What good is Second Language Acquisition theory?

Scott Thornbury poses some big questions in an attempt to acquire some answers.

Before you read this article, here is a short test that you might like to try.

How's your knowledge of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory? Test yourself.

1   Who's the odd-one-out?
   a) Chomsky   b) Chimpsky   c) Vygotsky   d) Skinner

2   What's the odd-one-out?
   a) connectionism   b) behaviourism   c) mentalism   d) pelmanism

3   What do these stand for?
   a) UG   b) LAD   c) i + 1   d) ZPD

4   Can you match the following statements with the year that they were made?
   1922   1966   1978 (x 2)   1983   1997

   a) 'Language acquisition occurs in only one way: by understanding messages.'

   b) 'Language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations, out of learning how to communicate.'

   c) 'Language grows and organises itself from the bottom up in an organic way, as do other complex nonlinear systems.'

   d) 'Language is not a habit-structure. Ordinary linguistic behaviour characteristically involves innovation ... in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy.'

   e) 'Language learning is a habit-forming process ... Proficiency in the use of a language can only come as a result of perfectly formed habits.'

   f) 'Language arises in the life of the individual through an ongoing exchange of meanings with significant others ... In this sense, language is a product of the social process.'

5   Now, for ten points each, who *made* the above statements?

First, the answers

Check your answers on page 6 and see how many you got right.

If you did well in the test, you are probably one of those teachers who are not only interested in SLA theory, but are keen to explore its classroom applications. If, on the other hand, you didn't do so well, you are certainly not alone. Most teachers have a limited interest in SLA theory and hence only a fairly sketchy grasp of its details. Typically, this knowledge is represented in quasi-biblical form, along the lines of: *'Now Skinner did reign in the land of psychology, and it came to pass that Chomsky smote Skinner and begat Krashen, and Krashen begat Long, and, lo, Long begat Merrill Swain ... etc, etc.*

This ignorance of – or indifference to – SLA theory owes in part to the visceral distrust that most practitioners feel towards ivory-tower theorising. But there is also a strong sense that, when it comes to agreeing on a unified theory of SLA, or assessing its relevance to classroom practice, the jury is still out. Recently I was teaching a course in SLA to a group of Masters students. About halfway in, after we'd looked at the history of SLA theory from behaviourism through to cognitivism, one of the students piped up: *'How many more theories are we going to have to study, only to see each one shot down?'* I had to admit that the (relatively short) history of SLA – with its rivalries and intrigues, attacks and counterattacks – reads a bit like the Wars of the Roses.

What, then, is the good of SLA theory? And why the lack of agreement?

Now, the BIG questions

First, it's worth reviewing the 'big questions' that SLA research attempts to address. These might be summarised thus:

- In what ways is SLA like FLA (First Language Acquisition)?
- Which of the following are necessary and/or sufficient for SLA?
  □ input/exposure
  □ attention
  □ interaction
  □ correction
  □ motivation
  □ formal instruction
  □ none of the above
- Why do learners make errors?
- Why do some learners do better than others?

Given that there is still no consensus as to how we learn our *first* language, it is not surprising that opinions range widely with regard to the relationship between SLA and FLA. Should we take the mentalist view, for example, that there is (in Stephen Pinker's terms) a *language instinct*, ie that we are hard-wired with an innate and universal language acquisition faculty (Chomsky's UG)? And, if so, is this faculty available for the acquisition of additional languages? Or should we take the more environmentalist view that it is not nature, but nurture, that accounts for language acquisition? That is, it is the child's (or the learner's) exposure to and interaction with the linguistic environment that shapes the development of language.

If we adopt the 'nurture' position, do we choose between the (pretty well discredited) behaviourist one (learning is conditioning); the cognitive one (language learning involves general learning faculties, such as conscious attention and practice); the sociocultural one (learning is co-constructed in episodes of assisted performance) or the more recent 'usage-based' or 'emergentist' view that grammar emerges 'for free' out of the piecemeal accumulation, categorisation and recombination of tens of thousands of individual words and phrases?

Having plumped for either nature or nurture (or perhaps, more wisely, a bit of both), we then need to decide to what extent the processes and conditions of FLA are still operational for SLA. And we will need to decide what specific conditions are optimal for success, given that so many second language learners

Theory of learning	Dominant metaphor	Associated method	Implications for teaching
Behaviourism	carrot and stick	audiolingualism	repetition; avoidance of error; correction
Mentalism/UG	hard-wiring	natural approach, TPR	exposure (so as to trigger parameter re-setting); acceptance of error and a developmental order
Cognitive theory 1: information-processing	black box	communicative language teaching	comprehensible input; noticing; output; interaction; feedback; focus-on-form
Cognitive theory 2: usage-based, emergentism, connectionism	order for free	no defined method as yet	
Sociocultural theory	scaffolding	task-based learning?	interaction; assisted performance of tasks

fail to achieve advanced levels of proficiency. And, of course, as teachers, we will want to know whether and how instruction helps, and what support SLA research offers to our present practices.

There is no space in this short article to review how SLA researchers stand with regard to all these issues, but the accompanying table offers a potted summary of some of the main theoretical movements, including their implications for practice (for fuller descriptions of these theories and methods, see Thornbury 2006).

Theory and metaphor

It's often helpful to think of theories in terms of an image that encapsulates their core principles, that is to say, their dominant metaphor (column 2 in the table). In fact, given the slipperiness of the notion of 'mind', metaphor underpins a good deal of the language that is used to talk about SLA. For example, the use of terms like *input, output, feedback*, and so on, reinforces a view of the mind as a kind of information-processing machine, or a sealed 'black box'. *Scaffolding*, on the other hand, construes mental processes as being less internalised, more collaborative, and learning more like joint-construction than mere data-processing. (I'll come back to the subject of metaphor shortly.)

The good of theory

What does all this mean, then, in terms of how we answer the question: *What's the good of SLA theory?*

Knowledge of theory, it seems to me, serves at least four important purposes for the teacher. The first is that it can validate our classroom practices: it can reinforce what N S Prabhu called our 'sense of plausibility' in terms of our day-to-day teaching. Thus, if we feel, intuitively, that there is value in correcting learners' errors, it is helpful to know that there is research evidence that shows that negative feedback can be formative. If we encourage pairwork in class, it is good to know that researchers have found positive benefits for it.

The second is that knowing that there are still no conclusive answers to the big questions is a safeguard against adopting a narrowly inflexible position with regard to classroom practice – a lesson that teacher trainers need to bear in mind!

Thirdly, by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of a particular classroom approach, we may be encouraged to experiment within that approach, along lines suggested by the theory, and thereby become the researchers of our own theories. The value of becoming an active and reflective experimenter is well documented in the literature on teacher development. Theory can both motivate and inform this process.

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Finally, a knowledge of theory can act as a bulwark against the claims of charlatans and impostors, of whom this profession has its fair share. For example, we are all familiar with publicity such as this:

'Using the award-winning [XXX] immersion method, our unique interactive software teaches without translation, memorisation or grammar drills. Combining 1000s of real-life images and the voices of native speakers in a step-by-step immersion process, our programs successfully replicate the experience of learning your first language.'

This short extract is packed with assumptions about SLA that even a rudimentary knowledge of theory would call into question. How can a method be described as 'immersion', or a replication of FLA, if there is no apparent speaking? How can a method be both immersion and incremental ('step-by-step')? Why are translation, memorisation and grammar drills necessarily to be avoided? Why are the voices of 'native speakers' valued? What aspects of learning the first language is this method actually replicating? And so on.

Art or science?

At the same time, we need to be wary of taking SLA theory too seriously. And we should be suspicious of those who argue that knowledge of theory is a professional obligation. Teaching is a highly skilled activity, but it is not, alas, rocket science. In fact, it is probably not a science at all.

In an article called 'Art and science in Second Language Acquisition research', an SLA heavyweight, John H Schumann, likened theory-construction to other kinds of creativity, such as painting. Comparing two (at the time) competing theories, he wrote: *'When SLA is regarded as art and not science, Krashen's and McLaughlin's views can coexist as two different paintings of the language learning experience – as reality symbolized in two different ways. Viewers can choose between the two on an aesthetic basis, favouring the painting which they find to be phenomenologically true to their experience. Neither position is correct: they are simply alternative representations of reality.'*

This is why metaphors have such power. We tend to be well disposed to a theory if its dominant imagery chimes with our own values and beliefs. If we are inclined to think of learning as 'the meeting of minds', for example, an image such as the *Zone of Proximal Development* is more likely to attract us than the image of a black box. By the same token, we need to be aware that, when a case is being made for a particular theory of SLA, the motives of those making the case are seldom disinterested.

One consequence, for Schumann, of re-construing SLA theory as art rather than science is that *'such a view would allow us to consider our work [ie the work of SLA theorists and researchers] as unimportant. And, in fact, it is unimportant. It has no significant short-term consequences …'.*

A similar scepticism was expressed by the one theorist whose name is probably the most frequently cited in the literature on language acquisition: Noam Chomsky. He wrote:

'In general, the willingness to rely on "experts" is a frightening aspect of contemporary political and social life. Teachers, in particular, have a responsibility to make sure that ideas and proposals are evaluated on their merits, and not passively accepted on grounds of authority, real or presumed.

The field of language teaching is no exception. It is possible – even likely – that principles of psychology and linguistics … may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith.'

This advice would seem to be as good today as it was 40 years ago. ETp

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Prabhu, N S 'There is no best method – why?' *TESOL Quarterly 24*: 161–176 1990

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Answers to the SLA test:
1 Chimpsky, because he was a chimpanzee! He was taught an extensive vocabulary but never really developed even a rudimentary grammar. This did not confirm, but did not disprove, Noam Chomsky's contention that humans (and only humans) are born with an innate grammar. B F Skinner, whose behaviourism was refuted by Chomsky, is also an odd-one-out, since behaviourism has no real currency any longer, whereas Chomsky's mentalism is still widely touted, as is Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory.

2 Pelmanism, because it is a game (sometimes called Memory) while the others are theories of learning. Connectionism is the theory that learning occurs as the brain's neural networks become strengthened in response to repeated encounters with patterned input. It's a view that doesn't presuppose an innate language acquisition device, as in mentalism.

3 *Universal Grammar* (Chomsky's explanation for the way we all end up speaking our first language accurately despite exposure to less than ideal data); *Language Acquisition Device* – the hypothesised and innate language learning faculty – a predecessor of UG; *input + 1*: the key concept in Stephen Krashen's input hypothesis, which argues that input that is both comprehensible and calibrated just one notch above the learner's present competence is all that is needed for language acquisition to occur (assuming conditions of low anxiety); *the Zone of Proximal Development*: a key concept in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory – the moment of optimal learning potential, where the learner is almost within reach of being able to perform a task unassisted.

4/5 a) 1983 (Stephen Krashen); b) 1978 (Evelyn Hatch); c) 1997 (Diane Larsen-Freeman); d) 1966 (Noam Chomsky); e) 1922 (Harold Palmer); f) 1978 (Michael Halliday). These quotes reflect the trajectory from (early) behaviourism (Palmer), to mentalism/UG (Chomsky), to cognitive learning theories (Hatch and Krashen), to a more sociocultural view (Halliday), to an emergentist position (Larsen-Freeman).