

## Reviews

### Comptes rendus

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**Alessandro G. Benati, and Tanja Angelovska.** 2016. *Second language acquisition: A theoretical introduction to real-world applications*. London: Bloomsbury. Pp. 200. \$US 39.95 (softcover).

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In this introductory text, Benati and Angelovska offer a new and welcome examination of key issues that relate to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) within a practical perspective. More specifically, as explained by the authors, the book was written so that students, and language teachers in training, could familiarize themselves with the wealth of theoretical and practical implications of SLA research. The book fulfils its promises: it provides a rich overview of SLA issues and topics while also inviting readers to reflect on the merits or shortcomings of various theories.

The book is divided into six chapters; several chapters cover general aspects of SLA, and a final chapter focuses on the definition of SLA. Instead of adopting a chronological approach, the authors have opted for a theme-based approach, allowing readers to reflect on various aspects of SLA from several perspectives. For instance, grammar instruction or learning may be viewed via Input Processing Theory (chapter 3) or according to the declarative/procedural model (chapter 1). Likewise, a concept such as bilingualism, that has been the focus of attention for decades in academic texts and the press (as the many recent articles inspired by research in neuroscience, medical sciences or psycholinguistics can attest), is considered from a neurolinguistic approach (in chapter 2), which is reminiscent of studies on bilingual processing (e.g., Schwieter 2015), as well as from the point of view of competencies (in chapter 5), implying a sociocultural approach and the realization that nowadays bilingualism is to be considered together with, or in opposition to, multilingualism. In addition, each of the six chapters includes a section named *real-world applications*, where readers are presented with a range of suggestions, further questions or activities, and a list of readings to help them focus on how SLA theories and principles can be applied in the classroom.

In chapter 1, “Introduction to second language acquisition”, the authors describe SLA as a field of research, before offering a fairly extensive overview of 11 theories ranging from behaviourism to sociocultural theories, highlighting the main issues and attributes of each theory. While this introduction forms a key part of the book, some aspects of the description could lead to confusion in the novice reader. For instance, the definition of SLA (p. 2) starts with a description of the field of enquiry, highlighting the main research methods common to the discipline: experimental studies, observational studies and case studies; however, a new educator or undergraduate student not yet familiar with the discipline might not be versed in the variety of qualitative research methods that are described, and hence might be confused as to the difference between the concept of SLA and the field of research covered by SLA. The explanation given by the authors, “the study of how learners create a new language system [...]”, (p. 3) would have been appropriate at the beginning of this section.

Chapter 2 focuses on differences and similarities between learning a first language (L1) and learning a second language (L2). It offers a clear introduction to concepts such as the idea of innate knowledge, Universal Grammar (UG) and Chomsky’s innatist view of language acquisition. Most importantly, the authors present studies that have initiated endless debates about the process of SLA, explaining that while no “SLA theory [...] supports the view that learners start the process of acquiring a second language [...] on a *tabula rasa* basis” (p. 33), a consensus is yet to be reached as to the level of UG access available to L2 learners. Here the authors have done a sound job of clarifying this key theoretical consideration. In this chapter, the authors also introduce the concept of markedness. Note that part of this section (p. 39) might be complex for the novice reader. If used in an introductory course, it would be helpful to expand on this notion, and add exercises or examples to help the reader/student better grasp this concept.

Chapter 3 introduces readers to the general concepts of individual differences in SLA and the consequences that these may have on thought and behaviour. Future language teachers will find this chapter particularly relevant, since it clarifies the reasons why one method of language teaching may not suit all learners, or why some language learners might struggle. To that effect, a good portion of this chapter is dedicated to the role of instruction, its limitations in relation to L2 learners’ levels of readiness and the need to involve learners in meaningful learning tasks. Another helpful part of this chapter focuses on the role of input, acquisition and comprehension, and takes various perspectives into account (such as the connectionist principle, the functional perspective or the interaction perspective). The chapter might feel somewhat overwhelming, since it encapsulates so many concepts that are deeply connected while still introducing unique and sometimes inherently contrasting approaches.

Chapter 4 is pivotal; as stated by the authors, “the chapter deals with the most fundamental issue in SLA: the development of the internal language system” (p. 85). Readers learn about key issues related to SLA (such as the internal developing system, the role of output – hence making connections with the previous chapters that focus on the role of input – and the role of cognitive mechanisms) as well as learning to question whether language acquisition can be viewed as a skill. The *real-world applications* section is particularly helpful in answering theory-based

questions about SLA that matter to teachers: the authors explain, for instance, why teachers should know about the developing system of learners and how this knowledge can be used to enhance teaching.

Chapter 5 focuses on communication and explains how learners use their knowledge of another (or other) language(s) to communicate. The authors expand the discussion to include an introduction to multilingualism, a much welcome addition at a time when many language learners are indeed already bilingual, and are thus developing competencies to communicate in a third or even a fourth language. This chapter also dedicates a fairly good section to socialization and the effect of cultural practices. It introduces the work of Vygotsky, the role of mediation, as well as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), explaining the connection and differences with other mediated or scaffolding systems such as Krashen's *i+1* model (laid out in chapter 1, p. 10).

In chapter 6, "What we know in SLA", readers will be enlightened with regard to the various debates within the discipline. More important, though, the chapter offers a useful summary of what really matters within SLA, and how what matters can help future teachers find and understand better ways to teach languages. Whether readers are interested in grammar instruction, error correction or developing authentic communicative learning tasks, this last chapter will guide them in the right direction. To this effect, Table 6.2 (p. 155) will be of particular interest to anyone hoping to better understand the connections between theories, instructions and feedback or error treatment.

While this book is a very solid introduction to SLA, there are a few aspects that could be improved upon for a future edition. For instance, a few concepts are used without proper introduction or clarification, which could be confusing for the novice reader. This is the case for the concept of constructivism (p. 96), which is not properly explained, nor is it included in the glossary. Another example of omission is the reference to Piaget, where the authors distinguish his work from that of Vygotsky; a footnote or a mention in the list of references would have been welcome, since Piaget was very influential within the field of cognitive development and learning theories. Another useful addition would be a list of abbreviations to help new SLA researchers and students navigate through the many acronyms and symbols used in the field. Finally, we note that very little is mentioned with regard to the role that technology-mediated language learning may play within the field of SLA.

Despite these few weaknesses, this book provides a fresh contribution to the shelf of introductory books on SLA. By covering past and current research in SLA theories and practices, it offers undergraduate students and graduate students in applied linguistics, as well as new language educators, an easy-to-understand investigation of the "crucial interplay between how people learn languages and the most effective way to teach languages" (p. xi). The authors are to be praised for presenting the many debates that still surround SLA, and thus avoiding the pitfall of favouring one theory over another.

## REFERENCES

- Schwietter, John W., ed. 2015. *The Cambridge handbook of bilingual processing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.