

SLA: What It Offers ESL/EFL Teachers

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Introduction

SLA stands for second language acquisition, the field of research and theory in applied linguistics that deals with learning a second or foreign language (i.e., any language that is not one's mother tongue). Although there are many approaches to SLA, cognitive ones seem to dominate (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 2006). Building on recent articles (Haley & Rentz, 2002; Mangubhai, 2006; Porto, 2001), in this chapter my concern is what writings in and perspectives on SLA offer ESL/EFL teachers. Some SLA specialists (e.g., Gass & Selinker, 2001) do not distinguish between formal or classroom SLA and other learning contexts, while others (e.g., Lightbown, 2003) recognize that there can be important differences depending on the situation.

In a helpful overview, Doughty (2003) notes two main arguments in “the case against L2 instruction”, namely the Universal Grammar (UG) position, that SLA is influenced by the same UG that guides L1 learning, and the incidental/input hypothesis position, which distinguishes learning and acquisition and says that learned knowledge can never become acquired. Important to both of these arguments is the role of input in (second) language acquisition, yet instruction is either discouraged or prohibited in the strong versions of these two views (pp. 257-258). Doughty (2003) also indicates that there are different perspectives within each of these views (e.g., White's (2003) other UG perspective), and that both have influenced L2/FL teachers. Some SLA researchers (Crookes, 1997; Ellis, 1997a, 1997b; Lightbown, 2004) nonetheless argue that there are clear connections between SLA and language teaching, and I agree with this view.

In the rest of this paper I would like to answer the question of what SLA offers practicing ESL/EFL teachers from my perspective as a teacher, researcher, and ESL/EFL teacher trainer. While there are many points that I would like to make, due to limitations of space I will focus on five answers to this question and point readers to some recent research and writings on issues that I believe can help them better understand both their students' learning and their teaching.

Perspective on the Complexity of Language Learning

The first thing I believe SLA offers ESL/EFL teachers is *a reality check on the complexity of second and foreign language learning*. Recent surveys of SLA research by Doughty and Long (2003), Hinkel (2005), and Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (2006) make clear that L2 learning is extremely complex, and involves many different factors, such as language transfer, cultural issues, communicative competence, views of learning, etc. (see Brown, 2007, for an overview). Yet although teachers usually teach classes of students, we should remember that students learn as individuals, and that individual differences in SLA are numerous (Ellis, 2004; Dornyei & Skehan, 2003). Dornyei's (2006) overview, for example, considers personality traits, language aptitude, motivation, and language learning styles and strategies, all of which need to be considered. As research suggests, often one's rate of L2 learning is clearly connected to individual differences (Mangubhai, 2006). So, in terms of implications, I believe that both teachers and students need to be aware of the complexity of L2/FL learning, and I think that part of a teacher's job is to help students understand this complexity and what they can do about it.

A Reminder to Balance Input, Output, and Interaction

Second, I believe that SLA offers teachers *a reminder that appropriate input, output, and interaction are all crucial to L2 learning*. Research on L2 learning and instruction reveals that to be successful learners need both rich and varied input in the target language and opportunities to use the language (VanPatten, 2003). While Krashen (2003) is right that input is key, research by Swain (1995, 2005) and others reveals the importance of output and interaction as well. Swain (1993) suggested that output does at least four things, by giving learners chances for meaningful language practice, helping move them from semantic to syntactic processing, providing opportunities for them to develop and test hypotheses in their learning, and generating responses from others that they interact with, which can in turn help them (re)process their own output. In

short, appropriate input of different types is great, but output is necessary, too. SLA researchers Gass and Mackey (2006) build on input and output in outlining their interaction hypothesis, observing that in interaction both positive and negative feedback is an important component in students' second language learning. So the implications here are that teachers need to provide students with rich input in class, opportunities for output (both written and spoken) and interaction in practice (see DeKeyser, 2007), and helpful feedback on their L2/FL use.

A Balanced View on Vocabulary, Grammar, and Focus on Form

While TESOL has often followed various fads, I believe that SLA gives us, third, *a balanced perspective on vocabulary and grammar and notes the value of focus on form*. Partly in response to Krashen's work, Laufer's (2003) study asked if learners actually acquire vocabulary most through reading (as Krashen suggests). She compared reading alone with productive tasks (such as using glosses, writing sentences, writing a composition, sentence completion) in Israeli EFL classes. In all cases the empirical evidence suggested (in relation to vocabulary) that a word's meaning is more likely to be remembered in a "productive word-focused task" than simply through reading, even when the word is looked up in a dictionary (p. 581). This key finding with several class experiments and statistical significance clearly suggests that the benefits of L2/FL instruction are not limited to form or grammar. So free voluntary reading is good, but it is simply not enough for successful L2 learning, especially in the L2/FL classroom.

While there are various perspectives on focus on form (FonF, see Doughty & Williams, 1998; Spada, 1997), SLA suggests that some FonF is important to learners' L2 development. Byrd (2005) therefore summarizes recent issues on instructed grammar and suggests planning ahead to allow for FonF in the classroom, using recasts carefully and effectively, and recognizing grammar in context. In terms of implications, I believe teachers need to recognize the importance

of vocabulary (Nation & Gu, 2007), as well as grammar, and follow Williams' (2005) suggestions for "form-focused instruction" (FFI), relating to problematicity (is the grammar or form actually a problem for learners?), lesson planning, obtrusiveness, and responsibility (pp. 674-679). In addition, helpful error correction can be useful to students who know how to use it.

Guidelines/Suggestions for Our Teaching

Teachers rightly argue that some SLA research and theory is difficult to connect with classroom learning and teaching. While it is not always easy to find good SLA classroom research, there is thankfully more and more of it, and published research articles will often have "implications for teaching" that teachers can evaluate themselves for their own contexts. As a result, I believe, fourth, that SLA offers teachers *guidelines or suggestions for what to focus on in our teaching*. In terms of suggestions from the literature, Nation (2005) offers an interesting perspective on the role of the teacher in a classroom context, stating that to teach is only one of the instructor's four main jobs, with the other three being to plan appropriate lessons, to train students in language skills, and to test their progress. In his framework for instruction, Nation (2005, 2007) argues four strands are necessary, namely meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, deliberate language study, and fluency development, and each has practical implications in the classroom. Also, Cook (2002) offers a helpful SLA perspective by applying L2 user concepts to instruction, noting a) our focus in language teaching should be on *learners*, not native speakers, b) we should use successful L2 users as models, not just native speakers, c) learners should experience the richness of L2 use, d) we should connect with our students' goals as much as possible, and e) we should emphasize the value of students' native languages for language learning (pp. 335-341). The implication is that these and other researchers suggest teachers should use a range of activities in class to allow students to develop their English skills

through meaning-focused input and output, specific language study skills, and fluency practice, but recognize the focus is on *learners* and their goals, not teachers or even the curriculum.

Encouragement

Fifth, and finally, I believe that SLA offers ESL/EFL teachers *encouragement, because classroom instruction appears to help second language learning*. An early attempt by Long (1983) to review relevant research on instruction compared with L2 exposure focused on the Krashen acquisition/instruction distinction. Long concluded instruction was beneficial; however, it was also clear that there were major problems in making such comparisons. In a later attempt to consider whether instruction makes a difference, Long (1988) focused on four domains of SLA: processes (transfer, generalization, noticing, etc.), route (developmental sequences in negation, questions, word order, etc.), rate (speed of learning), and level of ultimate attainment. This brief summary of Long’s (1988) findings is adapted from Doughty (2003, pp. 261-263):

<u>Domain</u>	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
SLA processes	Similarities/differences exist in in naturalistic/classroom settings	Processes must be understood in order to enhance SLA in any context
SLA route	Routes/developmental sequences exist and can be affected by L1	Stages can’t be skipped; L2 learners need to be ready for instruction
SLA rate	Several studies showed a rate advantage for instructed learners	With SLA route findings, rightly timed instruction “can speed SLA”
SLA attainment	Advantages for instructed learners	Instruction can help develop communicative competence

In short, Long (1988) concluded that instruction can in fact help students’ L2 learning.

More recently Norris and Ortega (2000) surveyed 250 possibly relevant studies related to the effectiveness of L2 instruction, and were able to screen 77 that met their (quasi-)experimental focus on L2 features, but then only 49 included adequate statistical data to be included in their meta-analysis. They came up with some 20 different pedagogical procedures (instructional treatments) in the remaining studies that concerned five variables (2 on the type of instruction:

explicit vs. implicit; 3 on attention to form: focus mainly on meaning, form, or forms). While they could not comment on the 20 or more different instructional types, Norris and Ortega (2000) concluded that “L2 instruction can be characterized as effective in its own right, at least as operationalized and measured within the domain” (p. 480). [See Norris & Ortega (2003) for more on defining and measuring SLA, and their (2006) edited collection for further recent research syntheses.] The Long and Norris and Ortega studies use quantitative and experimental approaches, and both observe the role of replication research to support the importance of L2 instruction. This view contrasts with a broader language socialization and SLA perspective (see Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Cole, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), which is more descriptive and takes into consideration diverse social, cultural, and learning contexts. In essence, the implication, no matter what approach one has to SLA, is that good teaching can make a difference to L2 learning, and the difference appears to be substantial. This research finding is significant, because much, if not most, L2/FL learning appears to at least begin (if not take place) in formal or classroom situations around the world, both in ESL and EFL settings.

Conclusion

SLA offers ESL/EFL teachers a range of insights into second language learning and teaching, and I have noted five here. Perhaps the main value of SLA is to help us recognize how understanding *learning* can better inform our *teaching*. Although some experts may see little value in classroom language instruction, there is ample evidence in the SLA literature that L2 teaching makes a difference, and I have provided references to important articles and books that discuss this view. Suitable classroom instruction provides students with useful language models and appropriate input, opportunities to process and practice that input, a focus on relevant form, and support and feedback. Echoing the research, good teaching can lead to students’ L2 learning.

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