Revisiting What SLA Research Offers Practicing ESL/EFL Teachers

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0. Introduction/Outline
1. Reflecting on a learning situation/discussing +/- issues (see p. 7)
2. Background: An introduction to some issues from the literature
3. Answering the question: What SLA offers the ESL/EFL teacher
4. Conclusion (and comments/question and answer time)
5. References and suggestions for further reading

1. Reflection/Discussion (see questions and discussion re helping/hindering learning)

2. Background
• SLA means second language acquisition, the field of research and theory in applied linguistics dealing with learning a second or foreign language. Despite many approaches, cognitive ones still dominate (Cook, 2016; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ellis, 2015; García Mayo, et al., 2013).
• Building on published articles (Hansen-Thomas & Grosso, 2013; Porto, 2001; Spada, 2015), my interest is in what writings in and perspectives on SLA might offer ESL/EFL teachers.
• Some SLA specialists (e.g., Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013) don’t distinguish between formal or classroom SLA and other learning contexts, while others (Lightbown, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2013) recognize there can be important differences depending on the learning situation.
• In a helpful overview, Doughty (2003) noted 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 (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Ellis & Shintani, 2014) nonetheless argue that there are clear connections between SLA research and theory and English language teaching.
• A number of Krashen’s (2003) principles and hypotheses reflect topics in the recent literature:
  • the acquisition-learning hypothesis (distinguishing subconscious vs. conscious processes)
  • the natural order hypothesis (learning order is predictable, can’t change, isn’t teachable)
  • the Monitor hypothesis (learning only Monitors or edits, and doesn’t esp. help accuracy)
  • the input (now comprehension) hypothesis (input isn’t enough, it must be understood; also, 1) talking isn’t practising and 2) with enough comprehensible input “i + 1 is present”)
  • the affective filter hypothesis (negative variables block input from reaching the LAD)
  • “Free voluntary reading may be the most powerful tool we have...” in instruction (p. 15).

3. Answering the question: What does SLA offer the practising ESL/EFL teacher?
I believe SLA offers many insights into L2 learning and teaching, but share five answers here.
1. A reality check on the complexity of second and foreign language learning

- Recent surveys by Loewen and Sato (2017), Robinson (2013), Tarone (2015), and VanPatten (2017) make clear that L2 learning is extremely complex, and involves many different factors (e.g., L1/language transfer, culture, communicative competence, learning, etc. See Brown, 2014).
- Students learn as individuals, and individual differences in SLA are numerous. Dörnyei and Ryan’s (2015) overview considers personality traits, language aptitude, motivation, language learning styles and cognitive styles, and learning strategies, all of which need to be noted. Often one’s rate of L2 learning is clearly connected to individual differences (Mangubhai, 2006).

Implications: Both teachers and students need to be aware of the complexity of L2/FL learning.

2. The reminder that appropriate input, output, and interaction are crucial to L2 learning

- Research on L2 learning and instruction reveals that learners need both rich and varied input in the target language and opportunities to use the language (VanPatten, 2003). Krashen (2003) is right that input is key, but research by Swain (1995, 2005) and others reveals the importance of output and interaction as well. Swain (1993) suggested that output 1) gives learners chances for meaningful language practice, 2) can help move them from semantic to syntactic processing, 3) provides opportunities for them to develop and test hypotheses, and 4) generates responses from others that they interact with, which can in turn help them (re)process their own output. (See also Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2015, plus studies in Mackey, 2008, and Tomlinson, 2017.)
- Mackey, Abbuhl and Gass (2012) build on input and output in outlining their interactionist approach, noting that feedback is an important component in learners’ second language learning.

Implications: Teachers need to provide students with rich input in class, opportunities for output (written and spoken) and interaction, and feedback on their L2/FL use (see Tomlinson, 2017).

3. A balanced perspective on vocabulary and grammar, noting 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. She compared reading alone vs. productive tasks (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 clearly suggests the benefits of L2/FL instruction are not limited to form/grammar.
- While there are various views of focus on form (see Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2008; Lessard-Clouston, 2011; Spada & Lightbown, 2008), SLA suggests that some FonF is important to learners’ L2 development. Byrd (2005) summarizes issues on instructed grammar and suggests planning ahead for FonF, using recasts effectively, and recognizing grammar in context.

Implication: Recognize the importance of vocabulary (Webb & Nation, 2017) and use Williams’ (2005) suggestions for “form-focused instruction” (FFI), relating to problematicity, lesson planning, obtrusiveness, and responsibility (pp. 674-679). Good error correction can be helpful!

4. Guidelines or suggestions for what to focus on in our teaching

- Much SLA research and theory is hard to connect with classroom learning and teaching. Yet often articles will have “implications for teaching” that teachers can evaluate for their contexts.
- Nation (2013) 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 (2013) argues four equal strands are necessary: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, deliberate language study, and fluency development.

- Cook (2002) offers a helpful SLA perspective 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).

**Implications:** Use a range of activities to allow students to practice and develop their English

5. **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. In terms of varying amount
  of instruction vs. exposure, Long concluded instruction was beneficial; however, it was also clear
  that there were major problems in making such comparisons (lack of info., definitions of SLA).
- 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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLA processes</td>
<td>Similarities/differences exist in naturalistic/classroom settings</td>
<td>Processes must be understood in order to enhance SLA in any context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA route</td>
<td>Routes/developmental sequences exist and can be affected by L1</td>
<td>Stages can’t be skipped; L2 learners need to be ready for instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA rate</td>
<td>Several studies showed a rate advantage for instructed learners</td>
<td>With SLA rate findings, rightly timed instruction “can speed SLA”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA attainment</td>
<td>Advantages for instructed learners</td>
<td>Instruction can help develop communicative competence (pp. 261-263)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 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 also Norris & Ortega (2006, 2012) for further recent
  research syntheses and more on defining and assessing second language learner knowledge.]
- In critiquing Norris and Ortega’s (2000) analysis, Krashen (2003) noted that the comparison
  groups examined for their study didn’t have exposure to the target rules and therefore “they were
  not in an acquisition-rich environment” (p. 45). Krashen concluded: “Thus, these studies really
  compare the presence and absence of formal instruction, not acquisition versus learning” (p. 45).
- The Long and Norris and Ortega studies use quantitative and experimental approaches. Both
  also observe the importance of replication studies to support the importance of L2 instruction.
  This contrasts with a broader language socialization and SLA perspective (e.g., Atkinson, 2011;
  Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Duff & Talmy, 2011; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), which takes into
consideration diverse social, cultural, and learning issues and contexts. This view also recognizes the role of culture in L2 learning/teaching (Lessard-Clouston, 2016). Consider Loewen (2015).

**Implication:** *Teaching can make a difference to L2 learning,* and it appears to be substantial. This research finding is important, 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.

4. **Conclusion**

- In essence, SLA offers ESL/EFL teachers a range of insights into second language learning and teaching, and I’ve noted five main points in answering the question today. I believe the main value of SLA is to help us recognize how understanding learning can better inform our teaching.
- Although some experts like Krashen may see little or limited value in formal or classroom language instruction, there is ample evidence in the SLA literature that L2 teaching does make a difference, and I’ve provided references to important articles and books that discuss this view.
- In summary, I suggest that suitable classroom instruction provides L2 students with 1) useful language models and appropriate input, 2) opportunities to process and practise that input, 3) a focus on relevant form (both grammar and vocabulary – Lessard-Clouston, 2018; Zimmerman, 2009), and 4) support and feedback (including through tests, helpful error correction, etc.). In reflecting on one study, Brown and Larson-Hall (2012) summarize: “Explicit instruction plus lots of opportunities for practice lead to the greatest gains” (p. 148). This approach seems to reflect the “jobs” of the L2 teacher that Nation (2013) noted, as well as his four strands for L2 learning. Echoing the research, I believe good teaching can and does lead to students’ ESL/EFL learning!

- **Comments?** Question and answer time

5. **References**

(See also the list of introductory SLA books for teachers on p. 6.)


**Teacher-friendly Books Introducing SLA** (* = particularly accessible and/or recommended)


**Note:** This presentation draws on and expands upon chapter 8 in Lessard-Clouston (2018), “Putting it together: What SLA offers classroom teachers.”
Formal or Classroom Instruction Reflection

Think of an example where you received formal or classroom instruction in a second or foreign language (or a situation in your ESL/EFL class). Consider the specific class, teacher, class activities, types of instruction involved and then answer two questions:

1) In what specific ways do you think the classes and/or instruction helped you/your students learn the language?

2) Were there any difficulties in those classes that you think hindered your/your students’ language learning? If so, list some:

Now compare your help and hindrance lists with another person.