

## Book Review

### *Introducing Second Language Acquisition: Perspectives and Practices*

By Kirsten M. Hummel

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**Reviewed by:** Sharif Alghazo, University of Jordan

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a field of study that is constantly expanding. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many books and volumes are continually written to report on new developments in the field. Despite the existence of an important, large body of work in SLA, the field is still in need of further investigations. As Hummel puts it in the concluding chapter of the book under review: “[f]urther research into second language acquisition will certainly lead to new discoveries and surprising directions that are difficult to predict” (p. 252). This need for further research is justified when we consider how intricate and slippery the field is. It is intricate because many factors are at stake when it comes to studying SLA resulting in a complex – but “manageable” as Brown (2014) observes – area that intersects with linguistics, psychology, and education. In addition, it is slippery because it may be a hopeless endeavour to attempt to

reach final answers to the many questions that are often asked about the process of SLA and the differences among individuals in their ultimate second language (L2) attainment.

The intricacy of SLA and its intersection with other disciplines make it an intriguing field that is ripe for investigations. In its link to linguistics, one has to consider the concept of 'language', with all the perplexity that the term accompanies. In its relationship with psychology, a concise understanding of how one learns or fails to learn a language (be it a first or second language) becomes a prominent part. In its intersection with education, the significance of studying SLA is justified: We are learning about L2 learning because we want to help ourselves and others (mainly in the classroom, as teachers) achieve satisfactory results. These evident links among the three disciplines are clearly reflected in the organization of Hummel's book, particularly Chapters 4 and 5 that show the link between SLA and L2 education, exemplifying the contribution of SLA theory to practice.

Hummel's book comes as a concise, straightforward introduction to SLA, aiming at providing "an overview of the main concepts, issues, and debates in the field" (p. 2). The book is an attempt to find answers to manifold questions in SLA such as: Is SLA similar to/different from first language acquisition? What are the various contexts in which an L2 is learnt? Is SLA a universal process? What are the major theorisations in SLA? Are adults able to pass as native speakers in SLA? How have theories of SLA informed L2 teaching approaches? What is the

role of affection in SLA? What are the different types of bilingualism? This coverage of various themes in SLA makes the book a suitable textbook for undergraduate students as well as the general reader who may be interested in learning about SLA. The book assumes no previous knowledge of SLA, so teachers can assign it as a teaching material for introductory courses in L2 learning.

The book comprises 10 chapters, each of which ends with a listing of key concepts, self-assessment questions, discussion questions and exercises, and a list of sources for further reading and viewing. For example, at the end of Chapter 2 that discusses first language acquisition, six multiple-choice questions are listed for self-assessment; this is followed by three reflection questions and one exercise for students to undertake. Finally, the chapter ends with a list of additional readings and sources that students might need to look at to expand their knowledge of first language acquisition. In addition, the book incorporates the experiences of six fictional language learners to help explicate concepts related to the content of each chapter. In each chapter, there is also a 'language learning in practice' textbox that explains the implication/s of SLA for L2 pedagogy. The format of the page – and in particular the definitions that are placed in the margins, the illustrative cartoons, and the colorful headings – are features that make the book a suitable teaching material for introductory courses in SLA at the undergraduate level.

Chapter 1 introduces the book by providing a straightforward definition of SLA, narrating some of the ancient attentions to language acquisition, clarifying a distinction between second and foreign language contexts – a distinction that is returned to again in Chapter 3 – and listing a number of the questions that one might expect answers to when they study SLA.

Chapter 2 paves the way for introducing SLA by exploring an interrelated process on which much thought and many theorisations in SLA were based, that of child language acquisition (CLA). Three major themes are covered in this chapter: developmental stages of CLA, theoretical underpinnings, and a contrast of CLA and SLA. The latter part is of paramount importance because it dispels some of the myths that have underlay linguistic and psychological theorisations of SLA for a long time, especially during the early stages of SLA research.

Chapter 3 touches upon the distinction between naturalistic and instructed SLA contexts. Although it is mainly an exploration of educational programs offered at North American institutions, it remains of value to a wider readership in that it clarifies a rudimentary misconception about SLA: Naturalistic contexts such as study abroad situations do not necessarily guarantee full competence and proficiency in the L2; rather, it is the quality of the experience itself that is the main determinant of success.

Chapter 4 represents the core of the book. It explores theories of SLA. In the overview, the chapter provides definitions of the two terms, 'theory' and 'hypothesis', showing how they relate and differ from each other. After that,

Hummel meticulously discusses the major theorisations of SLA, reporting on both the main principles and limitations of each theory or hypothesis. The theories covered include Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Universal Grammar, the Monitor Model, Information Processing Hypotheses, Emergentism, and the Sociocultural Theory. This chronological and accessible coverage of different theories allows the readers to form a comprehensive understanding of SLA theories and of their links to CLA.

Chapter 5 moves on to explore many of the L2 teaching approaches that prevailed throughout the history of L2 pedagogy. These include the Classical Method, Grammar Translation, the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, and the Postmethod Perspective. In the first part of the chapter, Hummel shows how “the issue of the contribution of theory to pedagogy is a controversial one” (p. 106). By exploring popular teaching approaches from antiquity to modern times, the chapter shows in an accessible way how L2 teachers’ conceptualisations of teaching are primarily based on their understanding of SLA. What is important about this part of the chapter is the inclusion of ‘critical pedagogy’ as an alternative that L2 teachers may adopt in their L2 classrooms. In addition, the chapter investigates some of the important instructional issues, such as focus-on-form, corrective feedback, first language use in L2 classrooms, and technology use in L2 classrooms. These issues further

explicate the relationship between theory and practice by implementing SLA research in L2 classrooms.

Chapter 6 discusses L2 development by exploring common processes involved in the development of various linguistic sub-areas and briefly describing new trends in investigating learner language, primarily L2 learner language corpora.

In Chapter 7, one of the much debated issues in SLA, that of the role of age in L2 learning, is examined. The chapter begins with a discussion of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), pointing to its claims and counterclaims and highlighting some of the main explanations for the existence of a critical period in both CLA and SLA. After reporting on two abnormal cases of children faced with the task of learning their first languages in post childhood, the chapter reviews the findings of many studies that were conducted to explore CPH effects on acquisition. This review is intended to reveal two points: The first is that not all linguistic areas are prone to the effects of the CPH, and the second is that there are some reported cases of individuals who overcame the constraints of the CPH by manifesting advanced, native-like proficiencies in the L2 despite a late start.

Chapter 8 turns to an exploration of the psychological side of SLA. It examines many significant factors that cause differences among individuals in ultimate L2 attainment. These include intelligence, aptitude, attitudes, motivation, personality, learning style, cognitive style, and learning strategies.

The chapter focuses on the extent to which each of these factors directly or indirectly influences L2 achievement and critically examines the tests that have traditionally been used to measure the factors and their effects on SLA. What is valuable about this examination of individual differences is the emphasis on motivation considering it to be “closely related to L2 learning perseverance and success” (p. 201).

Chapter 9 discusses an important area in SLA research, that of bilingualism. It clearly shows the similarities and differences between SLA and bilingual first language acquisition. The chapter also introduces the different types of bilingualism and discusses bilingual language development. Finally, the chapter examines the linguistic perception and production of bilinguals and touches upon the relationship between bilingualism and cognition.

Chapter 10 concludes the book by summarizing the themes discussed in each of the previous chapters. In this final chapter, Hummel reminds the readers – who might develop a feeling of dissatisfaction upon completing the book due to a lack of absolute answers to their questions – that the study of SLA “is a complex, but fascinating, process that raises a number of unanswered questions” (251).

Hummel’s book represents an invaluable source, it is both theoretical and practical and it provided answers – though not final answers – to all the questions addressed. The inclusion of the experiences of some fictional language learners throughout the last seven chapters provide an informative illustration for readers to come to grips with the concepts presented in the book. In

addition, the 'language learning in practice' textboxes provide appropriate illustrations of the practical applications of SLA research and theories for L2 pedagogy. For example, the 'language learning in practice' textbox on pages (74-75) explains how Krashen's Monitor Model could be practically implemented in the language classroom. Other features, such as the format of the page as well as the inclusion of questions and exercises, are also valuable in drawing the reader's attention to the most important topics covered in the book. The only noticeable limitation of the book is that the discussion of Language Learning Contexts (Chapter 3) focuses exclusively on North American L2 learning programs such as 'dual language programs', 'bilingual programs', and 'immersion programs', which may not be directly relevant to readers who are teaching and/or learning L2s in other parts of the world. This focus on specific programs in Chapter 3 contrasts with the 'global' tone that prevails in the rest of the book. Overall, I strongly recommend the book for readers interested in learning about SLA theory, research, and applications, either independently or in the context of an introductory SLA course.

#### **References**

Brown, H. D. (2014). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (6<sup>th</sup> edn.). New York: Pearson Education.