The Least a Second Language Acquisition Theory Needs to Explain

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What are theories of SLA?

- Strives to explain well-attested empirical findings about the relationship between all the components of second language acquisition (process and product in interlanguage development and universals, and variance in learning and learning environments)

- Empirical: relying or based on experiment or experience (Webster’s New World Dictionary)

- Interlanguage: a language of second language learners, which is composed of: (Leon's Glossary of SLA Terms)
  1. correct target language components
  2. incorrect target language components
What are the most important components of SLA theories?

- One or more mechanisms to account for interlanguage change
- Account for major accepted findings within their domains
- Identification of “accepted findings”
- Accepted findings are the least an SLA theory needs to explain
Second Language Acquisition: Some Structural Characteristics

- SLA is a relatively new field of inquiry
- Empirical research since 1960 by researchers drawing heavily upon theory, research findings, and research methods in a variety of fields
- Only three journals are devoted to reporting SLA research results: *Language Learning, Studies in Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Research*
SLA’s brief history means that few issues have yet been investigated exhaustively.

This scarcity of funding leads to labor-intensive work conducted cross-sectionally and on small samples instead of longitudinally.
SLA studies inspired in one source discipline frequently seems irrelevant for other studies with origins in another discipline.

Fragmented publication of SLA research findings makes it hard to find out what is known about a given topic.
What is essential to construct a valid description of SLA?

- A synthesis of well-attested empirical findings about process and product in interlanguage development related to universals and variance in learning and learners environments
The description specifies what is acquired; the theory explains how

Several qualifications:

- Not all forms of theory attempt to explain how
  - Axiomatic and causal-process forms do
  - Set-of-laws for does not
What is an explanation?

- What counts as an explanation varies from one discipline and scientific subcommunity to another, and over time
  - Behaviorists, biochemists, psychologists
  - Ethnographers and anthropologists
Description and Explanation in Theory Construction

A

B

description

C

explanation
1) The frequency of no V constructions declined as that of don't V constructions increased

2) Subject’s suppliance of plural s was more target-like on the picture description task than in the narrative

3) Whether or not learners exhibited adverb-fronting on the pretest predicted their control of particle separation after instruction
4) Accuracy was greater on tasks performed after planning than on tasks performed with no planning.

5) After equivalent periods of exposure, child starters score higher on proficiency tests than learners who begin as adults.

6) Constructions which involve movement of an element from final to initial position are learned before constructions which require both disruption of a string and movement of an internal element to a salient (initial or final) position.
Statements in area C

7) SLA is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the TL group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language (Schumann, 1978, p.34)

8) There are two independent ways of developing ability in a second language. “Acquisition” is a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language, while “learning” is a conscious process that results in “knowing about” language (Krashen, 1985, p.1)
9) Second language learning, like any other complex cognitive skill, involves the gradual integration of subskills as controlled processes initially predominate and then become automatic (McLaughlin, 1987, p.139)
A theory that referred to every accepted finding about SLA would still not necessarily provide an explanation of the SLA process even when all the findings were correct.

For explanatory power, a theorist needs to propose one or more mechanisms to account for a change.
Mechanisms are devices that specify how cognitive functions operate on input to improve grammar at Time 1 to its new representation at Time 2.

The output of these mechanisms is observable in learner data, in this case, and interlanguage sample
Behaviorist theories have relied upon data-driven mechanisms of associations, differentiation, and generalization.

Innatist theories typically employ some form of hypothesis testing constrained by innate knowledge.

Example: Chomsky’s language acquisition device. Flavell (1972) provides governing possible relationships between stages in a developmental sequence, including addition, substitution, modification, inclusion and meditation.
Specifying mechanisms driving development from one stage to the next, (Atkinson 1982) suggest that an adequate explanation will also identify why stages in a developmental sequence have occur in exactly the order they do, and cannot occur in some other order.

Few proposals have been made in SLA theory
Some Accepted SLA Findings

- Theorist need to review facts when evaluating and creating new theories.

- SLA is a rational effort.

- Quality make well-attested findings significant.
Some Accepted SLA Findings

- Scientist see their work higher than other.
- The strength and the value system with which a belief is support are not relevant enough in judging.
- Generalizations are possible only when empirical observations are supported.
Some Accepted SLA Findings

- Unfortunately some characteristics of SLA research determine easier other things than why some people can learn a second language and other can not.

- Some examples:
  - Well-established findings about learners
  - Environments
  - Interlanguages
Learners

- A variation of abilities, states and traits have little effect in the acquisition of a language in children.

- Differences in learners like age, aptitude, attitude and motivation are important factor in the achievements and process.
Learners

- Positive attitudes and motivation can not overcome psycholinguistic constrains in a development stage and in the maturational constraints of older starters can achieve.
Both children and adults need to comprehend the language.

Comprehensibility may result from interactional and elaborative changes.
Both children and adults learn from positive evidence, focused on form and behavior that makes L2 features relevant, improves rate and second language achievement.
Interlanguages

- Interlanguages show systematicity and variability in their development.

- Systematicity can manifest in including suppliance and nonsuppliance of targetlike and nontargetlike features.

- Variability shown is systematically related to task, task requirements, interlocutor, and linguistic context.
Interlanguages

- Items like:
  - English negation
  - English-Swedish relative clauses
  - German word order

- Progress is not linear

- Development is gradual and incremental
Sample Implications for Current SLA Theories

- If previous findings can be considered a sample of accepted findings

- A number of implications follow for any theories that purport to be comprehensive accounts of SLA

  - As illustrations:
1. A theory that says nothing about universals in language and cognition is incomplete or, if considered complete, inadequate.

2. A theory that says nothing about environmental factors is incomplete or, if considered complete, inadequate.

3. Differences in rate of acquisition and the level of proficiency achievable by children or adult requires that viable theories specify either different mechanisms driving development in learners of different starting ages or differential access to the same mechanisms.
4. The subordination of affective factors to linguistic and cognitive factors means that a theory that purports to explain solely in terms of affective factors can, at most, be an account of facilitating condition, not an explanatory theory of acquisition itself.

5. A theory that holds all language learning to be unconscious is inadequate. (awareness/attention to the language)

6. A theory that holds that a nativelike mastery of a SL can result simply from exposure to comprehensible samples of that language is inadequate.
7. Interlanguage systematicity, including adherence to regular sequences and production of nontargetlike forms (never modeled in the input indicates a strong cognitive contribution on the learner’s part and means that enviromentalist theories of SLA are inadequate.

8. A theory that assumes that change is a product of the steady accumulation of generalizations based upon the learner’s perception of the frequencies of forms in the input is also incomplete.
Conclusions

- A theory must account for some of the major accepted findings.

- Some researches show that SLA is a multidimensional phenomenon, with many learner and environment variables.
Conclusions

- An explanatory theory of SLA that wants to be viable needs to be interactionist.

  - First, it needs to recognize the role of learner variables and environmental variables
  
  - Second, it needs to specify which of those environmental and learner variables apply and influence, which pones interact, when and how.
Conclusions

- Interactionist theories are more powerful than single factor solutions in the account of data because:
  - It can give one or more variables
  - Type of variables
  - Relationships among variables