

Final Synthesis Paper

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WL 664: Second Language Acquisition-Theory and Practice

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Question A: My top list of favorite theories, ideas or concepts from our SLA readings

- **Age and second language acquisition**

One of the myths that still exist today regarding SLA is that children are better than adults at learning a second language. Basically, when it comes to learning a second language, younger is better. Many of the arguments supporting this position center on the belief that the second language acquisition process is exactly like the acquisition process of our first language. There is also a notion that there is a critical age period for learning language and that after this period the process becomes extremely difficult.

- **Individual differences**

Despite all we know about how language is learned, it is clear that there is not one unified language teaching approach that will ensure successful acquisition by all learners. That is, if a class of students receives the same teaching approach, the range of success among those students can be quite varied. SLA is very complex and differences in how individuals learn is one of the key factors adding to the complexity of this process. Understanding the different learning styles is essential knowledge for all SLA instructors.

- **Affective factors**

Affect refers to human emotions and feelings. It has been shown in both of our course readings (Brown, 2014; Gass et al., 2020) that affect plays a significant role in second language learning. Our emotions act as a filter through which all input passes and depending on the emotions we are feeling, can act as either a barrier or a support to that input. Affect, is has also been argued, lies at the foundation of human cognitive functioning.

- **The critical importance of input**

Input refers to the vast quantity of information that is received by the learner. It can come from a wide variety of sources and occur in different contexts. Krashen's Input Hypothesis, though heavily critiqued, offers some valuable insights into the level of input the learner needs to receive to optimize the language learning process. Furthermore, Gass et al. (2020) explain that not all input gets noticed. As we received input, it goes through a series of filters that influence what is noticed and integrated.

- **Comprehensible output**

One of the prevalent assumptions in some circles of SLA is that students simply need to learn the rules of grammar and then by plugging those rules into a conversation context will be able to acquire an L2. There is now evidence that SLA is much more complex and requires production for a language to be learned. Production is the overall essential aspect to SLA because it forces learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing and also exposes a learner to the negotiation of meaning with an interlocutor in which opportunities to modify output strengthen L2 knowledge and the syntactic process.

- **Learner's ability in their L1 has a direct impact on their L2 proficiency**

It is generally assumed that because learners are able to converse with ease, fluency and accuracy in their L1 that they have reached a level of complete proficiency. However, research has shown that there is in fact a tremendous range in L1 ability between students,

such as use of different complexity in sentence structure and knowledge of vocabulary. Research has shown that differences in L1 ability can impact outcomes in L2 learning. That is, students who have more advanced abilities in their L1 stand to become more proficient in an L2.

- **Metalinguistic awareness has a positive impact on L2 learning**

Metalinguistic awareness is an important element in the L2 learning process and it concerns a learner's knowledge of language as a thing, as an object of study, as opposed to a means of communication. There is now evidence (Gass et al., 2020) that learners with higher levels of metalinguistic knowledge and awareness achieve greater success in SLA. There is also evidence to show that metalinguistic awareness is greater among bilingual speakers than monolingual speakers.

- **Constructivist approaches to L2 learning**

Intuitively I am drawn to the view that language acquisition, in particular L1, is due to innate abilities. However, I am also quite drawn to certain aspects of the constructivist approach with respects to SLA. At the foundation of the constructivist view is that language is learned through usage. That input is compared to our storage of memories, knowledge and experiences, patterns are detected, associations are made and the gradual strengthening of those associations fosters L2 learning. This process of cognitive constructivism, for me, is complemented by the social constructivist view that interaction is essential to L2 learning.

- **Effects of peer input and collaboration on L2 learning**

In the classroom the principal sources of input are the teacher, materials and students. Collaboration and partnering activities in the L2 classroom are quite common but because the majority of learners have not yet received a level of adequate competence, there is the assumption made by many teachers that input from students may not be a reliable source to foster the learning process. While true that students are bound to make mistakes in their collaboration activities, under certain conditions their input can actually be quite valuable to the learning process.

- **Learner strategies**

Some learners are more successful than others despite working with the same input in the same context. SLA is very complex and there could be several reasons to explain this but one of them could be differences in learner strategies. Learner strategies are specific actions that learners take to solve a problem and just as there is a vast range of individual learning styles, there is also a vast difference in learner strategies among individuals.

One of the myths that still exists today is that younger is better when it comes to learning a second language. Brown (2014) states quite clearly that although younger learners may have some advantages, that there is absolutely no evidence to support the argument that children are better at learning languages or that after a certain critical age there is no use even trying to learn a second language as it is just too difficult a process. This is an important myth to dispel because it results in preventing many older learners from attempting to learn an L2.

Hemispheric lateralization is thought to have a role in SLA in children. This refers to the process by which, as the brain matures, certain processes are assigned to the left or right hemisphere of the brain. The left side of the brain is responsible for more intellectual and analytical functions and is also largely responsible for most of our language functions. The right side controls emotional and social functions. Before lateralization occurs, it was thought that the brain had a greater level of plasticity and that this plasticity gave children an advantage in language learning. Brown (2014) states that the evidence for this is sketchy. Younger learners do have advantages however. They are less impacted by affective factors and inhibitions, less impacted by challenges to identity and ego from learning a new language, less impacted by their L1 and also are less aware that they are actually learning. On the other hand, it has been shown that adults are better at the analytical functions of SLA. Importantly for the classroom, research has shown that right brain classroom activities like pragmatics and guessing help adults in early stages of L2 learning (Brown, 2014).

The vast range of individual differences in learning and thinking and the impact these differences have on the learning and teaching processes is a really important takeaway from this class. Brown (2014) states that learning styles are general characteristics of intellectual

functioning that are part of a person as an individual. They differentiate us from each other and influence the contexts in which we learn best. Some people may have a higher tolerance for ambiguity whereas others may need know as much as possible before proceeding. Some people are comfortable speaking in public and taking risks while others are more introverted. Some people are more visual. Others prefer to work alone while some do better with interaction and collaboration. We all have differences and these differences are important for an instructor to be aware of so that they can both develop instruction and assess performance in a way that fosters L2 learning for each student. Because of our reading on this material, I have already begun to think about the different learning styles of my students and how I can need to change some of my instruction approaches and expectations to match the various learning styles they have.

The crucial role of Affect and how factors impact SLA are another key takeaway from this class. No matter how skilled the student, no matter their prior language experience, L2 aptitude or individual personality traits and learning style, their emotions and feelings can act as a barrier to learning. Affect refers to human emotions and feelings, and while much of SLA theory has focused on cognitive and psycho-linguistic processes, there is a great body of evidence that shows us how emotions can act as a barrier or obstacle to L2 learning. When we speak of Affect we generally are referring to feelings of self-esteem, anxiety, willingness to communicate, openness to risk taking, attribution and motivation (Brown, 2014). Affect not only acts as a barrier to SLA, it is also a filter through which passes input, and in addition has been argued that it lies at the foundation of cognitive processing. Students will come to the classroom environment with their own individual differences and varying degree of affective factors, but the teacher, to a large degree, has most control over the classroom

environment and therefore can create a context that lowers affective barriers through support, kindness, fairness, encouragement and respect.

One of the key elements to L2 learning is input. As I'll explain further in this paper, input alone is not enough for effective SLA, yet it is all the same one of the key driving forces in the L2 learning process (Gass et al., 2020). Learners are exposed to all types of input from a wide range of sources but not all input is equal. Krashen (as cited in Gass et al., 2020) argues that for SLA to take place, input needs to be at a level which is just a tiny bit more advanced than the current level of the students. Krashen calls this input +1 and it is part of his Input Hypothesis. There are many criticisms of Krashen's Monitor Model and I too am not in agreement with every aspect of the Input Hypothesis (ie, that speaking is a result of acquisition and that acquisition does not result from speaking), I am however drawn to his idea of input +1 which I think is a very effective way to progress through material in the classroom.

Another important element regarding input is the notion of Apperceived Input (Gass et al., 2020). Not all input is noticed. As input is received by a learner it is subject to a number of factors that can act like filters and impact what portions of the input are noticed and subsequently processed. These factors include affect, motivation, individual learning differences, personality traits and to a certain degree the learner's L1 skill level. This is important to understand because input lies at the foundation of the learning process and so many factors influence how much of it is retained. The teacher does not have influence on the entirety of this process but can influence much of it.

Input alone is not sufficient for L2 acquisition to take place. It used to be assumed that students really only needed to be exposed to grammar. Learning the rules of grammar and

then applying those rules within the context of conversation was all that was needed. We now know this is not the case and that SLA is much more complex. We also know that despite the essential role of input, that the role of output may be even more critical to the L2 learning process. Gass et al. (2020) discuss the critical nature of comprehensible output and how creating communicative pressure with students, (forcing them to produce) forces them to think about word order and sentence structure. In other words, production moves students from a stage of semantic processing to syntactic processing, a stage that is essential to achieve language acquisition.

This was a very important takeaway for me and one that underscores the importance of engaging students in the classroom and having them produce output. Additionally, interacting to produce output creates the opportunity for them to test hypotheses, provide them feedback and engage in a process of negotiation of meaning which in turn can lead to strengthening syntactic processing.

Another key takeaway from the course was the influence that L1 ability has on L2 learning. Most of us generally make the assumption that because we are able to converse with skill in our L1 that we have reached a level of full proficiency in our L1. Research has shown that in fact this is not true; that there is a significant difference in L1 knowledge and skills among students and these differences can have a significant impact on L2 learner outcomes (Sparks et al., 2019). That is, those students that have a higher skill level in their L1, (usage of more complex sentence structures, richer vocabulary etc.) tend to display a higher aptitude for SLA. This poses a challenge for teachers in the L2 classroom because how is a teacher to know a student's ability in their L1. It is a challenge but I believe a start can be made by

working on core language skills, metalinguistic knowledge and paying attention that the level of L2 input matches the level the students need.

Before this class I had never encountered the term *metalinguistic awareness* but I now seem to see it surface in several areas of SLA. Metalinguistic awareness is an important element in SLA and concerns a learner's knowledge and awareness of language as a thing; a subject of study, as opposed to uniquely a means of communication. Developing the ability to think analytically about language, its morphology, syntax and phonology, provides learners the additional tools to support their L2 learning. Research has shown that advanced L2 learners as well as bilingual speakers have high metalinguistic awareness. It stands to reason therefore that developing this ability in students can help them on their L2 journey. This awareness of language was primarily developed through exposure to grammar but this is not the only way it can be done. Engaging in production and subsequent negotiation and feedback interactions provide learners with the opportunity to modify their utterances and further test hypotheses, all of which can also have a positive impact on metalinguistic awareness.

Another area that has really drawn my interest is the constructivist approach to SLA. With regards to L1 I am intuitively drawn to the nativist perspective. One of the class videos that had a big impact on me was the research on the finches that were isolated from their fathers and therefore were not able to learn the song of their species. However, after four generations with no outside influences, the finches gradually developed their song. Lacking all other influence, it had to be due to an innate ability that they were able to recover their song. Although this research was performed on animals, are we saying that mother nature

endowed birds with an innate ability for language but not humans? Although not absolute proof that we also have an innate ability, it does make for a strong argument.

Although the constructivist approach sees L2 learning in a different way, I believe it has something to offer. Constructivism argues that L2 learning is like all learning. That is, it is based on usage and communication. When we receive L2 input, that input is compared to our storage of memories, experiences and knowledge and patterns are looked for (Gass et al., 2020). When detected, associations are made and those associations get strengthened the more frequently we are exposed to them. Along with this cognitive side of the constructivist approach is the social and interaction side which posits that social interaction is the basis for learning. For the classroom then, this would suggest an emphasis on activity, on interaction, on cooperation and collaboration and on pushing students to explore and engage in self-discovery.

The main sources of input in the classroom are the teacher, materials and other students. I have long thought that students were not a reliable source of input for each other because having not yet achieved a level of competency in the language they would make mistakes and when working together those mistakes would be copied. However, in certain situations peer collaboration seems to have a very positive effect on learning. Gass et al. (2020) refer to examples of students listening to each other and subsequently self-correcting. They also refer to students collaborating effectively on a writing assignment. I have since tried something similar and noticed that when collaborating on a metalinguistic problem, students were able to help each other and all of them benefited from the process.

The final area that has had an impact on me in terms of change that I would make in my own teaching, would be teaching learner strategies. Learner strategies are specific actions

learners take to solve a problem. There is a wide range of strategies and Brown (2014) separates them into cognitive (techniques to apply knowledge), affective (learning to employ positive emotional energy) and sociocultural-interactive (to help the learner interact and communicate). One area of learner strategies I believe would also benefit student is what Brown (2014) refers to as compensatory strategies. These are strategies to use when a learner has reached a block and needs a way forward. They include techniques like code switching but using the L2 accent, avoidance, and prefabricated patterns.

Question B: Organizing principles around which language teaching should be designed

- **Individual differences and learning strategies**

There are a vast number of theories, approaches and perspectives regarding language acquisition but no matter what perspective one adheres to, if a single approach is applied in the classroom with no regard to individual differences, then there will always be students that are unsuccessful. Any approach or teaching methodology must take into account individual learner differences if students are to develop their SLA. Learner strategies should be taught to further enhance the learning process.

- **Reduction of affective barriers**

Affect refers to human emotions and feelings. In regards to L2 learning, it can refer to feelings students have about their abilities, their classmates, the language, the anxiety felt about performing in front of others and of taking a test. It can also refer to a willingness to communicate and the attention students are able to bring to the table. All of these feelings and emotions can create a barrier to learning and therefore part of the role of the teacher is to employ techniques to reduce these affective barriers.

- **Communicative competence, culture and identity**

This is a catch-all grouping of related principles that underscore the importance of communicative competence, culture and identity to the language learning process. Having a solid foundation of L2 grammar and an ability in written production will not advance the learner if they are not able to functionally communicate. For this there is a need for students to become competent in discourse and communicative techniques that develop the ability to produce meaningful utterances. It also requires students to understand the socio-cultural norms of their L2 and their own values in comparison to the values of the L2.

- **Comprehensible output**

Input and studying grammar alone is not enough to become proficient in an L2. Learners must engage in language production. It is the production of language that forces a learner to think syntactically which is an essential, if not the most critical, element to SLA.

- **Interaction**

Interaction lies at the heart of the process of language acquisition. In many classrooms, time is spent practicing what has been taught but effect SLA occurs when students are interacting in conversation and interactive activities that require them to engage in speech production, repair, feedback, and negotiation.

One of the most frustrating parts of teaching an L2 is that no matter what SLA perspective is followed, or no matter the specific instructional technique or even the activity, there will be a range of outcomes in student performance. The main reason for this is that there is a tremendous number of individual differences and learning styles among students. Brown (2014) states that learning styles are general characteristics of intellectual functioning that are part of a person as an individual. They differentiate us from each other and influence the contexts in which we learn best. Some people may have a higher tolerance for ambiguity whereas others may need know as much as possible before proceeding. Some people are reflective and others impulsive. Some are comfortable speaking in public and taking risks while others are more introverted. Some people are more visual. Some can see the big picture whilst others get mired in details. Others prefer to work alone while some do better with interaction and collaboration. These individual learner styles represent the dominant characteristics or patterns in the way students think and learn. It is therefore essential to the L2 classroom that teachers have an understanding of these styles and what activities and teaching and SLA methodologies to best employ with various learner styles.

Of equal importance for instructors is a knowledge of learner strategies and the teaching of these strategies to L2 students. Essentially teaching students how to learn, learner strategies are techniques learners use to solve a problem (Gass et al., 2020). Brown (2014) highlights several categories of learner strategies which are all extremely useful. They include cognitive strategies which are techniques to apply knowledge, affective strategies which entail ways to employ positive emotional energy and sociocultural-interactive strategies that can help a learner interact and communicate. However, another category of learner strategies that I believe would also benefit students is what Brown (2014) refers to as compensatory strategies. These are strategies to use when a learner has reached a mental or linguistic dead end and needs a way forward. They include techniques like code switching but using the L2 accent, avoidance, and prefabricated patterns (Brown, 2014). It is important to emphasize that just as there are a vast number of individual learning styles, there is also a very wide range in learner strategies; some may work for one learner but not for another, therefore it is best to teach as many as possible.

Affective factors can be a very real and significant barrier to learning and it essential that teachers in the L2 classroom be aware of the impact of affect and understand ways to decrease the barriers they can create. Affect refers to human emotions and feelings, and while much of SLA theory has focused on cognitive and psycho-linguistic processes, there is a great body of evidence that shows us how emotions can act as a barrier or obstacle to L2 learning. Gass et al. (2020) underscore the significance of affective factors in L2 learning and state that one of the most common emotions produced in an L2 setting is anxiety and that this feeling of anxiety is produced primarily during the activity of speaking the L2. If successful SLA is based on models of output and conversation-based interaction, then the

feeling of anxiety could result in an unwillingness to communicate or much worse, a withdrawing from L2 learning.

While it is true that students will come to the classroom with their own personalities, experiences, strengths, weaknesses and emotions, many of which will impact the L2 processes, it the teacher, I believe, that has the biggest single impact on affective barriers in the classroom setting. The first step is for teachers to acknowledge that affective barriers play a significant role. The second step is to also understand that individual differences will determine which students are more prone to affective issues. The third step is for the teacher to employ techniques and activities that at a minimum do not create stronger affective barriers, but do in the long run create a context in which all students feel encouraged and excited to participate verbally.

Communicative competence is another organizing principle around which L2 instruction should be designed. At the core of SLA is the fundamental goal of developing the ability to connect with people and engage in meaningful interactions. This requires more than memorizing vocabulary lists and rules of grammar, it requires learning a interpersonal communication skills, and as highlighted by Canale and Swaine (1980) it requires discourse competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence (as cited in Brown, 2014). Teaching pragmatics and communicative strategies to accomplish various key functions could be a way to do this. Brown (2014) lists examples of speech functions that fall into this area including apologizing, asking for help, complaining, confirming, giving advice, making small talk, introducing oneself, describing others and giving directions.

Functions like these are essential and contribute to the foundation of communicative competence. To advance in communicative competence it is necessary for students to

become familiar with the cultural parameters of their L1 and L2. Furthermore, the L2 classroom needs to expose the students to thinking about identity and how identity can be impacted by their L2.

The concept of comprehensible output is, I believe, one of the most important aspects around which the L2 learning process should be designed. Gass et al. (2020) state that despite the essential nature of input, input alone is sufficient for acquisition. When one hears language, a learner is able to understand the basics of what is being said even if only a few words are understood. This is what Gass et al. (2020) refer to as semantic processing. However, for SLA to occur, a learner must move from semantic processing to syntactic processing and the only way to do that is by production. Putting learners into a situation of communicative stress forces them to think about the word order of their utterance and moves them along to a stage where they are able to process syntax, which is essential for language acquisition to occur.

Gass et al. (2020) refer to research conducted on French immersive students in the US who after years of study were still not able to communicate effectively. The conclusion of the research was that these students were not provided enough opportunities to produce language. They could understand what they heard, but semantic processing does not create acquisition. It is therefore very important that L2 learning be centered on the notion of output. That instructors understand that is one thing to develop comprehension abilities in their students, but unless learners are given multiple opportunities to produce language, they will not be put into situations where they are forced to think syntactically.

A final principle around which SLA should be organized is that of interaction. Ideas forwarded by Vygotsky and later by Michael Long (as cited in Brown, 2014) , as well as

other Social constructivist views underscore for me the essential role that interaction plays in the L2 learning process. Whereas the classroom was traditionally seen as a way to practice what the teacher had taught, social constructivist views see the classroom as a center of conversation, interaction, communication and collaboration, activities that lie at the core of the SLA process. The interpersonal context in which the learner operates between the instructor and peers then takes on a tremendously significant role (Brown, 2014).

There is also a strong link between this interaction perspective and the role of comprehensible output described by Gass et al. (2020). In the context of syntactic processing, interaction provides learners with the opportunity to receive feedback, negotiate meaning, test hypotheses and ultimately modify the original utterance, an interaction-based activity that develops syntactic processing.

References

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