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Donald William Peckham

Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 2

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Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 2

Don Peckham, peckham@lit.u-szeged.hu

Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics

Institute of English and American Studies

University of Szeged

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

UNIT #2: DEFINING SLA

2.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

In this unit, I'll provide a general introduction to the field of Second Language Acquisition through defining basic, though complex terms. At the end of this unit you will:

- be able to explain why the field of SLA is complex;
- know what some psycholinguistic contexts of learning are;
- know about cognitive contexts of learning;
- understand “superdiversity” as defining a complex social world of language learning and use;
- tell the difference between linguistic and communicative competence; and
- know the difference between acquisition and learning.

2.2 THE DEFINITION OF THE FIELD IS COMPLEX

It makes sense to provide a definition of the field itself when beginning a survey course like this, yet our excellent textbook, Lighbown and Spada's *How languages are learned*, does not provide a one- or two-sentence definition of the field. Why could this be? If we turn to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (4th ed.), we do find a definition, which is the following:

second language acquisition *n* also *SLA*

the process of acquiring a second or foreign language.

This seems straightforward enough, yet already it's possible to see that the term “second” is indeed more complex, as the definition includes “second” and “foreign” languages, and these terms themselves need further definition. If the first term needs refining, maybe all of them are more complex than they appear? Indeed, this is the case, and yet it doesn't simply reflect the difficulty of coming up with a name for the field, but is a clear reflection of the complexity of the field itself and the complexity of the act of language

learning itself. So, let's take an in-depth look at the **S** the **L** and **A** in order to get a better feel for the field. What we'll find is that under each letter of the acronym will be many complex issues and definitions, and that, in fact, you almost need an entire textbook to completely define the field.

2.3 "SECOND" LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Under the term "second" there are further definitions that need to be made that involve the psycholinguistic and social contexts of learning.

2.3.1 SECOND VS. FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

The field of SLA, or L21 clearly distinguishes itself from the field of **first language acquisition**, or L1A. This is a distinction of psycholinguistic "context" where first languages are learned before any other language is learned – or simultaneously with another language – while **second language** are learned after first language learning has begun. To take the clearest cases, there will be distinct differences between an adult's psycholinguistic context or state when learning another language than a child's. To state some obvious differences, and adult already knows the complex and rich details of one language, while a child does not, and an adult already has an understanding of the world and all of the conceptual knowledge that allows him or her to function in that world, while a child is in the process of learning this. Thus, these two clear cases suggest that learning a second language might be done in a very different way than learning a first language.

Two further clarifications need to be made. First, there is a question of how similar or different childhood consecutive bilingualism is to first language learning. That is, here is a case where a child may be learning a second language within that developmental period where their conceptual understanding and first language are still developing. Will learning a second language be similar or different in this context? This is indeed an empirical question that we'll touch on in Unit 3 on child language acquisition, and this is an active area of research in the field.

Second, even when acknowledging the clear differences between child L1A and adult L2A, we are left with an intriguing question: indeed, how similar or different are these two cases in terms of language development? Similarities between L1A and SLA would have clear implications for instruction, as we'll see in later units of this course.

Thus, concerning the psycholinguistic differences between L1A and L2A, we can assume that there are indeed large enough differences that two separate fields of inquiry are needed (child language acquisition and SLA), but that the degree of their overlap is an important issue to investigate.

2.3.2 SECOND VS. THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC EFFECTS OF EXPANDED LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL – MORE ON PSYCHOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

The word “second” also contrasts with **third or additional language acquisition**. Is the field taking a stand that it is only about the learning of second languages and not about additional languages beyond that? No, it is not. In the field of SLA, the question of how third or additional language learning is different is a critical issue. Learners possess, after having learned one additional language, enormous amounts of specific knowledge about language in general which they can be applied to the learning of an additional language. Furthermore, learners also possess skills which are potentially transferable, such as the “learning to learn” skills which they have obtained in learning their second language. This knowledge and these skills can be applied to learning an additional language. Furthermore, there is deeper, potentially less conscious knowledge which may be brought to bear on learning an additional language.

Thus, also the name of the field implies second languages only, we don’t want to exclude the experience of becoming multilingual from the field of inquiry, especially as multilingualism is an extremely common experience in Europe, and indeed the whole world. For example, the most recent Eurostat statistics show that nearly 30% of Europeans know more than two languages (Eurostat 2015). You yourself are most likely multilingual, and if you become a teacher, it is likely that many your students are either becoming multilingual now, or will do so after the instruction in your course is over. Multilingualism is a key issue for the field to deal with.

2.3.3 SECOND VS. FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Having a look at the difference between second and foreign language acquisition allows us to see different social context of language learning. What we’ll find, is that, unlike the issue of first vs. second language learning, while the term “second” is used in the definition of the field, it should also be seen to cover the area of foreign language learning, too. A quick look at the definitions, though, will show that these two social contexts are quite different.

Learning a **second language** is often defined as the learning of a language which is widely spoken and used in the learner’s context. A good example of this would be foreign students and immigrants learning English in the United States. In this case, they are learning the language that is widely used around them. This means that when these students leave class, they are in an “input-rich” environment, that is, an environment where they can potentially hear, read and use the language in their daily lives.

Learning a **foreign language** is often defined as learning a language as a school subject. A good example of this is Hungarian students studying English as a subject in their primary and or secondary school curriculum. In this case, the social context where the language is most widely used is the classroom. And, oftentimes the language input that students receive is limited to what happens in class and the homework that they do outside of class.

The two social contexts of second or foreign language learning are quite different, and the opportunities that people have for learning reflect this. Nevertheless, the field of SLA would claim that despite these social differences, there are similar processes going on in each case. Thus, while it’s important to keep

these differences in context in mind, the study of SLA should account of learning in each of these contexts.

2.3.4 SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, DIGITAL LANGUAGE USE, AND ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT EXPANDED

The distinction between second and foreign language acquisition seems to make a clean break between two quite different contexts, and for those of us working in foreign language environments the face validity of a “foreign language experience” in our classrooms seems quite apparent. Nevertheless, is this distinction that clear and clean? More specifically, is a foreign language environment really cut off from language use outside the classroom? If you think briefly about this issue, the answer is a clear “no”. To take the example of English, English language use is alive and well in places even like Szeged, Hungary due to the explosion of **digital language use** and to the expansion of English as a lingua franca between people who do not share a first language. I’ll explain this below.

The expansion of the internet to all corners of the world has radically changed the opportunities for language learners to experience the foreign language they are learning. Now from phones, classrooms and home, students can access all manners of English language input from simple information to podcasts, YouTube how-to videos, music and full-length movies. Indeed, foreign language learners can access on their phone more media in an instant than second language learners could in a week twenty years ago. And, not only is there opportunity to do so, but students take advantage of this opportunity.

Furthermore, particularly in Europe, English has become one of the major lingua francas which non-native speakers use together when communicating with each other. This is not simply a minor domain of language use, but there is good reason to believe that most of the communication in English on continental Europe is between non-native speakers, and indeed, this may be the major domain of English use for interaction for most non-native speakers of English on the continent. Considering the question of where students of English go to use English, and the answer is most likely here in Szeged, in Hungary or in another European country other than the UK. Indeed, face-to-face and virtual interaction in English need not be seen as happening between learners and native speakers, but must be seen as likely to happen between two non-native speakers of English. This can have profound impact on how English is taught and why it is taught .

Thus, the case can be made that as far as English is concerned, the expanding digital exposure to and engagement with English along with the expanded primary domain of using of English as a lingua franca effectively blurs the lines between second and foreign language learning.

2.3.5 SUPERDIVERSITY: THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS EXPLODED

It can be seen in the previous sections that the heading of “second” covers a variety of psycholinguistic and social contexts. It’s beginning to look like there are many many different contexts of language learning each with their own characteristics. The point I want to make here is that not only are there

innumerable different contexts, but that in a single geographical situation and within a single individual many different contexts may co-exist simultaneously. This multitude of simultaneous contexts, situations and experiences is referred to as “superdiversity” in the sociolinguistics literature. Superdiversity exactly refers to this wide variety of language knowledge and contexts of use which characterize the current globalizing world. As an example of superdiversity, read the following account by sociolinguist Jan Blommaert who describes the texture and diversity of language use as it exists in his neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium.

READING TASK: INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

As you read the following text by Blommaert, keep in mind the following questions:

1. What kind of language knowledge and use is shown in this situation?
2. How does this context stretch our definition of second and foreign languages, as well as first and second languages?
3. How is this situation similar to and different from the language knowledge, use and experience of Hungarian university students?

Multilingual repertoires and super-diversity

The [language] repertoires of new migrants often appear to be ‘truncated’ (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005a ; see also section 4. 1 below): highly specific ‘bits’ of language and literacy varieties combine in a repertoire that reflects the fragmented and highly diverse life-trajectories and environments of such people. Thus, recent West-African (e.g. Nigerian) immigrants in Berchem may combine one or more African languages with a West-African indigenized English, which will be used with some interlocutors in the neighbourhood ,and will also be the medium of communication during weekly worship sessions in a new Evangelical church in the neighbourhood. English, however, is not part of the repertoire of most other immigrants in the neighbourhood. Most of the shops, for instance, are owned by Turkish or Moroccan people, who often use vernacular forms of German or French as ‘emergency’ lingua francas. Thus, when a Nigerian woman goes to buy bread in a Turkish-owned bakery, the code for conducting the transaction will, for both, be a clearly non-native and very limited variety of local vernacular Dutch, mixed with some English, or German, words. In the phone shops, vernacular English will have slightly more currency, because the phone shops are typically run by people from India or Pakistan. Note, however, that the particular varieties of English spoken in such transactions will be very different: none will be ‘standard’, each variety will reflect informal patterns of acquisition and an uneasiness in use.

The Dutch used in the bakery is a minimal, informally acquired small ‘bit’ of language, a specialized language skill, limited to specific domains of interactions, and showing significant limitations compared to fluent speakers. It is insufficient for successful communication in institutional encounters: bureaucratic procedures are in standard and literate varieties of Dutch, typically varieties that are associated with formal acquisition efforts. Thus, when a Nigerian woman goes to her daughter’s school for consultation on her child’s progress, she will have to revert to her non-native English. This will then be met by a Belgian–Flemish variety of English from the teachers, and the interaction will typically be less than

smooth. The medium of communication between mother and child will be a mixed code, often blending unevenly distributed chunks of Dutch and English. Naturally the child, as a result of her immersion in a formal language learning environment, has access to more elaborate varieties of standard and local vernacular Dutch and will often have to assist the mother and the teacher in communication attempts. This, importantly, points towards another peculiarity of language in such neighbourhoods: the fact that language tasks often involve collaborative work. People may call on others, or others may volunteer to translate and assist in communication. This is not only the case for tasks that involve literacy; it can also be noticed in face-to-face encounters. People very often pool their competences and skills in particular languages when they have to accomplish demanding communication tasks.

At home, the Nigerian family will have access to television, and the choice will go to English-medium channels such as BBC World or MTV, with an occasional foray, often initiated by the children, into Dutch-medium children's programmes. There will be a very low level of consumption of local printed mass-media, and access to printed sources from Nigeria will be restricted. At the same time, telephone contacts in the native languages will be maintained with people back home and fellow migrants from the same region of origin, now living in Brussels, London or Paris. Occasionally, there will be mutual visits during which the African regional language might be the medium of communication among adults, while the children revert to vernacular forms of English to interact with each other. Their exposure to education environments in which different languages are the medium of instruction – Dutch and French, for instance – constrains the use of any other language.

Thus we see very fragmented and 'incomplete' – 'truncated' – language repertoires, most of which consist of spoken, vernacular and non-native varieties of different languages, with an overlay of differentially developed literacy skills in one or some languages (depending on the level of literacy at the time of migration). We also see how many communication tasks are accomplished collaboratively, by combining the resources and skills of several people. The particular patterns of such repertoires are difficult to establish in detail – here is the descriptive challenge. Repertoires such as these require close inspection [...]. The sociolinguistic world of these people is strictly local (the neighbourhood) as well as widely translocal (involving the network of fellow migrants elsewhere, communication with people back home, and the media). And internally, we see variation in language repertoires, in which adults have different repertoires from children; fellow migrants from the same region now living elsewhere have different repertoires again. The local environment of these migrants is abundantly multilingual.

—Blommaert 2010:8-9

As is shown in the text, the West African immigrant presented in the description may speak to some degree a wide variety of languages and varieties which are used in different home and public contexts in the community. Languages mentioned in the text that a simple person may use nearly on a daily basis are one or two local African languages, indigenized African English, the local Dutch variant and German. Furthermore, one speaker may not have full control over all of these languages and varieties so communication happens in a collaborative way where participants in the conversation use all of their language skills and strategies to create meaning.

This description forces us to stretch our definitions of first language, and second and foreign language by considering as legitimate linguistic knowledge all forms of knowledge, whether they be full languages that were learned from birth or the bits of language or “truncated” repertoires which are employed for specific communicative purposes. All of these forms of knowledge have been learned and are used in service of communication no matter how extensive or “truncated” these systems of knowledge are in the individual.

Any sufficient theory or collection of theories of second language acquisition would need to be applicable in the above example where we can see people simultaneously learning and using various languages and bits of language in a wide range of contexts. This is indeed what modern multilingualism looks like in many parts of Europe, and any useful theories of language learning will need to account for this diversity and the complex variables involved.

But, how does Blommaert’s example relate to our situation here in Hungary. The message, I think is rather clear: if we look at the language experience of university students in Hungary, we can see a similar diversity of experience. Surely language knowledge of students would not be seen as “truncated”, to use Blommaert’s word, but surely there is a diversity of knowledge, skills, abilities and experience across a variety of languages and contexts within groups and within individuals. That is, if we use the kind of depth of description that Blommaert uses, we’ll certainly see that diversity is potentially the hallmark of language use and language learning.

To conclude this section on the word “second” in the term SLA, we have seen that that the possible contexts of learning are numerous and that different contexts create different conditions for learning and affect learning in different ways. We’ve also seen that all of this diversity – this superdiversity – may exist within a single individual, too. The field of SLA needs to carry out the seemingly contradictory task of providing general explanations for language learning while acknowledging the diversity of contexts. In this sense, the terms “second” and “foreign” language are impoverished terms which don’t match our highly complex world in 21st century Europe.

For future teachers, though, there is a further conclusion that can be made: it is not possible to teach with the assumption that English language learning means developing a skill that can be used at a later time in life when one is using English with native speakers. English use is happening now, no matter what the skill level of students, it is not necessarily happening with native speakers, and it’s likely to be happening in a multilingual context. Furthermore, the context of use may involve diverse Englishes and diverse abilities in English which represented in any group of people. Students need to be ready to face this reality.

2.4 SECOND “LANGUAGE” ACQUISITION

Next, let’s turn to the L, language, and consider its definition. We can start with the classic question: What is it that is learned when one learns a language? Or to put it another way which is often used in introduction to linguistics classes, what is it you know when you know a language? Your answer to this question will determine much about how you approach the tasks of language learning and teaching and also researching the learning of language.

What is needed in answering this question is a model of language – or more specifically, a model of language knowledge. The division of language between what we say – that is, performance – and the knowledge that that speech is based on – that is, competence – is a useful concept since it suggests a kind of pure knowledge behind language which can be separated from the large amount of variation found in actual language performance.

Traditionally linguists thought mainly of grammatical or **linguistic competence** when describing language knowledge, and indeed many language teachers do define their role as developing grammatical competence in their students by explaining grammar to students. But there is more to language than this, and the development of a more inclusive and expansive model of language is one of the achievements of linguistics in the 20th century. This more inclusive model is called “communicative competence” and includes grammatical competence and more.

VIDEO TASK: EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Watch the following video by the noted applied linguist Jack Richards on communicative competence. Keep in mind the question “what is it we know when we know a language?” and note the different types of knowledge that he discusses.

Jack Richards on Communicative Competence:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwMii_YtEOw

In the video, Jack Richards contrasts the traditional view of “linguistic competence”, that is, the knowledge of grammar which allows us to produce accurate sentences, with “communicative competence”, that is, the ability to use language in such a way that it’s communicatively appropriate. The idea of appropriate use of language involves speakers knowing the sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules for language which are in effect in that particular context. Thus, while linguistic competence, or the grammatically correct formation of sentences, might be realized on the sentence level, communicative competence is realized on the discourse level of conversations and texts, or connected phrases and sentences. As Jack Richards points out, this different view of language as something larger than creating correct sentences leads to a different view of language teaching, focusing the class on tasks, functions, activities, fluency, and also accuracy.

In terms of our definition of SLA, we want to keep in mind the depth and breadth of language knowledge and use. This is the knowledge that we gain when we learn a language.

2.5 SECOND LANGUAGE “ACQUISITION”

After we know what language knowledge is, the question arises: how does this develop in learners? And, importantly for people who would like to become teachers, what can teachers do to promote the development of this linguistic knowledge? One of the key domains of interest in answering this question is the cognitive domain, that is, the domain of mind and thinking. We might ask the question this way then: what kinds of cognitive processes underlie the development of linguistic knowledge?

This question leads us to the “A” for “acquisition” in the SLA acronym, a technical term which you might already be familiar with. Stephen Krashen in his popular monitor model defines the acquisition of language as picking up and developing linguistic knowledge when a person is not thinking about language or engaged in considering what is being learned. That is, acquisition is a process where learners are neither aware of the process nor the product of language development. This view of the acquisition of knowledge as happening through a completely unconscious process which occurs when we engage in language use is a powerful idea, and nearly all of us have some anecdotes about how we have experienced something like this where we’ve been using and understanding a foreign language and have picked up some features of it.

In opposition to acquisition is the idea of “learning”. In this case people gaining linguistic knowledge are thinking about language and are indeed focusing on language forms so that they can be integrated into a person’s linguistic knowledge. All of us also have very clear experiences of this through participation in foreign language classes where we have learned what was taught in the class.

It appears, then, that these terms suggest different cognitive processes, acquisition versus learning, which correspond to different domains, real use of language for communication versus experiencing language in the classroom. Yet this is not really the case. There is no reason that we cannot be consciously aware of language and be learning elements when we are communicating outside the classroom, and there is no reason to think that the classroom communication we experience would not trigger acquisition.

Furthermore, there are problems in assuming that one of these cognitive process is more important than the other, or that they can’t work together. And in fact, Krashen’s theory claims that learned knowledge is less important than that which is acquired, but we’ll deal with this issue later in the course.

Thus we are faced with another issue in the SLA acronym: the word “acquisition” is used, but we certainly don’t want to exclude learning from our models of language development or our investigations of this process. In short, even though the word “acquisition” is in the SLA acronym, we have to consider both acquisition and learning.

2.6 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT

In this unit, we’ve spend quite a bit of time taking apart and putting back together the notion of what study is of second language acquisition is. In doing so, we’ve seen that language acquisition happens in a series of complex psycholinguistic, cognitive and social settings. While the field would like to develop overarching theories that can be used in all context, there is a great deal of tension between this goal and the finely variegated textures of the various contexts. In the end, this is what theories of SLA must take into account. And, this explains the wide number of theories of SLA and also how a wide variety of

academic disciplines can weigh in on questions of SLA, from educational policy to cognitive science and linguistics.

2.7 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

Second Language Acquisition

First language acquisition

Second language

Third or additional language acquisition

Foreign language

Consecutive bilingualism

Third language acquisition

English as a lingua franca

Digital language use

Superdiversity

Linguistic competence

Communicative competence

Acquisition

Learning

2.8 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT.

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