

Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition

This highly accessible introductory textbook carefully explores the main issues that have driven the field of second language acquisition research. Intended for students with little or no background in linguistics or psycholinguistics, it explains important linguistic concepts, and how and why they are relevant to second language acquisition. Topics are presented via a “key questions” structure that enables the reader to understand how these questions have motivated research in the field, and the problems to which researchers are seeking solutions. It provides a complete package for any introductory course on second language acquisition.

Bill VanPatten, formerly Professor of Spanish & Second Language Studies at Michigan State University, is now an independent scholar. He has had a long and distinguished academic career and has published widely in the fields of second language acquisition and second language teaching.

Megan Smith is an Assistant Professor at Mississippi State University. Her main research interests are in second language acquisition, particularly L2 syntax and psycholinguistics.

Alessandro G. Benati is Head of the English Department and Professor of English and Applied Linguistics at the American University of Sharjah. He is visiting and honorary professor at the University of York St. John and the University of Portsmouth.

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Bill VanPatten , Megan Smith , Alessandro G. Benati
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Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition

An Introduction

Bill VanPatten

Chowchilla, CA, USA

Megan Smith

Mississippi State University

Alessandro G. Benati

American University of Sharjah, UAE

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To Murphy

– BVP

To Hideki and Ayako

– MS

To Bernadette, Grace, and Francesco and in
memory of AnnaMaria and Orazio Benati

– AB

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Foreword

Interest in second language acquisition (SLA) has been on a sharp rise for a few decades. Examining the acquisition and learning of non-native languages is important for multifarious reasons and, thus, of interest to students and scholars of linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, sociology, and many more disciplines. There is no shortage of introductory books on second language acquisition on the market, which is not surprising when one considers the many paradigms that contribute to the larger field. *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* is a unique and refreshing such book that stands out in this well-populated landscape. As an introduction to the field of second language studies in the broad sense, the book is as impressive as it is useful for a varied audience. The authors do a great job walking a novice student audience through decades of work in SLA, while providing a level of history of our discipline that offers insights and succinct review for even the more seasoned researcher. What stands out most from other texts available is the format. The tone and structure, aligning to key questions as the title suggests, make for a quite enjoyable and easy experience. I especially enjoy the “Consider this ...” excerpts, which facilitate this book being used at various levels of teaching on undergraduate and even graduate courses. The layout of the book is also logical in its flow as it incrementally builds knowledge that is needed for questions/topics covered downstream – another advantage for quick adoption of the book as a teaching tool.

Often with books of this type accuracy is sacrificed for the sake of perceived teaching needs: Details are changed knowingly or certain topics are foregone since they might be “too complex” for an introductory book. The authors have managed to find the perfect tone to engage, excite even, the reader while delivering a seriously large amount of information. Many difficult/dynamic questions are addressed without infantilizing the audience. And still, little to no prior knowledge is needed to get the full benefits of this book. In this respect, this book would be a very nice introduction even for the very seasoned linguist or psychologist who works on theory, language acquisition, or processing yet does not do so in the domain of sequential bi-/multilingualism. In a nutshell, this book is current, complete, well informed and well articulated. It is a must-have for everyone who studies or is interested in second language acquisition.

Jason Rothman
University of Reading
UiT, The Arctic University of Norway

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Abbreviations

ACC	accusative case
CEI	communicatively embedded input
CP	complementizer phrase
CPH	the Critical Period Hypothesis
ESL	English as a second language
FDH	the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis
FEM	feminine
FT/FA	Full Transfer/Full Access
L1	first language
L2	second language
MASC	masculine
MLAT	Modern Language Aptitude Test
NNS	non-native speaker
NOM	nominative case
NP	noun phrase
NS	native speaker
OPC	overt pronoun constraint
OVS	object-verb-subject (word order)
POS	poverty of the stimulus
PP	prepositional phrase
RC	relative clause
SLA	second language acquisition (as a research field)
SOV	subject-object-verb (word order)
SSH	the Shallow Structure Hypothesis
SVO	subject-verb-object (word order)
TP	tense phrase
UG	Universal Grammar
V2	verb second
VP	verb phrase
WM	working memory

Prologue

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a field of empirical and theoretical research that has been around since the early 1970s. For scholars interested in cognitive science (i.e., the interdisciplinary study of the mind and its processes), research on how a second language (L2) is acquired adds valuable data that can shed light on various hypotheses and offer novel insights into how the mind works. For teachers, basic facts about L2 acquisition can be informative for decision-making processes about methods, what to teach, what not to teach, and so on. (Note to the reader: In this book, we use SLA to represent a field of study and L2 acquisition to mean the actual acquisition of another language. Thus, when the reader sees SLA, that should be interpreted as a field of study interested in L2 acquisition.)

Regardless of the motivation for one's interest in research on L2 acquisition, it should be noted that the field of SLA is driven by underlying questions. Like any science or social science, SLA seeks answers to questions. The present volume is unique compared to other similar introductions to the field because it is organized around questions and not topics, theories, or research methodology. As the reader will see, Chapter 1 situates the origins of contemporary L2 research within the fundamental and original question of whether L2 acquisition is similar to or different from first language (L1) acquisition. As we see it, all questions currently driving the field stem from this fundamental question; that is, whether stated or not, lurking behind current research in L2 acquisition is the issue of similarities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. In most cases, this issue is implicit, as the researcher tends to have an underlying assumption about similarities and differences between the two contexts. So, for example, the researcher interested in motivation in L2 acquisition – a factor of little interest to researchers in L1 acquisition – may have already “determined” that something is different about L2 acquisition and this is why motivation is important to examine (see Chapter 8). As another example, researchers have wondered whether instruction on the formal elements of language (what people typically call “grammar”) has an impact on how formal elements are actually acquired. In asking this question, the researcher is explicitly or implicitly making claims about how different L2 acquisition is from L1 acquisition (where there is no instruction).

It is impossible for a purposely short and introductory book to be exhaustive, so for the present endeavor we have selected a limited number of questions that we believe drive the bulk of L2 research (and theorizing) these days. We list them

here with some brief introductory remarks – and the reader will note that most also form the chapter headings.

- Are L1 and L2 acquisition fundamentally the same or fundamentally different? We show how this question launched the field of SLA research in the early 1970s in Chapter 1. We do not address this question in this chapter but return to it in the Epilogue once the reader has reviewed research on the major questions that form the focus of this book.
- What does development look like? In Chapter 2, we describe various aspects of the ordered and staged development of formal features of language (e.g., sentence structure, inflections, and endings on verbs and nouns) while also touching on variation in such ordered development and any observed L1 influence on this development.
- What are the roles of input and output? One of the fundamental findings of the early research on L2 acquisition was the critical role that communicatively embedded input plays as the data for language acquisition. Chapter 3 reviews this idea while also addressing later hypotheses that communicatively embedded output (i.e., learner production) somehow affects acquisition.
- What is the initial state? Of concern to researchers since the early 1970s is whether or not L2 learners begin the task of acquisition by massively transferring their L1 into the “hypothesis space” for L2 acquisition. In Chapter 4, we explore research related to this question.
- Can L2 learners become nativelike? In Chapter 5 we address this question, looking at the outcome of L2 acquisition from a variety of perspectives. What will emerge from this discussion is that nativelikeness is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but that it likely depends on what aspects of language and language use we examine.
- Does instruction make a difference? Almost since the foundation of contemporary L2 research there has been debate about the extent to which instruction on the formal properties of language (i.e., what most people call “grammar”) affects acquisition. We take up this question in Chapter 6.
- What are the roles of explicit and implicit learning? Increasingly, L2 researchers are converging on the importance and fundamental nature of implicit learning in L2 acquisition (i.e., learning without intent and without awareness of what you are learning). However, there is debate about the contribution of explicit learning and explicit processes in L2 acquisition. In a sense, the question raised here is related to the previous question about instruction. We take these issues up in Chapter 7.
- What are individual differences and how do they affect acquisition? Individual differences refer to non-linguistic things such as motivation, attitude, aptitude for learning, and working memory, among others. In Chapter 8, we focus on the most researched of the individual difference variables, namely, motivation, aptitude, and working memory. We purposely situate this chapter and the

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question it addresses last in the book as much of how we interpret the research involves an understanding of how we answer other questions.

Because this is an introductory volume, we have purposely avoided a “scholarly style and tone.” Instead, we have used a style that we hope is reader-friendly for the novice student of SLA. The three authors are experienced educators, having taught courses on SLA to teachers-in-training, novice researchers, graduate students, and other populations. We have concluded that introductory books that assume little background on the part of the reader are difficult to come by. So our target audience, again, is that novice student who is reading about the field of SLA for the first time. By extension, the reader could also be someone outside the field such as an administrator, parent, or anyone interested in the basics of L2 acquisition. We assume no background in any area related to SLA (e.g., linguistics, cognitive psychology) and do our best to explain as we go and simplify complex concepts where possible. In so doing, and in trying to keep this book as short as possible, we have necessarily been brief on some of the topics. Some topics that readers might find in a lengthier and more advanced work are not included in this volume. In addition, the reader will not find an exhaustive review of research with citation after citation that is found in tomes that are intended for more advanced readers and scholars (e.g., in the many “handbooks” on second language acquisition that are on the market these days). This book is different in intent and is not meant to compete with books used in advanced courses or advanced degree programs.

Along the same lines, we narrow our scope of discussion to what are traditionally called “syntax” and “morphology.” Syntax refers to sentence structure while morphology refers to word structure (e.g., roots, inflections on words). We do this purposefully. One reason is to keep the book short. A second reason is that the crux of what we wish to talk about – differences between L1 and L2 acquisition – has largely been tied to these domains of inquiry. This does not mean that such things as the sound system (phonology), vocabulary (the mental lexicon), and other things aren’t of interest to L2 acquisition more generally, and occasionally we make reference to them. But when it comes to comparing L1 and L2 acquisition, the locus of discussion has tended to be syntax and morphology. Because we have limited the scope of inquiry, we don’t intend that readers will be experts in the field by the time they turn the last page. Instead, we hope to instill curiosity in readers so that continued engagement with more detailed volumes as well as primary sources is a result. For those readers who will not pursue more reading or work in the field of SLA, we hope we provide enough of the “basics” for whatever purpose that reader has in mind.

We also need to admit our biases up front. All scholars in SLA come to the task of synthesizing the field from a variety of perspectives. The three of us are trained linguists and thus we come to the task with a linguistic slant or bias. For example, we assume that the product of acquisition is an abstract, complex, and implicit

system called “language” that defies easy explanation and looks nothing like textbook rules or descriptions language learners might find in a Google search. This perspective pushes us to always look at the research in terms of what it means to speak to the creation of this underlying “mental representation” of language. The particular approach that underlies this book is called “generative,” which we will discuss in Chapter 1. In linguistics, the generative approach is the dominant framework informing theoretical and empirical advances. However, not all L2 researchers adopt a generative approach. Many have no theoretical approach to language at all. But we are firm believers that if we want to talk about language acquisition, we have to have a working theory of language. Readers who go on to pursue academic work in the field of SLA will encounter other approaches and can compare them to the one taken in this volume. Still, where appropriate, we point the reader to alternative ideas. And because none of us works in the field of social and cultural aspects of acquisition, the book leaves these perspectives to other experts. We do, however, touch on social aspects of acquisition in a special feature called “What about Social Factors?” in which we offer brief glimpses into how we might bridge the gap between linguistic approaches and social approaches. This may not be enough for the experts in social factors, but for an introductory book with a linguistic focus, we hope our intent is well taken.

We also point out that in addition to readings and follow-up questions at the end of each chapter, internal to each chapter are three features we hope will help the novice reader. One feature involves bolded words and phrases. Bolded words and phrases represent key constructs and ideas. Although these constructs and ideas are defined as we go, they are also included in a glossary at the end of the book. A second feature consists of call-outs, which are intended to draw the reader to a main idea in a particular section of the chapter. These are useful for reviewing after reading the chapter to recall key ideas. A third feature consists of boxes called “Consider this ...” The intent of these boxes is to invite readers to stop and think about something they have just read, to reflect before going on. We have found that such “stop and think” suggestions help readers consolidate ideas and also break up the reading process. If this book is used in a class, such boxes can also be used for classroom discussion.

We hope we have done our job for the novice reader. We hope we have done our job for the instructor who adopts this text for classroom use. Most importantly, we hope to instill in that novice reader a sense of wonder at the complexity of L2 acquisition both as a human endeavor and as a research enterprise. Although we have come a long way since the foundation of contemporary L2 acquisition research in the late 1960s, there are still things to be sorted out, research methodologies to be explored, and details that need examination. But at the heart of it all are the key questions that drive what we as researchers do, whether we acknowledge it or not. We hope these key questions remain with the reader long after finishing this book.

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