

Towards a Theory of Second Language Acquisition

By
Ian Slater

Abstract

In this paper, the author examines attempts at theory building within the field of Second Language Acquisition, particularly efforts to formulate a unified theory of SLA. He argues that such attempts have been largely futile and moreover, given the nature of the discipline itself, that efforts toward consensus –style theory building are misguided and possibly counter productive.

Introduction

When the economist Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) joined the faculty of Cambridge University in the late 1860's, one of his principal ambitions was the general recognition of economics as a field of intellectual endeavour in its own right. Throughout his career, Marshall argued for economics as a separate field from history or the moral sciences. In this he was

ultimately successful, although it took until 1903 to persuade Cambridge to establish a separate economics course. One of his other ambitions was to unify economic thinking and to exemplify it in one text. In this too, he was eventually successful; his celebrated *Principles of Economics* first appeared in 1890 and sales increased every year, peaking in the late 1920's. Indeed, Marshall saw eight editions in his lifetime and modern microeconomics textbooks still rest on this text (Bucholz, 1989).

There are some parallels here with the field of second language acquisition (SLA), which emerged in the early 1970's. Owing something to the many branches of theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics (which emerged in the late 1950's), psychology, and education, SLA arose from research into first language (L1) acquisition by children, as well as the need to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to the growing number of ESL learners around the world (Kramsch, 2000). From the outset, as in any

* Ian Slater was educated at the university of Sydney where he took his degree in Economics. He is currently pursuing a Master's Degree (in TEFL) at Thammasat University. He has been teaching at Assumption University since 1996.