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# Introducing Second Language Acquisition

Muriel Saville-Troike

context

competence

critical period



## Introducing Second Language Acquisition

Written for students encountering the topic for the first time, this is a clear and practical introduction to second language acquisition (SLA). Using non-technical language, it explains how a second language is acquired; what the learner of a second language needs to know; and why some learners are more successful than others. This new edition of Muriel Saville-Troike's bestselling textbook introduces in a step-by-step fashion a range of fundamental concepts, such as SLA in adults and children, in formal and informal learning contexts, and in diverse socio-cultural settings. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, it encourages students to consider SLA from linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives. Providing a solid foundation in SLA, this book has become the leading introduction to the field for students of linguistics, psychology, education, and trainee language teachers.

MURIEL SAVILLE-TROIKE is Professor Emerita from the University of Arizona, named Regents' Professor of English before her retirement. She has made significant contributions to the fields of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, and has previously held posts at Texas A & M University, the University of Texas, Georgetown University, and the University of Illinois. Her previous publications include *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction* (Third Edition, 2003).

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# About the book

This book is a brief but comprehensive introduction to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The intended audience is primarily undergraduate students, but it is also suitable for graduate students who have little or no prior knowledge of linguistics.

My goals in writing this book are threefold: (1) to provide a basic level of knowledge about second language learning phenomena to students as part of their general education in humanities, the social sciences, and education; (2) to stimulate interest in second language learning and provide guidance for further reading and study; and (3) to offer practical help to second language learners and future teachers.

## Scope and perspective

I have included a broader range of SLA phenomena in this book than is the usual case: those involved in both adult and child second language learning, in both formal (instructed) and informal (natural) contexts of learning, and in diverse sociocultural settings. Since my own professional identity and commitment are interdisciplinary, I emphasize the importance of integrating linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives on SLA even as I recognize the differential nature of their assumptions and contributions. An effort has been made to maintain balance among them in quantity and quality of representation.

The focus of this book is on the acquisition of second language “competence,” but this construct is broadly considered from different points of view: as “linguistic competence” (in the sense of underlying grammatical knowledge); as “communicative competence” (adding notions of requisite cultural knowledge and other knowledge which enables appropriate usage); and as knowledge required for participation in communicative activities involving reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

## Design

Each chapter of this book considers three basic questions: *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know? *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge? *Why* are some learners more successful than others? Chapter 1 introduces the most basic terms and concepts, beginning with “What is SLA?” Chapter 2 provides a foundational background, ranging from the nature and distribution of multilingualism in the world to generally accepted notions of contrasts between first and second language acquisition. The chapter concludes with a preview of the different theoretical frameworks of SLA which will be surveyed. Chapters 3 to 5 focus in turn on different disciplinary perspectives: linguistic, psychological, and social. Chapter 6 focuses on the competence required for academic and interpersonal functions, and on the interdependence of content, context, and linguistic knowledge. The final chapter briefly summarizes and integrates answers to the basic *what*, *how*, and *why* questions that are posed throughout the book.

Each chapter includes a preview of its content and a summary. Chapters 1 to 6 conclude with suggested activities for self-checking of understanding and for class discussion or individual exploration. Chapters 2 to 6 include annotated suggestions for further reading on each major topic in that chapter, listed in the order in which they occur. Important technical concepts are presented sequentially with key terms listed at the beginning of chapters and highlighted with explanations and examples in the text. A comprehensive glossary is provided for student reference, and the subject index allows for integration and reinforcement of concepts across topics and disciplinary perspectives. All terms which appear in the glossary are highlighted in the text, whether or not they are listed as key terms.

## Second edition changes

The same scope, perspective, and design are retained in the second edition of this book. The major change has involved updating its content and reference beyond 2005, when I submitted my manuscript for the first edition to Cambridge University Press.

While I have considered all recent publications on topics that I had already included in the first edition, I focused on adding information on the one new perspective within each discipline (linguistic, psychological, social) that I believe is most likely to be contributing significantly to SLA scholarship and practice in the early twenty-first century. For linguistics (Chapter 3) I added linguistic interfaces, which is of increasing interest and importance within the Chomsky tradition. For psychology (Chapter 4) I added Complexity Theory, which is changing ways that we pose critical questions and seek answers. And for social approaches, I added Computer Mediated Communication, primarily for the ways it is redefining our concept of “speech community” and influencing instructional practices.

Other changes have been made primarily to revise or clarify content in response to suggestions and comments from readers in different parts of the world. I greatly appreciate the dialogue we

have been having since publication of the first edition, and I sincerely hope that it will continue.

## Website

Additional resources to accompany this text are available for download at the book’s website. These resources include all matter from the ends of chapters (questions for self-study, active learning and introductory suggestions for further reading), and the answer key to the questions for self-study. There are also additional teaching aids and professional resources that are not found in the textbook itself. For teaching, a new section called “More active learning” provides additional thought questions for each chapter to encourage critical thinking. These questions can be used as topics for student essays, class debates, or even, in some cases, mini-research projects. To supplement the textbook for use with advanced students, there is an annotated list, “Primary suggestions for further reading”, made up of articles reporting original research in the field (updated to reflect the additions of the second edition). Finally, for students and instructors interested in the profession, there are current listings of professional organizations, journals, and institutes for research and development.

# Acknowledgments

Any introductory survey of a field is indebted to many sources, and this is no exception (as the relatively long list of references suggests). I am particularly grateful to Karen Barto-Sisamout in the preparation of this work: she developed the suggestions for further reading and chapter activities, and she is responsible for the development and maintenance of the accompanying Website. She has also contributed significantly to other aspects of conceptualization and development. I am also very grateful to colleagues and other readers (especially Rudy Troike) who have made suggestions, corrections, and comments, and to Nadia Moraglio for her careful

and competent proofreading. My students and former students at the University of Arizona have been most helpful in providing relevant examples and in indicating where clarification in my presentation was necessary. I could not begin to make an enumeration, but I thank them all.

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# 1 Introducing Second Language Acquisition

## CHAPTER PREVIEW

### KEY TERMS

*Second Language Acquisition (SLA)*

*Second language (L2)*

*Informal L2 learning*

*Formal L2 learning*

*Linguistic competence*

*Linguistic performance*

*First language/  
native language/  
mother tongue  
(L1)*

*Simultaneous  
multilingualism*

*Sequential  
multilingualism*

When you were still a very young child, you began acquiring at least one language – what linguists call your **L1** – probably without thinking much about it, and with very little conscious effort or awareness. Since that time, you may have acquired an additional language – your **L2** – possibly also in the natural course of having the language used around you, but more likely with the same conscious effort needed to acquire other domains of knowledge in the process of becoming an “educated” individual. This book is about the phenomenon of adding languages. In this introductory chapter, I will define a few of the key terms that we will use and present the three basic questions that we will explore throughout the book.

## What is SLA?

**Second Language Acquisition (SLA)** refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a **second language (L2)**, even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a **target language (TL)**, which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. The scope of SLA includes **informal L2 learning** that takes place in naturalistic contexts, **formal L2 learning** that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. For example, “informal learning” happens when a child from Japan is brought to the USA and “picks up” English in the course of playing and attending school with native English-speaking children without any specialized language instruction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native English speakers or with co-workers who speak English as a second language. “Formal learning” occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French, when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic, or when an attorney in Colombia takes a night class in English. A combination of formal and informal learning takes place when a student from the USA takes Chinese language classes in Taipei or Beijing while also using Chinese outside of class for social interaction and daily living experiences, or when an adult immigrant from Ethiopia in Israel learns Hebrew both from attending special classes and from interacting with co-workers and other residents in Hebrew.

In trying to understand the process of second language acquisition, we are seeking to answer three basic questions:

- (1) *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know?
- (2) *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge?
- (3) *Why* are some learners more successful than others?

There are no simple answers to these questions – in fact, there are probably no answers that all second language researchers would agree on completely. In part this is because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars studying SLA come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods. The multidisciplinary approach to studying SLA phenomena which has developed within the last half-century has yielded important insights, but many tantalizing mysteries remain. New findings are appearing every day, making this an exciting period to be studying the subject. The continuing search for answers is not only shedding light on SLA in its own right, but is illuminating related fields. Furthermore, exploring answers to these questions is of potentially great practical value to anyone who learns or teaches additional languages.

SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily from within linguistics and psychology (and their subfields of applied linguistics,

psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology), as a result of efforts to answer the *what*, *how*, and *why* questions posed above. There are corresponding differences in what is emphasized by researchers who come from each of these fields:

- Linguists emphasize the characteristics of the differences and similarities in the languages that are being learned, and the **linguistic competence** (underlying knowledge) and **linguistic performance** (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition.
- Psychologists and psycholinguists emphasize the mental or cognitive processes involved in acquisition, and the representation of language(s) in the brain.
- Sociolinguists emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and extend the scope of study to communicative competence (underlying knowledge that additionally accounts for language use, or pragmatic competence).
- Social psychologists emphasize group-related phenomena, such as identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social contexts of learning.

Applied linguists who specialize in SLA may take any one or more of these perspectives, but they are also often concerned with the implications of theory and research for teaching second languages. Each discipline and subdiscipline uses different methods for gathering and analyzing data in research on SLA, employs different theoretical frameworks, and reaches its interpretation of research findings and conclusions in different ways.

It is no surprise, then, that the understandings coming from these different disciplinary perspectives sometimes seem to conflict in ways that resemble the well-known Asian fable of the three blind men describing an elephant: one, feeling the tail, says it is like a rope; another, feeling the side, says it is flat and rubbery; the third, feeling the trunk, describes it as being like a long rubber hose. While each perception is correct individually, they fail to provide an accurate picture of the total animal because there is no holistic or integrated perspective. Ultimately, a satisfactory account of SLA must integrate these multiple perspectives; this book is a step in that direction. As in the fable of the elephant, three different perspectives are presented here: linguistic, psychological, and social. I make no presumption that any one perspective among these is “right” or more privileged, but believe that all are needed to provide a fuller understanding of the complex phenomena of SLA.

## What is a second language?

I have broadly defined the scope of SLA as concerned with any phenomena involved in learning an L2. Sometimes it is necessary for us to make further distinctions according to the function the L2 will serve in our lives, since this may significantly affect *what* we learn. These differences may determine the specific areas of vocabulary knowledge we need, the level

of grammatical complexity we have to attain, and whether speaking or reading skills are more important. The following are distinctions commonly made in the literature:

- A **second language** is typically an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes. It is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively. In this more restricted sense, the term is contrasted with other terms in this list.
- A **foreign language** is one not widely used in the learners' immediate social context which might be used for future travel or other cross-cultural communication situations, or studied as a curricular requirement or elective in school, but with no immediate or necessary practical application.
- A **library language** is one which functions primarily as a tool for further learning through reading, especially when books or journals in a desired field of study are not commonly published in the learners' native tongue.
- An **auxiliary language** is one which learners need to know for some official functions in their immediate political setting, or will need for purposes of wider communication, although their first language serves most other needs in their lives.

Other restricted or highly specialized functions for “second” languages are designated **language for specific purposes** (such as *French for Hotel Management*, *English for Aviation Technology*, *Spanish for Agriculture*, and a host of others), and the learning of these typically focuses only on a narrow set of occupation-specific uses and functions. One such prominent area is *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*.

### What is a first language?

There is also sometimes a need to distinguish among the concepts **first language**, **native language**, **primary language**, and **mother tongue**, although these are usually treated as a roughly synonymous set of terms (generalized as **L1** to oppose the set generalized as **L2**). The distinctions are not always clear-cut. For purposes of SLA concerns, the important features that all shades of L1s share are that they are assumed to be languages which are acquired during early childhood – normally beginning before the age of about three years – and that they are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them. Acquisition of more than one language during early childhood is called **simultaneous multilingualism**, to be distinguished from **sequential multilingualism**, or learning additional languages after L1 has already been established. (“Multilingualism” as used here includes bilingualism.) Simultaneous multilingualism results in more than one “native” language for an individual, though it is undoubtedly much less common than sequential multilingualism. It appears that there are significant differences between the processes and/or results of language acquisition by young children and by older



learners, although this is an issue which is still open to debate, and is one of those which we will explore in chapters to follow.

## Diversity in learning and learners

As already noted, the circumstances under which SLA takes place sometimes need to be taken into account, although they are perhaps too often taken for granted and ignored. *What* is learned in acquiring a second language, as well as *how* it is learned, is often influenced by whether the situation involves informal exposure to speakers of other languages, immersion in a setting where one needs a new language to meet basic needs, or formal instruction in school, and these learning conditions are often profoundly influenced by powerful social, cultural, and economic factors affecting the status of both languages and learners.

The intriguing question of *why* some L2 learners are more successful than others requires us to unpack the broad label “learners” for some dimensions of discussion. Linguists may distinguish categories of learners defined by the identity and relationship of their L1 and L2; psycholinguists may make distinctions based on individual aptitude for L2 learning, personality factors, types and strength of motivation, and different learning strategies; sociolinguists may distinguish among learners with regard to social, economic, and political differences and learner experiences in negotiated interaction; and social psychologists may categorize learners according to aspects of their group identity and attitudes toward target language speakers or toward L2 learning itself. All of these factors and more will be addressed in turn in the following chapters.

### Chapter summary

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) involves a wide range of language learning settings and learner characteristics and circumstances. This book will consider a broad scope of these, examining them from three different disciplinary perspectives: *linguistic*, *psychological*, and *social*. Different approaches to the study of SLA have developed from each of these perspectives in attempts to answer the three basic questions: *What* exactly does the L2 learner come to know? *How* does the learner acquire this knowledge? *Why* are some learners more (or less) successful than others?

## Activities

### Questions for self-study

1. Match the following terms to their definitions:

- |                     |                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. target language  | a. has no immediate or necessary practical application, might be used later for travel or be required for school              |
| 2. second language  | b. the aim or goal of language learning                                                                                       |
| 3. first language   | c. an officially or societally dominant language (not speakers' L1) needed for education, employment, or other basic purposes |
| 4. foreign language | d. acquired during childhood                                                                                                  |

2. The underlying knowledge of language is called \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Actual production of language is called \_\_\_\_\_.

### Active learning

- List all of the languages that you can use. First classify them as L1(s) and L2(s), and then further classify the L2(s) as "second," "foreign," "library," "auxiliary," or "for specific purposes." Finally, distinguish between the ways you learned each of the languages: through informal exposure, formal instruction, or some combination of these.
- Do you think that you are (or would be) a "good" or a "poor" L2 learner? Why do you think so? Consider whether you believe that your own relative level of success as a language learner is due primarily to linguistic, psychological, or social factors (social may include type of instruction, contexts of learning, or attitudes toward the L1 and L2).
- Do you know people who don't feel like native speakers of their first language acquired? Or people who feel like native speakers of a language acquired later in life? What do you attribute this feeling to?

Written for students encountering the topic for the first time, this is a clear and practical introduction to second language acquisition (SLA).

Using non-technical language, it explains how a second language is acquired; what the learner of a second language needs to know; and why some learners are more successful than others.

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- Suitable for beginners – assumes only a basic knowledge of linguistics
- “Questions for self-study” and “Questions for active learning” encourage critical thinking and provide new ideas for research topics
- A comprehensive glossary provides clear definitions and ease of look-up for each concept introduced

“Just what everyone teaching Second Language Acquisition has been waiting for – a truly undergraduate textbook. It explains the terms regularly used by those in the field but not always understood by beginners. It is non-partisan in its approach, well organized, clearly laid-out and provides good, worked-through examples. A most welcome addition – it is the first truly ‘joined up’ work in the field!”

Vera Regan, *University College Dublin*

“... a useful resource for both undergraduate and graduate students who would like to know more about the learning process and language acquisition and the teachers who need to explain these to them.”

*Asian EFL Journal*

“By structuring an SLA course around the main questions the field investigates, Saville-Troike focuses students’ attention on the important issues that illuminate the study of SLA. The adaptable nature of the book also makes it ideal for courses that include both undergraduate and graduating students, and for courses that have both students who intend to continue taking courses in SLA, and those who do not. Saville-Troike’s text is a timely and welcome addition to the profession.”

Wynne Wong, *Ohio State University*

New to this edition:

- New sections on simultaneous bilingualism in early childhood, the role of computers in SLA, electronic communication, and nonverbal aspects of language
- Updated theories including Chomskyan interfaces, Complexity Theory, and Computer-Mediated Communication
- Greater emphasis on the practical applications and implications of the theories presented
- Extra resources on the accompanying website, including ideas for student research projects, additional exercises, and suggestions for further reading

MURIEL SAVILLE-TROIKE is Professor Emerita from the University of Arizona, named Regents’ Professor of English before her retirement. She has made significant contributions to the fields of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, and has previously held posts at Texas A & M University, the University of Texas, Georgetown University, and the University of Illinois. Her previous publications include *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction* (Third Edition, 2003).



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