Exploring Second Language Acquisition and Learning: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract
There are a number of contentious theories that have dominated the field of second language acquisition (SLA) over the years. They tend to revolve around how long it takes to learn a second language, our knowledge of second language learners, the influence of learning a second language, how to facilitate the process of second language acquisition in the classroom, and expectations that teachers should have about language learners both in and outside of the classroom. To address all of them and the evolution of SLA theories to date is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it will shed light on six key ones – vocabulary acquisition, value systems, enculturation, influences of L1 on L2, age, and negotiation of meaning – to include a brief explanation, the rationale behind it, and how teachers can practically apply each one in their classrooms.

Keywords: second language acquisition, theories, explanation, rationale, practice

Introduction
Theories (i.e. abstract sets of claims about the entities that are significant within the focus of a given study, the relationships that exist between them, and the processes that bring about change), which account for and explain observed phenomena, hold a prominent position in the field of second language acquisition (VanPatten & Williams, 2015; Mitchell et al, 2019). Below is a condensed list of some key observations:

1. Exposure to input is necessary for SLA.
2. A good deal of SLA happens incidentally.
3. Learners come to know more than what they have been exposed to in the input.
4. Learners’ output (speech) often follows predictable paths with predictable stages in the acquisition of a given structure.
5. Second language learning is variable in its outcome.
6. Second language learning is variable across linguistic subsystems.
7. There are limits on the effects of frequency on SLA.
8. There are limits on the effect of a learner’s first language on SLA.
9. There are limits on the effects of instruction in SLA.
10. There are limits on the effects of output (learner production) on language acquisition (Long, 1990; VanPatten & Williams, 2015).

In looking at this list, which results from years of analysis, discovery and debate, second language learning (as illustrated below), in all its facets, is clearly incredibly complex. Research endeavors to help us understand the process more fully, but there is clearly still much to account...
for and explain. In an effort to do just that, at least to some degree, this paper will examine six key issues within this larger set of observations. For each one, there is an explanation, rationale, and ideas for classroom implementation (i.e. a bridge between theory and practice).

*Spolsky’s (1989, p.28) general model of second language learning*
Six second language acquisition theories

1. *Children acquire vocabulary in the same way that they make sense about the form that language rules can take.*

“The engineering trick behind human language – its being a discrete combinatorial system – is used in at least two different places: sentences and phrases are built out of words by the rules of syntax, and the words themselves are built out of smaller bits by another set of rules, the rules of ‘morphology.’” (Pinker, 1994, p.127)

**Explanation:** In order for children to acquire vocabulary as rapidly as they do, they must be able to form quick and rough hypotheses about the meaning of a new word (Pinker, 1994). This process is similar to the way children use pre-existing knowledge about the form rules can take when constructing grammatical patterns. They both involve a systematic process of:

1. Deducing language in specific situations
2. Forming hypotheses about what sounds (and later words) mean based on observation
3. Using new phoneme (and later morpheme) constructions (as a form of experimentation)
4. Getting feedback on these new sound (and later word) formations
5. Having more exposure to language through interaction in a community (e.g. with his or her family or caretakers initially)
6. Using a cycle of revision to refine the language and eventually use it in a comprehensible and acceptable manner (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994)

**Rationale:** Some teachers might disagree with Pinker (1994) when he states that babies intuit the meaning of words or that each child’s brain contains a lexicon of words and the concepts they stand for. In terms of the first of these potential disagreements, intuit literally means immediate apprehension. Perhaps this is a matter of semantics, but that could signify an absence of cognitive processes involved in acquisition. Additionally, it’s hard to believe that we have a mental dictionary at our disposal. Instead, it’s likely we have the tools to create one (Krashen, 1981).

Even before children have had a chance to listen in their native language, they are equipped to deal with the linguistic distinctions that are critically important for analyzing speech streams into appropriate segments (Ellis, 1997). This mirrors the ability to form rules at the grammatical level. Together, these account for a child’s ability to gradually build sophisticated phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures (Gass & Selinker, 2008). To illustrate, let’s take a look at how children process language. For months, babies play around with sounds and intonations (usually in the form of crying) before uttering a single comprehensible word. By six weeks, they begin to make vowel sounds. Typically, within six months, babies begin to produce consonant-vowel pairs. This is the stage where they try to decipher which sounds are important for making words. Around age one to one-and-a-half, children will try to utter their first meaningful word. From here, around age two, children try to form simple two-word sentences. Generally, these are content words. Eventually, they produce longer sentences, still using content words only, and then progress to constructing simple (and, later, more complex) sentences with both content and function words. By age five, most children will have acquired a sophisticated system of rules and sounds of language. After that, children begin combining different sentence types in various ways, as well as adding new vocabulary words to their lexicon (Krashen, 1982).
It is important to note that there are a number of factors that affect language acquisition for children. These include:

- modification (e.g. ‘baby talk’ or exaggerated intonation and sounds, as well as lots of repetition and questions, all of which help a child to sort out the meanings and sentence patterns of his or her language)
- motivation (e.g. to communicate needs and wants)
- level of interaction (i.e. level of participation and engagement)
- sensory input (namely visual or auditory)
- nonverbal communication
- emotional responses (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Pinker, 1994)

**Practice:** Teachers can incorporate strategies L1 learners use to acquire language into the L2 classroom. To do this effectively, they would need to emphasize active social interaction, focus on learners’ communicative needs and wants, modify speech (e.g., to speak more slowly for lower level learners, stress content words, etc.), implicitly draw attention to individual learning strategies, utilize a variety of sensory stimuli (both inside and outside the classroom), try to both create a learning environment and instruct in a way that will minimize anxiety and fear, and limit as much interference as possible (Loewen & Reinders, 2011). Further, teachers would create a learner-centered environment, stress fluency over accuracy, teach inductively, give ample amounts of feedback, and, ultimately, encourage students to take more and more responsibility for their own learning (Saville-Troike, 2006).

2. **Value systems, whether they are cultural, occupational, familial, or based on peer group associations, play a very important role in language acquisition and learning.**

   “Each of us, then, develops a self-image – a set of perceptions related to our body, but also to our personal style, to our actions, and to the values that underlie them.” (Earl Stevick, 1998, p.20)

**Explanation:** Values account for our identity and validity as human beings. Clearly then, key aspects of what makes us who we are – the way we choose to live, what we believe, the precepts we hold – are not left at the door of the classroom. They are brought inside, and must be contended with.

**Rationale:** Our self-image (i.e. the way we perceive ourselves) and the way we interact are affected simply by being in a given space. As classes unfold and courses progress, there is an intersection of private universes that must be dealt with on an ongoing basis. In addition to individual needs, wants, concerns, anxieties, and fears, self-constructed boundaries (i.e., limitations of what to say and how to say it, as well as attitudes and behaviors) based on group allegiances and/or friendships, the need for support, the language ego, and comfort levels, also play major roles in second language learning (Gass, 1997). Then comes the integration and/or imposition of something new – both the language itself and how it is presented, received, and processed. Clearly, the stakes in classroom interaction are high. Good teaching requires a perceptive awareness of and astute handling all of this.

**Practice:** Respect, understanding, tolerance, and safety are key here. In a given classroom, teachers could be dealing with a great variety of differences, to include gender, race, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, and personality. These are just some of the obvious ones. Needless to say, any one or combination of these differences of self-identity could lead to instances of
miscommunication, misunderstanding, frustration, anxiety, or even anger. Creating an environment that’s safe and that stresses mutual respect and tolerance is essential. Failing to do so could lead to a host of unwanted problems. The nature and possible severity of these are obvious in the context just described. While understanding is important, teachers and students alike also need to learn how to interact and communicate together. Establishing conditions for this is equally critical. To do so, we must develop a system of communication that is acceptable to everyone in the community we are forming, which may necessitate some degree of explicit discussion and negotiation.

3. **Learning is chiefly a process of enculturation into a community of practice.**

   “In the early stages of ontogenesis, the child is completely dependent on other people, usually the parents, who initiate the child’s acting by instructing the child in what to do, how to do it, and what not to do. Parents, as representatives of the culture, and the conduit through which the culture passes into the child, actualize these instructions.”

   (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p.9)

**Explanation:** This principle is plucked from the tree of social constructivism, a theory formulated by cognitive psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) argued that culture gives children the cognitive tools needed for development. The type and quality of those tools determines the pattern and rate of language acquisition and learning. Adults, including both parents and teachers, are channels for the tools of a given culture. Vygotsky also stressed the importance of learning in context (i.e. constructing understanding through interactions with people in the social environments in which the knowledge is to be applied).

**Key elements of social constructivism:**

- active participation
- social interaction
- personal experience
- active meaning construction
- cooperative/collaborative learning
- learner-centered
- empowerment of the learner (Vygotsky, 2012)

Clearly, culture, as an integrated set of behaviors and modes of perceptions, becomes highly important in the learning of a second language. Without question, language is a part of culture, and culture is a part of language; the two are intricately intertwined, to the point that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of the other (Brown, 2000; Moran, 2001).

**Rationale:** First of all, the development of the mind is interconnected with the biological development of the human body and the appropriation of the cultural, communal heritage that exists to connect people with each other and the outside world. This heritage is the context within which we exist, feel, and relate (Hall, 2002). It also provides the shared tacit knowledge that enables members of a community to understand and communicate with one another (Haslett, 1989). Second, all psychological functions begin, and to a large extent remain, culturally, historically, and institutionally situated, as well as in a specific context (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). In other words, the meaning of language and the cultural context in which it’s communicated in are not independent of one another.
Acquiring communicative competence, in part, requires that knowledge about cultural practice be established for children; that the connections between this knowledge and practice be made for them; that children be placed in situations that allow them to experience these connections, and that these experiences enable them to learn what communication is and how to use it appropriately (Gardner, 1984). Over time, children will comprehend, adapt, and integrate themselves into their specific communities. In doing so, they will go through a repetitive cycle of acquiring cultural information (e.g., perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes), developing cultural behaviors, discovering cultural explanations, and articulating personal responses to what they are learning. (Moran, 2001). In short, it would be fallacious to assume that a child could acquire and learn a language without picking up on or absorbing key aspects of the cultural and social milieu in which it is rooted. Put another way, we learn what a word means through multiple exposures to how a culture uses it, and the process of language acquisition is the part of the larger process of socialization (i.e. it’s the way we acquire social competence) (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1984; Stevick, 1988).

Practice: Just as children need to be able to express themselves and communicate with members of the communities they are part of, with the myriad practices and products that make up their sociocultural way of life, second language learners need to enculturate themselves into their new communities of practice, and start engaging in active social participation with members of their new group(s) (Kramsch, 2000). Immersion can take place on many different levels. If it is the foreign language classroom, teachers could help their students by having them:

- work in pairs or groups
- do team projects
- role play ‘real-world’ situations
- solve common everyday problems
- perform tasks and functions
- read and discuss newspaper, magazine, or Internet content
- learn strategies for effective interpersonal communication
- study communicative language for specific social and/or professional environments (e.g., expressions, phrases, idioms, etc.)
- learn how to negotiate meaning (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993)

Through these, teachers would de-emphasize goal-direction (especially for younger learners as they generally don’t attempt to communicate with goals in mind), stress cultural dimensions and shared community practices (whether it be in class, at home, at work, in society at large, etc.), and maximize critical thinking skills (Kovecses, 2006). In other words, teachers need to engage learners in the discovery of knowledge and provide them opportunities to reflect upon and test theories through real-world applications of it (Moran, 2000).

4. **L1 is an influential determinant of L2 acquisition.**

   “Knowledge of the L1 can often have a positive impact on the rate of L2 learning.”  
   (Ortega, 2009, p.42)

Explanation: Language learners are caught between the habits of their first language and the patterns and rules of the second language. In particular, inner speech structures developed during L1 acquisition influences learners’ ability to acquire a second language. Second language
learners thus have to cope with the effects of competing linguistic paradigms in the acquisition process (Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996).

Rationale: Although there is a lot of debate about the degree to which L1 is a determinant of L2 acquisition, it is not disputable that it is one to some extent. Phonology is a good example. According to Scovel (2001), it is extremely difficult for adult L2 learners to acquire the phonology of another language after puberty without the interference of their L1 as a ‘foreign accent’ in their speech. Another good example is learning new grammatical patterns. To illustrate, Scovel (2001) notes that it is extremely difficult to discount the role that negative transfer for certain syntactic patterns (e.g. third person singular present tense suffix ‘-s’). Avoidance could also be cited as a form of interference. This is when learners purposefully avoid using grammatical structures that significantly contrast with the grammar of their native language. Then there is the issue of multiple effects. This is when two or more forces play a role in error creation. When this happens errors easily fossilize, and, as a result, become very difficult for the learner to overcome. These are the errors that tend to persist for many years after exposure and use of the L2.

There is another area where L1 affects L2 acquisition: inner speech. ‘Speech for oneself’ as Vygotsky (1978) called it, is comprised of structures for word storage, relations between words, semantic fields, grammatical rules, and rules for discourse production (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). These structures are formed on the basis of influence of speech in the communities one is part of and is manifested in L1 acquisition. Based on this conception of inner speech, two series of experiments aimed at identifying second language acquisition mechanisms were conducted in the mid 80s (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). The material used in the experiments was classified as an artificial language. Both series of experiments involved respondents learning 20 artificial sound combinations, or words, containing two open syllables, with each word taking its meaning from one of three grammatical categories: nouns denoting animals and food, verbs denoting a way of eating, and adjectives denoting colors. One series used respondents chosen at random, while the other series only used people with a high level of linguistic ability (e.g., philologists). In the first stage of both experiments, the respondents were asked to distinguish the 20 main words from other similar sound combinations. It was at this stage that the process of memorizing the words began. In the next phase, the respondents were then given the meanings of the 20 words, and asked to learn them. The results revealed dramatic differences in the processes of memorizing the meaning of a word depending on which category (i.e. noun, verb, or adjective) it belonged to. In other words, there was immediate stratification as soon as the process of associating form with meaning began. This led the researchers to conclude that success in acquiring words of the artificial language depends on the intensity of their incorporation into the structure of the first, or acquired, language of the respondents. The group of 20 words (comprising the L2) was classified according to the classification (i.e., the structures that make up inner speech) of L1. The L2 also relied on the previously developed semantic system of L1, as well as deployed the L1 phonology. In short, the L2 was found to be looking into the windows cut out by the L1 (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

On the other side of the debate, there are a few key points worth noting. The first is intraference. This accounts for conflicting patterns within the structure of a newly acquired language. As active and creative participants, learners are not simply responding from habits formed during L1 acquisition (Johnson, 2004). Then there is overgeneralization. This refers to learners’ usage of a new grammatical rule or pattern without exception. It is a dependence based on what was learned about the new language. Being so, learners can’t help but get caught up in miscues. This affects
areas such as word formation and syntax (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Creative construction is yet another interesting phenomenon. This refers to learners’ creation of new rules and patterns in an attempt to pick up a new language. Learners’ create new constructions based on overgeneralizations of what they have acquired in L2 (Doughty & Williams, 1998). At times, learners’ can certainly be a bit too clever for their own good.

Practice: Although learners’ L1 impacts their ability to acquire and learn a L2, it is far from being the only factor in this process. It certainly doesn’t account for individual differences such as effort, attitude, amount of exposure, quality of teaching, and talent. Intraference, overgeneralization, and creative construction are also outside the scope of first language influence. By providing stimulating environments and quality instruction (to include working with the structure of L2, highlighting learner dependencies on certain grammatical rules, and drawing attention to miscues), teachers could certainly have an impact on learners’ interest and attitude towards learning English. Perhaps this would also affect their overall level of motivation, which in turn could lead to an increase in the both the amount of exposure to and their effort to learn English. Add some self-initiative to this, and learners could be well on their way to accomplishing their language goals.

5. Age is a factor in second language acquisition.

“Adults proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant). Older children acquire faster than younger children…Acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults.” (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979, p.573)

Explanation: Let’s start with a caveat here. Generalizations about the relationship of age and language acquisition are slippery for a couple of reasons. Ostensibly, people of the same age do not share all of the same characteristics. We can speak of a typical five-year-old or an average teenager, but our conceptions about norms or ideals surely differ. There are countless differences in attitudes, aptitudes, knowledge, and skills for groups we choose to speak of. Second, there is no uniform pattern of development that everyone follows. Even if we could say that everyone eventually achieves certain characteristics, it is clear that there is no common route to be followed. Knowledge and skill are acquired by each of us according to our own experiences (Keating, 2017). Having said that, however, age, to some extent, does play a role in second language acquisition. To support this belief, consider the critical period hypothesis, which states that there is a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012).

Rationale: Below are some neurological, phonological, cognitive, affective, and linguistic considerations:

- Neurology: Maturational changes, to include a metabolic rate reduction, a decrease in the number of neurons during the early school-age years, and a bottoming out of the number of synapses around puberty, are all plausible causes for the linear decline in ability to acquire language as one ages (Pinker, 1994).
- Phonology: According to research, acquiring ‘authentic’ pronunciation after puberty is nearly impossible. Statesman Henry Kissinger and novelist Vladimir Nabokov are good examples here. Both arrived in the United States after puberty and mastered the English
language in all respects except one: accent (Pinker, 1994). Aged-based factors such as neuromuscular plasticity, cerebral development, sociobiological programs, and the environment of sociocultural influences, (Brown, 2000) account for this. As far as phonology goes then, there is support for the existence of a critical period for accent.

- Cognition: There is evidence to suggest that certain cognitive factors inhibit language acquisition in adults. Children are not normally cognizant that they are acquiring a language, nor are they concerned about values society hold. Rosansky (1976) goes so far as to suggest that a lack of flexibility and lack of decentration may well be a necessity for language acquisition.

- Affective factors: We are certainly influenced by our emotions. In terms of language acquisition, consider their effect on self-identity, especially for children. As they grow older children become more aware of themselves, more self-conscious as they seek both to define and understand’ themselves (Hummel, 2014). Their egos, especially in adolescence, are affected not only in how they understand themselves but also in how they reach out beyond themselves, how they relate to others socially (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Now, factor in the language ego, and think of how all of this is manifested in a learning environment. Its impact cannot be understated.

- Linguistics: To see if there was an age-related effect on learning the grammar of a second language, Johnson and Newport (1995) conducted a study of 46 Korean-born and Chinese-born students and faculty at the University of Illinois. All of the subjects had moved to the United States and had the opportunity to immerse themselves in English. They ranged in age from three to thirty-nine. The study itself consisted of 276 simple English sentences, half of which contained some sort of grammatical error. In terms of the results, subjects aged three to seven performed identical to American born students, those eight to fifteen did increasingly worse the later they arrived, and those seventeen to thirty-nine simply did worse of all (Pinker, 1994). According to Newport, this signifies that there is a gradual decline in language learning skills over the period of ongoing maturational growth (Brown, 1995). This supports the maturational state hypothesis, which says that any language, be it first or second, must be acquired during childhood in order for that language to develop fully (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Further evidence comes again from Newport and (her colleague) Supalla (2012) who conducted a study using deaf people who were not exposed to sign language until adulthood. Their results revealed that they never do as well as those who learned it as children.

Practice: Age is clearly a factor in L2 acquisition to some extent, but it is not a predictor of overall performance. In the face of deficiencies, all aspects of language are still learnable to a certain extent. Once again, effort, attitude, amount of exposure, quality of teaching, and learning strategies would all be worth emphasizing here.

6. The ability to make and negotiate meaning is essential to L2 learning.

“…negotiation of meaning involves the repeating, rephrasing and restructuring of phrases between two or more learners to enable them to understand the meaning of the messages they are communicating.” (Rees, 1998, p.284)

Explanation: As meaning negotiation happens between people at every level of communication, it goes without saying that this same social interactive pattern impacts the way teachers teach and the way students learn. To illustrate, teachers often have to deal with limited ranges of lexical
items that are different for each student, sets of related words that differ from person to person, a context or situation which could be viewed from different perspectives based on one’s understanding or experience of it, different interpretations of the words being spoken and the related words based on our assumptions about what the relevant context is, and our different beliefs and values (Gee, 1996). What each student comprehends depends in large part on what choices of language s/he excludes, how effective guessing is in trying to make sense out of what other speakers mean, and his or her understanding of the context of the interaction (i.e., whether linguistic, physical, and/or assumed knowledge and beliefs about the other speakers) (Gee, 1996).

**Rationale:** In order to communicate effectively in a second language, learners first need to be able to use language appropriately in different situations. To do so, they need to know diverse speech routines (e.g., greeting, clarifying, requesting, apologizing, etc.), as well as contend with the setting of the conversation, its overall context, and their relationship to the person they’re speaking with. All of this requires developing interactive competence (Mitchell et al., 2019). Needless to say, this is difficult enough between native speakers of the same language. If we factor in the fact that there are differences between languages and cultures, it’s easy to see how miscommunication or misunderstanding can easily arise. For example, a speaker of one language may compliment someone who speaks a different language. Perhaps because of the person’s tone, word choice, or body language, what was intended to be admiration or praise may come off as an unwanted advance. The frequency and universality of this kind of interaction is a clear indication that learners may not be aware of the complexities of using English in specific contexts. Of course, this could be attributed to personality traits, but this alone cannot account for the widespread grief so many people have had to endure because of unfortunate social encounters.

**Practice:** As teachers, we need to provide sufficient exposure to authentic input, as well as establish conditions that make shared interpretation possible (Slabakova, 2016). Activities in and out of the classroom should require a range of speech acts, utilization of surroundings, increased quantities of comprehensible input, and as much communication and uninhibited practice as possible. Language acquisition will be maximized when students engage in tasks that push them to the limits of their current competence.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, there is much research to be done in this rich and important area of English language learning and teaching. My objective in this paper was to shed light on six key issues – vocabulary acquisition, value systems, enculturation, influences of L1 on L2, age, and negotiation of meaning – that have a profound effect on what goes on both in and outside of the classroom. Hopefully my contributions here will have at least some degree of relevance for practitioners and parents around the globe.

**References**


