

How Languages are Learned (3rd ed.) by Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada.
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In the introduction to a collection of articles on second language acquisition (SLA), Doughty and Long (2003) pointed out that “second language acquisition – naturalistic, instructed, or both – has long been a common activity for a majority of the human species and is becoming ever more vital as second languages themselves increase in importance” (p. 4). Considering the diversity of SLA contexts and different factors/variables involved in these contexts, a single teaching method is unlikely to guarantee the best results. Therefore, language teachers need to be flexible enough to adopt and/or adapt different teaching methods according to the demands of their immediate teaching context. In this respect, Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada’s *How Languages are Learned* is a good resource for all language teachers, those in SLA in particular, in that it provides a comprehensive overview of what factors have been proven, disproven, or still left unproven to influence SLA processes and outcomes and how variable the effects of different factors can be in each language learning/teaching context.

Although not segmented in this way by the authors, the book can be divided into three parts, not including a separate introduction and conclusion (Chapter 7). The introduction serves as a general guideline to provide readers with an overview of the topics to be discussed in later chapters. The authors also provide an informal survey asking the readers’ beliefs about a range of SLA processes and outcomes, issues the authors ask readers to keep considering while reading the rest of the book. In the closing chapter, Chapter 7, they revisit the survey and summarize their positions by elaborating each survey point. This circular format is a good way to help readers actively relate their own thoughts and experience to the reading and see whether **there is any difference between their thoughts and the opinions supported by literature.**

The first part, Chapter 1, discusses the stages of first language development. Understanding the processes and stages of first language acquisition has been thought to be the foundation on which SLA processes can be explained, if similarities and differences of first and second language acquisition are taken into account. As such, the authors begin with a chapter outlining and evaluating three perspectives of first language acquisition: the behaviorist, innatist, and interactional/developmental perspectives. At the end of the first chapter, the authors argue for childhood bilingualism.

The second part consists of four chapters (Chapters 2-5) dealing with different aspects of SLA: SLA theories (Chapter 2), individual learner differences in SLA

(Chapter 3), the characteristics of second language learners' developing language (Chapter 4), and the effects of language learning contexts on SLA (Chapter 6). Even though all four chapters are important in understanding SLA as a quite intricate process, Chapter 2 is of particular importance in that it provides a foundation for better understanding different but related aspects of SLA, which become the topics of the next three chapters (Chapters 3-5). Additionally, the updates from the previous edition (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) are particularly noteworthy in Chapter 2 including more useful discussion on psychological and sociocultural perspectives of SLA.

In discussing the four perspectives – the behaviorist, innatist, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives – proposed to explain SLA, the authors highlight that SLA is a complex phenomenon difficult to account for by a single perspective. The complexity of SLA explains why even researchers sharing a general perspective have differing opinions. That is, it is understandable for researchers to have proposed different perspectives to explain SLA, depending on which aspect(s) they believe most important to successful language learning. In addition, the complex nature of SLA is also related to why SLA studies have found mixed or inconclusive results about the effects of individual learner variables on SLA, the topic of the next chapter.

In Chapter 3, "Individual differences in second language learning," the authors summarize the mixed results of research focusing on the effects of learner variables such as personality. The interaction among individual variables and the interaction between individual and contextual variables is suggested as an explanation for the inconclusive results. In other words, a variable's interaction with other contextual and individual variables makes it very difficult or unrealistic to separate out its 'independent' effect on SLA. At this point, a reader may question whether it is worthwhile to strive for 'one' general SLA theory, despite variable effects of individual variables in different contexts. The next chapter, Chapter 4, addresses such skepticism by stressing the 'commonality' of SLA processes.

Reviewing studies on the development of second language knowledge and the ability to use the knowledge, the authors underscore that learner language has been found to develop following a similar sequence, regardless of native language or learning context, especially at the earlier stage of development. This common pattern, although surprising considering the numerous variables discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, might be the main impetus for SLA researchers to keep searching for one satisfactory SLA theory. I would like to point out, however, that this common pattern is primarily reported in studies focusing on morpho-syntax. To fill this research gap, researchers have started looking at relatively less researched areas. This important shift in the field is reflected in the new edition of *How Languages are Learned* which has added a section on the development of vocabulary, pragmatics, and phonology.

Chapter 5 addresses the issue of learning context, focusing first on the similarities and differences between learning in natural and instructional settings,

and then on the research methods used to study language classrooms. Although noting that the term ‘instructional setting’ is problematic because it can conceal non-negligible differences across classrooms, as argued by Watson-Gegeo and Nielson (2003), the authors nevertheless adopt the term. They suggest that investigating the differences across classrooms is needed to avoid a misleadingly simplistic interpretation of the term, and they note two ways in which a classroom can be examined: by using an observation scheme or by ethnographic observation. The main difference between the two approaches is whether an observer starts a study with or without a ‘predetermined’ set of observation points. Whichever method is chosen to study the language classroom, the bottom line is the assumption that instruction plays a ‘certain’ role in SLA, which naturally leads to the last part of the book.

In the last part of the book, Chapter 6, the authors present six second language teaching methods/approaches along with empirical studies researching the effectiveness of each method. The reader is guided to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each teaching method by following the three steps the authors take in their discussion: an explanation of the characteristics of a teaching method, presentation of selected empirical studies examining its effectiveness, and interpretation of these studies. Through these three steps, a reader can develop critical eyes for reading literature in SLA and evaluate its implications for her own teaching context. In short, this chapter succeeds in helping the reader build an evaluative position in determining the applicability/adaptability of each teaching method to her own teaching and therefore how likely it would be for her and her students to gain outcomes similar to those reported in the study.

One strength of this book is its focus on instructed SLA, as seen in the allocation of space to classroom language teaching (Chapters 5 and 6). Given that language teachers will be the major audience of the book and many SLA contexts involve some form of instruction, it is appropriate that this resource sufficiently emphasize instruction. A weakness, however, is the lack of qualitative studies used to examine the effectiveness of teaching methods in Chapter 6. As the authors point out (p. 138), their discussion is mainly focused on experimental studies; however, there are many complexities in SLA (as shown in Chapters 2 and 3) that are difficult to thoroughly investigate by experimental approaches alone. Therefore, a more balanced discussion of experimental/quantitative and qualitative studies would be beneficial.

Overall, I found this book useful for readers with different purposes and various levels of teaching experience and background knowledge in SLA. For readers with relatively little teaching experience and background, it is a solid introduction to SLA theories and teaching methods. For more experienced teachers and researchers, this book contains valuable updates of the current studies and discussions in SLA. It may also serve as a useful reminder about which areas are being currently debated and are therefore in need of further research. To this end, “Sources and suggestions for further reading,” provided at the end of each chapter, will be a good supplement.

REFERENCES

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