

# **Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice**

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Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. SLA researchers examine how communicative competence -- the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, understand cultural references, use strategies to keep communication from breaking down, and apply the rules of grammar – develops in a second language (Savignon, 1997). They also study nonlinguistic influences on SLA such as age, anxiety, and motivation. (See Ellis, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 2001; & Pica, 202 for extensive discussions of SLA theory and research.)

Little research has been conducted on SLA with English language learners in adult education contexts. The complexities of adult ESL instruction make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education and tracking learner progress over time are not easy when complicated by diverse and mobile learner populations and varied learning contexts (e.g. workplace classes, general ESL classes, family literacy classes). However, knowing about the SLA research that has been conducted can be helpful to adult ESL teachers because the findings may be applicable to their populations and contexts

The purpose of the Q & A is to show how SLA research can inform adult ESL instruction. Research in three areas of SLA is discussed: (1) the effect of learner motivation, (2) the role of interaction, and (3) the role of vocabulary. The research presented here includes experimental, correlational, and descriptive studies, as well as theoretical articles that analyze the results of other research.

## **What does research say about learner motivation in SLA?**

Motivation has been a focus of SLA research for many years. Dornyei (2002a, p. 8) identifies motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it.” Linguist Robert Gardner (1985; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) examined factors that affected French- and English-speaking Canadians learning the language of the other community. His studies support the theory that integrative motivation (wanting to learn a language in order to identify with the community that speaks the language) promoted SLA. This motivation seems to promote SLA regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or foreign language. Even if individuals do not have this positive attitude toward learning the language, they may have instrumental motivation – that is, they may want to learn the language to meet their needs and goals, such as to get a job or to talk to their children’s teachers (Morris, 2001; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Whatever the learners’ motivation, research seems to support the practice of teachers discovering and responding to learners’ needs and goals when planning instruction (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997).

Teachers can facilitate motivation by helping learners identify short-term goals and reflect on their progress and achievements. For example, teachers can provide learners with self-assessment checklists to identify skill strengths and weaknesses, weekly checklists to track their progress on meeting a learning goal, and self-reflection tools (e.g., learning diaries) to help learners build autonomy and take charge of their learning (Marshall, 2002).

Recent research looks at how instructional contexts also affect motivation. A learner’s motivation may vary from day to day and even from task to task (Dornyei, 2002b; Dornyei & Kormos, 2000). Using varied and challenging instructional activities helps learners stay focused and engaged in instructional content (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). Research examining how to improve learner motivation suggests that social

factors (e.g., group dynamics, learning environment, and a partner's motivation) affect a learner's attitude, effort, classroom behavior, and achievement (Dornyei, 2002b). Therefore, teachers should create an environment that is conducive to learning by encouraging group cohesion in the classroom. Pair and group work activities can provide learners with opportunities to share information and build a sense of community (Florez & Burt, 2001).

Research also suggests that teachers cultivate opportunities that continue to stimulate language use when learners are not in class (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994). Project work provides learners with a bridge between practice in and outside of class. In addition, projects provide opportunities for learners to work with others to accomplish tasks, using English in real-life situations (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

Research on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition is ongoing. Current research looks at instructional practices that teachers use to generate and maintain learner motivation and strategies through which learners themselves take control of factors that have an impact on their motivation and learning, such as lack of self-confidence, change of goals, or distractions (Dornyei, 2003; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2003).

### **What is the role of interaction in SLA?**

Another area of SLA research focuses on how interaction contributes to second language acquisition. *Interaction* refers to communication between individuals, particularly when they are negotiating meaning in order to prevent a breakdown in communication (Ellis, 1999). Research on interaction is conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, which states that conversational interaction “facilitates [language] acquisition because it connects input [what learners hear and read]; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and out put [what learners produce] in productive ways” (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) as well as to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995). This allows learners to “notice the gap” (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 311) between their command of the language and correct, or target-like, use of the language.

Empirical research with second language learners supports the contention that engaging in language interactions facilitates second language development. Findings from a study to determine how conversational interaction affects the acquisition of question formation indicate that interaction can increase the pace of acquisition (Mackey, 1999). Research on interaction includes studies of *task-based language learning and teaching and focus on form*.

### **What is task-based language learning and teaching?**

Researchers have used tasks to understand both the second language learning and teaching processes (Bygate, 2000). Task-based teaching provides learners with opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions that encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication. The goal of a task is to “exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language” (Ellis, 1999, p. 113). Research suggests that learners produce longer sentences and negotiate meaning more often in pair and group work than in teacher-fronted instruction (Doughty & Pica, 1986). Interactive tasks may be most successful when they contain elements that

- are new or unfamiliar to the participants;
- require learners to exchange information with their partners or group members;
- have a specific outcome;
- involve details;

- center on a problem, especially an ethical one, such as deciding in a small group who should take the last spot in a lifeboat, a nuclear physicist or a pregnant woman; and
- involve the use of naturally occurring conversation and narrative discourse (Ellis, 2000)

Teachers can use problem-solving tasks to provide learners with opportunities to share ideas, build consensus, and explain decisions about real-life issues important to them (see, for example, Van Duzer & Burt, 1999).

*Information gap* tasks, in which two people share information to complete a task, can be more structured than problem-solving tasks and give learners an opportunity to ask and answer questions. In one-way information gap tasks, one learner has all the information (e.g., one learner describes a picture while the other draws it). In two-way information gap tasks, both learners have information they must share with the other to complete the task. (See McKay & Tom, 1999, for examples.)

### *What is focus on form?*

SLA researchers have examined the role of focus on the grammatical forms of language in instruction. In a focus on form approach to language teaching, rather than grammar being taught in isolation, learners' attention is drawn to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities, and the teacher's attention to form is triggered by learners' problems with comprehension or production (Long, 2000). An analysis of research studies suggests that instruction that uses a focus on form approach -- incorporating form with meaning -- is as effective as more traditional grammar-teaching approaches (Norris & Ortega, 2001). Focus on form in communicative lessons can result in learners incorporating new and more correct structures into their language use (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

When focusing on form, teachers need to consider learners' needs and goals and their developmental readiness to understand the instruction. Teachers then need to make decisions about the best way to draw learners' attention to a form and provide opportunities for practice of the form in meaningful activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998). For example, in a workplace class with intermediate or advanced level learners, a memo from an employer could be used to highlight the use of the passive voice.

### **What is the role of vocabulary in SLA?**

Word knowledge is an essential component of communicative competence, and it is important for production and comprehension in a second language (Coady & Huckin, 1997). What does it mean to know a word? Vocabulary knowledge is the size of the vocabulary and the depth of vocabulary, which includes knowledge of pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, the contexts in which the word can be used, the frequency with which it is used, morphological and syntactical properties, and how the word combines with other words (Qian, 1999).

Recent research has focused on incidental vocabulary -- vocabulary that second language learners develop while they are focused on a task other than on learning new words (see Gass, 1999, for a summary of research on incidental vocabulary acquisition). However, learners need to understand about 3,000 words families (e.g., the family of "think" includes think, thinks, thought, thoughtful, thoughtfully) in order to understand meaning from context (Laufer, 1997). Teachers can help learners build sight vocabulary by teaching word families and using word association activities such as semantic mapping (DeCarrico, 2001). In semantic mapping, teachers identify key terms in a text and learners list other words in the text that relate to the key terms.

Research also suggests that learners gain vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading. (See Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003 for a detailed discussion of vocabulary knowledge and its relationship to reading in adult second language learners.) Moreover, reading accompanied by vocabulary building activities can increase vocabulary knowledge (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000). Teachers should include reading opportunities in class and assist learners by selecting texts that are of high interest and level appropriate. They should preview the key vocabulary in a reading passage, teach high-frequency words, and help learners use dictionaries effectively (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Active meaning negotiation seems to have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition (de la Fuente, 2002; Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994). Teachers can provide learners with multiple opportunities to use new vocabulary in tasks such as those involving problem solving and information gap. Teachers can use games such as Bingo, Password, and Concentration and provide tasks for learners to pursue outside of class such as keeping vocabulary journals (learners keep a log of new words they encounter and the strategies they use to learn them).

## Conclusion

Research seems to support many practices that are currently employed in adult ESL instruction. Giving students the opportunity to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction to include tasks that promote these opportunities, and teaching language forms and vocabulary in the context of meaningful learning activities are all ways in which second language acquisition research is applied in the classroom.

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