

Lecture One

Basic Notions in SLA: Description and Explanation

1.1. Identifying the study of SLA

Gass and Selinker (1994)

SLA is relatively a young field. It is difficult to state a 'beginning' date, but it is probably fair to say that it expanded and developed significantly in the past 40-45 years. We are far from a complete theory of SLA, but there is progress and an increased sophistication. SLA is the study of how lges are learned. It is the study of the acquisition of a non-primary lge, the acquisition of a lge beyond the native lge. It is the study of how learners create a new lge system with only limited exposure to a second lge. It is the study of what is learned from a second lge and what is not learned. It is the study of why most second lge learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in the second lge as they do in their L1. Also, SLA is concerned with the nature of the hypotheses (whether conscious or subconscious) that LLs come up with regarding the rules of the second lge. SLA is an interdisciplinary field

One way to define SLA is to state what it is not. SLA is not about pedagogy unless pedagogy affects the course of acquisition.

Ellis (1997):

- The systematic study of how people acquire a second language (L2) is a fairly recent phenomenon (2nd of the 20th century).
- It appeared in time of the 'global village' and the 'World Wide web' (communication expanded beyond the local speech communities).
- Languages were learned as a pleasing time, education and employment.
- The term 'SLA' requires careful explanation.
- 'Second' can refer to any lge that is learned subsequent to the L1.
- 'Second' is not intended to contrast with 'foreign'. (Ellis 2008, in onde respect this is unfortunate, in South Africa involving black learners of English may be perceived as opprobrious. In such settings, the term 'Additional Language may be more appropriate and acceptable. In the case of 'SECOND' lge, the language plays an institutional and social role in the community (it functions as a recognized means of communication who speak some other lge as their L1). In contrast, 'FOREIGN' lge learning takes place in settings where the lge plays no major role in the community and is primarily learnt only in the CR. The distinction between second and foreign is best treated as a sociolinguistic rather than a psycholinguistic one.

Another distinction is between NATURALISTIC (lge learned through communication that takes place in naturally occurring social situations ; incidental learning) and instructed lge acquisition (through the study with the help of ‘guidance’ from reference books or CR instruction ; focus on some aspect of the lge system).

- ‘L2 acquisition’ is the way in which people learn a lge other than their mother tongue, inside or outside the CR, and SLA is the study of this.

For Saville-Troike and Barto (2017):

- SLA refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a lge subsequent to learning their L1 as young children, and to the process of learning that lge.
- The additional lge is called L2 (second lge), even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired.
- It is also commonly called a target lge (TL), which refers to any lge 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 CRs, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances.
- In trying to understand the process of SLA, 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; there are probably no answers that all second language researchers would agree on completely. This is in part because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars studying SLA come from different academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods).
- 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; Gass and Selinker (1994) added discourse analysis, conversational analysis and education).
 1. Linguists emphasize the features of the differences and similarities in the lges that are being learned, and the ‘linguistic competence’ (underlying knowledge) and ‘linguistic performance’ (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition.
 2. Psychologists and psycholinguists emphasize the mental or cognitive processes involved in acquisition, and the representation of lge(s) in the brain.

3. Sociolinguists emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and extend the scope of study to communicative competence (underlying knowledge that additionally accounts for lge use, or pragmatic competence).
4. Social psychologists emphasize group-related phenomena as identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social contexts of learning.
5. 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 lges.
6. 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.
7. The understanding coming from these different disciplinary perspectives sometimes seem to conflict.

What is a second lge?

An understanding of the function the L2 will serve in our lives may significantly affect ‘WHAT’ we learn.

A second lge is typically an official or societally dominant lge needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes. It is acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another lge natively.

A foreign lge is one not widely used in the LLs’ 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.

What is a first lge?

They are used as roughly synonymous (first lge, native lge, primary lge, and mother tongue). The distinctions are not always clear-cut. L1 s are assumed to be lges which are acquired during early childhood and are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them.

Acquisition of more than one lge during early childhood is called ‘simultaneous multilingualism’.

The nature of lge (What is needed to be learned ?)

How can we characterize the knowledge that humans have of lge?

Phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics.

The nature of non-native speaker knowledge

Given the complexity of the knowledge to be learned, the basic assumption in SLA research is that learners create a language system, known as an interlge (IL) (a lge filled with random errors, not a deficit system, but an internalized system with its own structure, composed of numerous elements, some are from the NL or the TL).

Diversity in language and learners

What is learned in acquiring a second lge, as well as how it is learned, is often influenced by whether the situation involves informal exposure to speakers of other lges, immersion in a setting where one needs a new lge to meet basic needs, or formal instruction in school, and these learning conditions are often profounding influenced by powerful social, cultural, and economic factors affecting the status of both lges and LLs.

How about LLs ?

Linguists may distinguish categories of LLs 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, and political differences and learner differences in negotiated interaction.

Social psychologists may categorize LLs according to aspects of their group identity and attitudes toward TL speakers or toward L2 learning itself.

1.2. Goals for exploring SLA

To define SLA

The **description** of L2 acquisition (grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary use). Description of errors, formulaic chunks, whether the acquisition is systematic.

The **explanation** of L2 acquisition (Social milieu in which learning takes place, input influence on LLs, lge aptitude). i.e., identify the external and internal factors that account for why LLs acquire a L2. Different kinds of learning: item learning and system learning; particular developmental patterns.

In brief, the goals of SLA are to describe how L2 acquisition proceeds and to explain this process and why some LLs seem to be better at it than others.

1.3. Frameworks for exploring SLA

Two frameworks: 'general SLA' and 'Instructed SLA'.

The former investigates issues relative to all L2 LLs, irrespective of whether they are in a naturalistic or an instructed setting. Distinction between 'description' and 'explanation'

The latter is concerned with how LLs acquire an L2 in a CR setting. It involves the study of how the kinds of interaction found in the CR influence L2 acquisition and whether LLs actually learn what they are taught.