

TOPIC 5: Models and Theories that explain L2/FL Acquisition

‘While child language development theory must explain invariant ‘success’, foreign language learning theory must explain variation and lack of success’.

Bley-Broman, en Epstein *et al.* (1996: 718)

A Theory of second language acquisition must take into account that:

- (A theory of SLA includes) an understanding of what language is, what learning is, and for classroom contexts, what teaching is
- Knowledge of children’s learning of their L1 provides essential insights to an understanding of L2 acquisition
- There are important differences btw adult and child learning, and btw L1 and L2 learning
- There is tremendous variation between learners in cognitive style and within a learner’s strategy choice
- Personality will affect both the quantity and quality of second language learning
- Learning a second language implies learning its culture
- Errors show the learner is learning, and teachers and learners can gain insight from them
- A theory of second language acquisition must be comprehensible in including as many relevant factor as possible while at the same time it must have a practical application in the real world

What we know about 'adult second language acquisition':

1. Adults and adolescents can 'acquire' a language
 1. The learner creates a systematic interlanguage that is often characterized by the same systematic errors as those of a child learning the first language, as well as others that appear to be based on the learner's own native language
 2. There are predictable sequences in acquisition so that certain structures have to be acquired before others can be integrated
 3. Practice does not make perfect
 4. Knowing a language rule does not mean one will be able to use it in communicative interaction
 5. Isolated explicit error correction is usually ineffective in changing language behaviour
 6. For most adult learners, acquisition fossilizes (stops) before the learner has achieved native-like proficiency
 7. One cannot achieve native-like command of a second language in one hour a day (or even less: three hours a week)
 8. The learner task is enormous because language is enormously complex
 9. A learner's ability to understand language in a meaningful context exceeds his or her ability to comprehend de-contextualised language and to produce language of comparable complexity and accuracy.

Theories of SLA/FLA:

Conditions:

- Must explain innate factors
- Must consider the influence of environmental or contextual factors
- Should explain differences according to age
- Cannot only consider affective factors for learning
- Considers learning as both a conscious and subconscious process
- Considers that learning is something else besides comprehensible input
- Should include cognitive factors
- Recognizes the 'U' shape of learning.

Three types of Theories: {
Nativist Theories
- Input-based Theories
Environmental Theories
Interactionist Theories

A. Nativist Theories:

They explain acquisition by positing an innate biological endowment that makes learning possible (i.e. Chomsky)

B. Input based theories (also somewhat nativist):

Example: Krashen's (1977, 1978, 1985) Monitor Theory

One of the most important theories, (Teaching implications!) in the two previous decades.

1. Acquisition vs. Learning hypothesis

Two different ways to 'learn' a language: a subconscious process, natural, identical to the one little children learning their mother tongue use, and effective (Acquisition). Second process, Learning, which is conscious and consists of learning grammar rules

2. Natural Order hypothesis

Second language rules are acquired in a fixed way, pre-established, determined by innate mechanisms and not by the linguistic complexity or explicit teaching.

3. Monitor Hypothesis

The monitor only controls learning, not acquisition. The monitor plans, edits and corrects the learner's production when there is time. (It sometimes interferes the process of acquisition).

4. Input Hypothesis

It explains how language is acquired. A second language is acquired processing comprehensible input, that is, input that has been listened to and understood. If that input is beyond the level of the student and he does not understand it, then that input is useless. For acquisition to take place the input has to be slightly superior to the level of the learner (i+1) and be comprehensible, using some help: through the context, using pictures, mime, whatever. Acquisition is achieved through comprehension of input (i+1), but what makes learning possible is the existence of innate mechanisms (LAD).

5. *Affective filter Hypothesis*

It considers the role for acquisition of several factors, such as motivation, self-confidence or anxiety. These factors foster or impede acquisition, though they do not produce acquisition. To be more concrete, lack of motivation or self-esteem can 'RAISE' the affective filter so that comprehensible input is not able to reach the LAD.

'People acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'. When the filter is 'down' and appropriate comprehensible input is presented (and comprehended), acquisition is inevitable. It is, in fact, unavoidable and cannot be prevented –the language 'mental organ' will function just as automatically as any other organ.'

(Krashen, 1985:4)

Good things: methodological and teaching implications.

Criticisms: not designed by experts/ distinction learning vs. Acquisition/ not considering interaction/ output / not possible to verify hypothesis...

C. Environmental Theories:

They hold that an organism's experience is of more importance to development than its nature, or innate contributions. They will typically deny that innate contributions play any role at all other than that of providing the animal with the internal structure which environmental forces can proceed to shape. (i.e. Skinner behaviourist models)

An example:

Connectionist Models: Parallel Distributed Processing or (PDP)

A theory of cognition which assumes no innate endowment. PDP theorists hold that learning is based on the processing of input, but not in the sense of creating rules. Learning is held to consist of the strengthening and weakening of connections in complex neural networks as a function of the frequency of stimuli in the input. The networks control what looks like rule-governed behaviour, but which is simply a reflection of the connections formed on the basis of the relative strengths of various patterns in the input.

1. Processing is distributed in parallel (we can receive different information at the same time without having to concentrate on only one thing)
2. Processing is activated through input
3. Knowledge is conceived as the strength of connection between the different nodes (neural networks): Associative model
4. Learning takes place when the connections between the units or nodes are changed.

That is, an expert or knowledgeable person would be that person who has stronger connections, so he can go from one category to another at faster speed than a novice. In language, a proficient learner would be that who can relate one term with another very quickly and effectively.

D. Interactionist Theories of SLA:

More powerful than either nativist or environmentalist theories because they invoke both innate and environmental factors to explain language learning.

Klein's model: Acquisition of language is organized around three dimensions: *Propensity*, or necessity to acquire the language (related to factors such as motivation, education...), *Linguistic faculty* for learning that language (related to his biological capacity and the knowledge at his disposal), and having *Access* to that language (related to input and communication opportunities). These three dimensions are the conditions for learning to take place.

The process of learning also requires a *sequence* –time-, a *structure* – order or path of learning- and a *final state* –which may not be coincident with the target language-.

The learner must overcome four problems, which appear at the same time and have to be solved also at the same time with his knowledge of the world, the situation, and the contextual information:

Analysis: the learner must segment acoustic signals and compare them with the information he has from the context.

Synthesis: The sounds and words he has understood have to be joined to understand and produce enunciations in the second language.

Embedding: those enunciations have to be identified in the situational and linguistic context.

Matching: the learner compares his linguistic variety with the target language.