

**S. M. Gass with J. Behney & L. Plonsky. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)*.  
New York: Routledge. 2013. Pp. 623.**

In the preface to the fourth edition of *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*, Gass emphasises the interdisciplinary nature of the relatively recent field of second language acquisition (SLA), which emerged from work in various established disciplines, including education, sociology and linguistics, to name a few, each concerned in their own way with questions of how second languages are learned. As a result of the field's diverse origins, the author suggests, SLA studies are characterised by varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives and research approaches.

In an attempt to bring some unity to the different views and approaches and to make the field more accessible, particularly to students as well as second language teachers, Gass clearly and insightfully draws together the diverse historical and multidisciplinary influences that have shaped and continue to shape SLA investigations and theoretical developments. Practical considerations such as research design, data collection methods and data analysis are well presented in relation to these influences, and plenty of example data are shown with explanations of how they might be interpreted by SLA researchers according to different theoretical paradigms. Each chapter includes helpful "time to do" sections, where the reader is asked to draw from and reflect upon their own experiences of language and language learning or teaching, and concludes with a list of points to remember, further readings, and a set of questions and exercises related to the content of the chapter. As such, this introductory textbook provides a broad and comprehensive overview of the field of SLA that will be of both theoretical and practical use to readers new to the field as well as those working in related disciplines sharing an interest in the nature of second language learning.

The book consists of 16 chapters, most of which seem to relate to three main aspects of SLA as a discipline: practical research considerations (Chapters 2 and 3), theoretical developments over time (Chapters 4 to 7), and major areas of research and associated approaches in the field of SLA (Chapters 8 to 14). The first chapter is introductory, outlining the sorts of questions related to second language learning that SLA studies attempt to shed light on. Relevant terms are defined, and a very brief overview is offered of the how SLA defines 'language' in terms of its phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics. In the first chapter, the relevance of SLA to related disciplines concerned with

language and language behaviour, language pedagogy, cross cultural communication, and language policy and planning is also briefly highlighted.

Chapters 2 and 3 are primarily data-based chapters, and both provide useful and well organised information for those unfamiliar with the field of SLA. In Chapter 2, example data sets derived from second and foreign language learner production are provided and accompanied by a step-by-step guide to data analysis, SLA style. Chapter 3 moves to outline some of the different possible study designs and data collection methods commonly used in SLA studies.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal in some detail with a concept central to theoretical developments over time as well as current thinking in the field of SLA – the role of the native language in the process of learning a second language. Chapter 4 details the historical development of SLA theory, beginning with an overview of the early dominance of behaviourism in conceptualisations of the role of the native language and the subsequent emergence of the contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis method.

Chapter 5, “The transition period” (from behaviourist beginnings to current thinking) details the fundamental influence of child language acquisition theory on the field of SLA, and provides an overview of the sorts of hypotheses that emerged in SLA theory development in light of this influence. In Chapter 6 the role of the native language is revisited, and more recent reformulations are presented. Chapter 7 focuses on the influence of Chomsky’s notion of Universal Grammar (UG) and related hypotheses in SLA theory situated around the question of if and to what extent second language learners can access UG.

In Chapters 8 to 14 the focus shifts to the various aspects of language or language use around which empirical SLA investigations are typically centred. Recent attention on the lexicon as a significant aspect of language development is highlighted in Chapter 8, and various related investigations and hypotheses are overviewed. Chapter 9 looks at two major approaches in SLA, the typological approach, whereby the focus is on universals among different languages, and the functional approach, in which consideration is given to how learners combine different aspects of grammar (such as tense and aspect) to achieve particular functions.

Chapters 10 and 11 turn to the key concept of “interlanguage” in SLA. “Interlanguage” is the abstract language system ‘in development’ that theoretically exists in the brain of second language learners. Chapter 10 looks at theories and investigations related to the ways in which learners’ cognitive processes function during second language learning and development, and

chapter 11 considers the impact of social and other contextual factors (beyond internal cognition).

Chapters 12 to 14 provide an overview of the sorts of studies that have been used to shed light on the nature of “interlanguage”, ranging from those focussing on input, interaction and output (Chapter 12), classroom interaction and feedback (Chapter 13) as well as investigations into how “nonlanguage” factors, such as motivation, affect, and anxiety, for example, influence language learning (Chapter 14).

In Chapter 15, the link suggested in the introductory chapter between SLA and other fields is taken up again. Specific related disciplines – bilingualism, multilingualism and heritage language acquisition – are briefly overviewed. In this chapter Gass notes in passing Cook’s (2005) critique of the disjunct between the monolingual orientation of SLA and the multilingual contexts in which language learning takes place for most people, but the author does nothing to address such criticism. Given that the interdisciplinary nature of SLA and the field’s relevance to other language-related disciplines are the focus of this chapter, some discussion of the ways in which one of the key premises underlying SLA theory – the native versus non-native speaker dichotomy – has been challenged and undermined in related fields, as well as different ways ‘language’ and language norms are being re-conceptualised in other fields in the context of increasing linguistic diversity, would have been interesting here.

In the final chapter, the author places the theoretical threads detailed throughout the book together into a clear and coherent model of how second languages are acquired. It would have been good, however, for the model to have been presented in brief at the beginning of the book, as a means of setting the scene and offering the reader a greater sense of coherence from the outset, and then revisited in the final chapter for further explanation.

Despite this possible drawback, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*, offers a very useful introduction to the field of SLA. Overall the book presents and combines the various pieces of SLA theory and research together in a way that is interesting, informative and accessible to the reader.

*Review by Kellie Frost*

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## **References**

- Cook, V. (2005, October). *Multi-competence: Black-hole or worm-hole?* Paper presented at the Second Language Research Forum, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.