar (UG). As soon as learners interact with CEI from the environment, UG will be activated. The latter theory is exemplified by usage-based approaches, which holds that language is a complex and abstract array of "stuff" in the mind of learners and learners are equipped with general learning mechanisms. To develop a linguistic system, those general learning mechanisms need access to real-world examples. For instance, the acquisition of the notion of "bird" is dependent on an interaction of birds in reality. Some sections also address the perspectives on the role of output in language acquisition.

Chapter four is entitled as "What is the initial state?", meaning that what is the starting point of L2 acquisition. The chapter expands on three possibilities based on generative tradition.

Chapter five share the way to unfold the topics with chapter four. It is given to the questions: Learners become nativelike? As in the case of last chapter, the writers present three possible answers to the question and explore each of these possibilities in later sections. The major hypotheses used to illustrate the possibilities consist of The Fundamental Difference

Hypothesis (FDH), The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), The Shallow Structure Hypothesis (SSH), The Interface Hypothesis, among others.

Chapter six focuses on the question about whether explicit instruction makes a difference to L2 acquisition. By examining the effects of instruction on the ordered development, rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment according to the results of studies conducted by related scholars, the co-authors come to the conclusion that instruction on formal features of language does not affect ordered development, but it is not clear that instruction impacts rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment. In the final part of the chapter, emphasis is also placed upon the existing problem in this area. For the researchers engaged in the studies on the effects of instruction, it is an urgent need for them to find methods to assess implicit knowledge.

Chapter seven brings to focus the role of explicit learning in L2 acquisition, and the final main chapter (Chapter 8) explores the individual differences that have received research attention, such as, aptitude, motivation, and working memory, and their effects on L2 acquisition.

3. Brief comments

One of the most striking advantages of this book lies in the organization and structure. The structure of this volume is unique in that it is not organized around topics or theories, but around eight key questions. What's more, each chapter consists of call-outs, recap and boxes called "Consider this...". This would be a convenient device for readers to review the chapter and to invite readers to stop and reflect before going on. If this book is used in language classroom, such boxes can also be used for classroom discussion. Another strength is that once a concept is introduced, it is followed by some examples or scenarios to illustrate. For example, in chapter six, the writers discuss the issue of explicit knowledge, which is defined as conscious and verbalizable knowledge. The given example is that in English, when we talk about someone else, we need to add an -s sound to the end of the verb, for instance I/you/we see versus he/she sees.

One problem should also be noted. Hypotheses in some chapters, such as chapter four and five, could have easily been simplified as they are proved to be the positions that have tended to be overwhelmed by the bulk of evidence. Long explanation of these hypotheses may pose troubles for readers who are looking for a basic grounding in major theories before exploring more deeply.

4. Conclusion

The book *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* to a large extent succeeds in its aim to provide an accessible introduction to SLA for learners with no prior knowledge of the field. It offers an overview of key concepts and theories, as well as well-known empirical studies. This volume also serves as an invaluable resource for both seasoned researchers who would like to seek some insights and instructors teaching introductory SLA courses at the undergraduate or graduate level.

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