Unscrambling the Omelette

Second Language Acquisition: Social & Psychological Dimensions

J. A. Foley

ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY THAILAND

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[Don't make things more complicated than they need to be]

(WILLIAM OF OCCAM: 1288-1348)

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CONTENTS

Forward i

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Modern Linguistic Theories 3

Chapter 2: How do People Learn Language 6
Issues related to the learning process 9
A framework for understanding and evaluation theories 16

Chapter 3: A Brief History of SLA Teaching 21
The Grammar Translation Method 21
The Reform Movement 21
The Direct Method 22
The Behaviourist Perspective 22

Chapter 4: Cognitivist Perspectives 37
Nativism in First Language Acquisition 42
Constructivism in First Language Acquisition 45

Chapter 5: Cognitive Approaches to SLA 47
The Monitor Model 49
Interlanguage 54
Interactionist Perspectives 57

Chapter 6: Alternative Approaches 69
Total Physical Response (TPR) 69
The Silent Way 70
Suggestopedia 72
Multiple Intelligences 73

Chapter 7: SLA: Different Theories, Common Assumptions 75
'Language': What SLA Assumes 75
'Learning' and 'Learners' in SLA 77
Socially Oriented Explanations 78

Chapter 8: How did Human Language Evolve? 82
Language Development from L1 to L2 85
What We Know about Language Learning 88
Language and Cognition: Piaget 91
Learning to Communicate 94
Vygotsky and Socio-Cultural theory 99

Chapter 9: A Social View of Language Learning 109

Chapter 10: What Early Childhood Tells Us about Language Learning 117
Language as a Resource for Learning 121
Language and Mental Development 122

Chapter 11: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) 130
The Genre Approach 132
Corpus Linguistics and the Lexical Approach 160

Chapter 12: The Spread of English as an International Language and SLA 179

Chapter 13: Individual Learner Differences and SLA 197
Individual Factors 197
General Factors 198
New Paradigms for New Contexts 206
Language Variation and the Individual 210
Implications for Teachers 214
Classroom Factors 216

Chapter 14: Conclusion 218

References 223

Subject Index 255

Forward

In a recent book, David Bellos (2011) argued that one of the great theories of modern language studies and barely disputed was the underling structure of natural language allowing an infinite number of different utterances/sentences to be generated by a set of words and rules.

An alternative theory, however, is that not every utterance/sentence is different but anything said/written has probably been said before. Whatever a language may be in principle, in practice, it is used most commonly to say the same things over and over again. In all human activities, including language, we find nothing as abstract as 'pure meaning', but rather common human needs and desires. All languages serve these same needs. If we do say the same thing over and over again, it is because we encounter the same needs, feel the same fears, desires and sensations. Language is a more of a parallel reflection of our common humanity.

Bellos' view of language seemed to reflect Firth and Wagner's (2003) proposal for a re-conceptualization of Second Language Acquisition. The imbalance between the cognitive and social aspects of language acquisition made me go back to trace the history of the psycholinguistic aspects of language learning. Then, further back to studies of animal communication, child language, to linguistic theories, social-psychologists, and theories being applied in our classrooms today. In other words, I felt that this was necessary to increase awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language in actual use.

To attempt to package all this in a 36 hour course meant restricting and indeed simplifying some of the concepts while expanding others. Consequently this book has relied on a number of important sources that in principle were available to students who want to pursue this area of research further. The initial impetus in terms of text was the course taught under the auspices of South-east Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Regional Language Centre Singapore (Lin 2003). This course was taught mainly within the countries of South-east Asia as part of a diploma course. Other basic texts used for this present book were Foley and Thompson (2003) *Language and Learning: A Life Long Process*. Mitchell and Miles (1998) *Second Language Learning Theories* as well as Richards and Rodgers *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2001). Ellis (2008) The *Study of Second language Acquisition* is a fundamental text in this field. As is O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) *From Corpus to Classroom* and the

growing important of various writings on the *Globalization of English* (Seildhofer 2001; Jenkins, 2000). Other important influences have been, Halliday, Derewianka, Martin and Rothery on genre studies and my own interest in the work of Vygotsky.

It has been said (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 244) that in general Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become to mean little more than a set of general principles that can be applied and interpreted in a variety of ways. This may have been true of earlier forms of CLT in the 70s and 80s but in its present incarnation, it seems to me to be very much based on the linguistic theory as proposed by J.R. Firth, Dell Hymes, M.A. K. Halliday, John Sinclair and the psycho-sociolinguistics of Lev Vygotsky (Foley, 1991a; 1991b) .

Discussions with my students and colleagues, in particular Steve Conlon over the years engaged me in an attempt to explain what Second Language Acquisition actual is or could be in terms of language teaching today, in other words 'unscrambling the omelette'.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about **how people learn languages and in particular English**.

We all have our beliefs and assumptions about how this happens, and this is often reflected in the way we teach or learn a language: in other words, whether or not we realize it, we all have our own **theories** that influence our teaching and learning **practices**. This is much like making an omelette, we have different ways of making one. What happens when we go about making it the wrong way? Can we unscramble the omelette?

Each of us needs to recognize, however, that our own theory may not be entirely right, and that there are other possible answers to the question. We therefore need to evaluate our own beliefs and practices in the light of other explanations, especially those that have been based on studies and research.

This book explores the various theories that scholars and researchers have put forward concerning **language acquisition**, or how people learn languages. Since it is *language* learning that is being examined, it is important that we understand what language is. **Linguistics** explores this question, and hence, this module draws to some extent on insights from linguistics. In addition, because *people* and *learning* each have both social as well as psychological dimensions, the module also draws on insights from **sociology** and **psychology**. In other words, this is an *inter-disciplinary* subject that draws on all three disciplines, as well as the sub-disciplines and research areas that inter-relate them.

Outcome

It is hoped that by the end of this book you will:

- have a good overview of some of the main theoretical explanations of how people learn a language
- understand how these explanations have influenced various approaches to teaching and learning languages
- be keenly aware of the key issues that need to be explored concerning the teaching and learning of languages
- appreciate the complexity of language acquisition and development;
- be better equipped to reflect on and evaluate your own teaching approaches and methods, those of other teachers, and those found in textbooks and other materials and

- have a good foundation in theory to create better and more effective teaching and learning practices.

It will be useful, to attempt to clarify what we mean by 'second language' in this book. In this present study we take as our working definition any language(s) other than the learner's 'mother tongue'. This would cover both languages of wider communication used within the local community and foreign languages, which have no immediately local users. Foreign language is included under the general term 'second' language, because the underlying learning processes are essentially the same, despite different learning purposes and circumstances.

However, we are aware that the term Second Language Acquisition (SLA) embeds some simplistic and questionable assumptions (Block; 2003). We will discuss these in more detail later in this book but for the moment we can signal the monolingual bias sometimes found in studies of SLA. Such a term also implies that people learn languages in chronological order and that the term is often associated with unequal competence between those who for example have learnt English as a 'second' language and those who are 'native speakers'.

It might also be useful here to look at some classical definitions of 'language', as a teacher who proposes to teach something should have a clear grasp of what is to be taught. However, 'language' is notoriously difficult to characterize, in part, at least because the term is used in so many different ways. It might help us to have some preliminary indications of the properties that linguists tend to think of as being essential to language.

According to Sapir (1921:8) 'Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.' As we will see in later chapters in this book such a definition would be hard to support given recent studies in primate research for example.

Hall (1968: 158) tells us that language is 'the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols'. It is noticeable that 'interaction' and 'communication' are introduced into the definition. Hall, like Sapir, treats language as a purely human institution and makes explicit the view that the language that is used by a particular society is part of that society's culture.

Robins (1979: 9-14) does not give a formal definition of language as he points out that such definitions 'tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose...some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis'.

It is to these general theories of language that we must next turn our attention by giving a brief outline of modern linguistic theory.