

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH IN CLASSROOMS – A TOOL TO TAILOR-MADE LANGUAGE TEACHING STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

SLA refers to the process by which individuals learn a second language, and understanding its principles and theories can greatly inform and enhance language teaching practices. It is already known that individuals have different style, motivation and needs when learning a second language. Consequently, factors such as prior knowledge, motivation, learning strategies, cultural background, and individual differences should also be considered when designing language instruction to create an inclusive and effective learning environment for SLA students.

It is hardly possible to design a particular curriculum for every student individually, especially in bigger classrooms, however gathering data on the above factors would surely help in employing instructional strategies that would provide a well-rounded learning experience for all students. Hence, this research examines SLA research studies and their use to the improvement of teaching strategies, student experience in SL classes and higher results in different aspects of second language acquisition. Analysis of research papers within the expansive domain of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) yields substantial insights; nonetheless, only a fraction is selected to capture the essence of their advantages and the application of their findings.

Keywords: *SLA, theories, teaching, strategies.*

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a multidisciplinary field that investigates the cognitive, social, and affective factors involved in learning a second language (Gass & Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (3rd ed.), 2008). According to (Ellis, 2008), SLA theories attempt to explain how individuals acquire a second language, and they are based on a range of theoretical frameworks, including behaviorism, cognitivism, and social constructivism. Some of the major SLA theories include Behaviorism, Innatism, Cognitive, Social and Interactionist theory.

Behaviorist theories propose that language acquisition is a result of conditioning and habit formation. According to this view, learners acquire language through repeated exposure to language input and reinforcement of correct language use (Carroll, 1963). Innatist theories argue that language acquisition is an innate and biologically determined process (Pinker, 1984). Cognitive theories propose that language acquisition is a result of cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving. According to this view, learners must actively process and analyze language input to acquire new linguistic knowledge (Anderson, 1983).

Social theories emphasize the role of social interaction and context in language acquisition. According to this view, language learning is embedded in social and cultural practices, and that learners acquire language through participation in meaningful communicative events (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Interactionist theories combine elements of cognitive and social perspectives, emphasizing the role of both individual cognitive processes and social interaction in language acquisition (Gass & Mackey, *Input, Interaction, and Output in Second Language Acquisition*, 2007). All these theories are concerned with explaining how individuals acquire a second language.

They examine the processes, factors, and mechanisms involved in learning and developing proficiency in a second language. Moreover, they draw upon various disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, and education; incorporate insights from these fields to provide a comprehensive understanding of second language acquisition and explore a wide range of factors such as cognitive processes, social interaction, motivation, age, aptitude, input, output, and individual differences, that influence language acquisition. A significant element is its application to language teaching, namely, these theories inform instructional practices and approaches by providing insights into effective strategies for facilitating language acquisition.

2. SLA research and language acquisition/learning in classrooms

Research has shown that teachers can influence language acquisition through effective strategies based on research in their classrooms. In line with this, (Cohen & al., 1991) concluded that a knowledge of SLA research findings helps to inform teachers' decisions, even if these findings are not directly applicable to the classroom. There are several reasons why would such a research have impact on LA in students.

Namely, SLA research provides insights into how language acquisition happens, which helps teachers make informed decisions about instructional practices. By understanding the underlying processes involved in learning a second language, teachers can tailor their teaching methods to better support students' language development. Likewise, as (Kang, 2015) puts it, one of the main goals of SLA is to examine which particular types of instruction are more pedagogically effective for a particular learning target.

Consequently, SLA research identifies effective teaching strategies and techniques that can enhance language learning. It offers evidence-based approaches for promoting language acquisition, such as providing comprehensible input, offering opportunities for meaningful interaction, and integrating language skills in a balanced way (Zhang, 2009). Moreover, as (Cohen & al., 1991) state, some of the concepts and tools developed in the process of research on SLA may be directly useful to teachers in conducting needs assessment. It sheds light on common difficulties faced by learners at different proficiency levels and provides guidance on how to address those challenges effectively.

SLA research informs the design of assessments and the provision of feedback. It helps teachers understand the developmental stages of language acquisition, enabling them to create assessments that align with learners' abilities. Additionally, research on feedback strategies helps teachers provide constructive feedback that promotes language development. On the other hand, (Pawlak, 2022) highlights the individual differences among language learners, emphasizing the importance of recognizing learners' diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and preferences. Therefore, teachers can make use of this knowledge to individualize instruction and differentiate their teaching approaches to meet the specific needs of their students.

Moreover, SLA research provides ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers. By staying up to date with the latest research findings and trends in SLA, teachers can continuously enhance their knowledge and refine their instructional practices, leading to improved outcomes for their students.

These represent a portion of segments of SLA research provides teachers and which can be used to improve their teaching strategies as well as benefit to students language learning experience.

2.1. Devising effective strategies in classrooms based on SLA research

Devising effective strategies in classrooms based on SLA research involves incorporating research findings into instructional practices to optimize language learning outcomes. (Cook, 1992) states that SLA can influence teaching at two levels, namely one is the overall impact on all teaching techniques; certain ideas from SLA could influence every technique. The other is the impact of SLA discoveries on particular techniques. SLA research is not necessarily tied in to any existing method but can have something to say for any method - or can indeed suggest completely new methods. Here are some strategies that can be derived from SLA research:

SLA research emphasizes the importance of exposing learners to comprehensible and meaningful language input. Teachers can select authentic materials, such as texts, videos, and audio recordings, that are relevant to learners' interests and level of proficiency. They can also modify and scaffold the input to make it more accessible and comprehensible to learners. In the research conducted by (Zhang, 2009), the findings showed that non-native oral fluency could be obtained through efficient and effective input, interaction and output in EFL.

Social interaction plays a crucial role in language acquisition (Zhang, 2009). Teachers can create opportunities for meaningful communication and collaboration among learners. Pair and group activities, discussions, role-plays, and language games encourage learners to actively use the language, negotiate meaning, and receive feedback from their peers.

SLA research suggests that explicit instruction on specific language forms and structures can enhance language learning. In this respect, in a research conducted about tense forms, (Tsai, 2017) emphasizes that considering the aim of enhancing learners' comprehension of grammatical rules and tense forms, one potential approach worth considering is employing tense-aspect instruction supplemented by Comprehensive Charts. These charts provide a comprehensive overview of all the forms, enabling learners to engage in synthesis, analysis, and comparison for enhanced understanding.

Moreover, teachers can incorporate focused activities that draw learners' attention to grammatical and lexical features, providing explanations, examples, and guided practice. In line with the above, Hall Haley and Rentz (2002) suggest that the benefit of focus on form is the wide range of possible teaching methods that can be employed to encourage students to "notice" the forms. SLA research highlights the importance of learner autonomy and self-directed learning (Olmos, 1998). Teachers can encourage learners to take responsibility for their language learning by setting goals, monitoring their progress, and engaging in self-reflection. Providing resources, self-access materials, and guidance on effective learning strategies empower learners to become independent language learners.

SLA research supports an integrated approach to language learning, where learners develop all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) simultaneously. Teachers can design tasks and activities that integrate multiple language skills and provide authentic contexts for language use. As (Raffone & Monti, 2019) claim in their research, enacting a Digital Storytelling Laboratory made students work with the English language from the perspective of each of the four traditional language skills (i.e., speaking, writing, listening, reading) by also acquiring knowledge of the usage of the different software necessary to create their digital stories.

Hence, the teaching methods were always based on the four language skills, this paper proves that integrating new technology enhanced student engagement and motivation in the context of SLA and also helped them develop digital skills.

Effective feedback is essential for language development. Teachers can provide timely and specific feedback that focuses on both accuracy and communication. Incorporating formative assessment strategies, such as peer feedback, self-assessment, and error correction, helps learners identify areas for improvement and make progress in their language proficiency (Chen, Lin, & Jiang, 2016).

(Pawlak, 2022) extensively discusses research on individual differences in learners of SL such as: aptitude and working memory, personality, grit, learning styles, learning strategies, beliefs, motivation, emotion, etc., and claims that the more informed teachers are about them, the more specified instruction plans they can devise. For instance, (Rubin, 1975) identifies seven learning strategies of good language learners. Even though emphasis is put on good language learners, it is beyond necessary to say that every learner has a strategy.

It is important to note that SLA research provides general guidelines and principles, but it is crucial to adapt these strategies to the specific context and characteristics of the learners. Regular reflection, professional development, and ongoing engagement with SLA research contribute to continuously refining instructional practices and enhancing language learning outcomes in the classroom.

3. Research method

The research method employed consists of analysis of research papers on the topic and their benefit to SL students.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Although in our country pupils start learning English and at least another second/foreign language as early as in first grade, there is a number of students who have undergone thirteen years of English classes and are still having difficulties with the basics of English. In line with this are research findings of (Sabeh, 2018). This allows us to recommend that more effort should be put to have a student-oriented curricula, teaching strategies or techniques. Consequently, there is not much evidence of SLA research in our country regardless of pupils being taught English from first grade. There are merely a few research papers concerning language learning strategies (Akay & Cingilioğlu, 2016) in Bosnia, young learners learning strategies (Vićević Ivanović, Košuta, & Patekar, 2021) in Croatia, and few or none in North Macedonia considering only the segment given, let alone the numerous segments of SLA.

While the abovementioned studies have shown to be of benefit to both students and teachers, a more serious approach should be taken towards student strategies, techniques, individual differences and the like, since SLA research helps educators understand the cognitive, social, and cultural factors that influence language acquisition. This understanding can be used as basis when designing curricula that align with the natural processes of language learning, promoting a smoother and more engaging learning journey.

It provides insights into various teaching methodologies and approaches. For instance, it can guide educators in selecting appropriate techniques for grammar instruction, vocabulary acquisition, and language practice. This knowledge enables the creation of well-rounded curricula that cater to diverse learning styles and preferences. Thus, using the insights obtained from this kind of research is of immense importance in increasing students' second language proficiency and knowledge, in parallel with making their learning experience more effective.

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