

# INTRODUCTION TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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# WHAT WE KNOW FROM FLA?

- All healthy babies are 'predisposed' to learning their L1 in **the spoken form**, i.e. there is **some mechanism or LAD** (language acquisition device) in the brain.
- Learning will **only takes place** if babies hear language around them (they do not learn words/structures they never hear).
- As young children learn their L1, they **practice endlessly** what they learn.
- Although the rate at which young children acquire their L1 varies, they **follow a fixed sequence of learning**.
- **The order** in which certain features of language are learned does not depend on the frequency with which they hear adults using the structures, e.g. they will learn plural 's' (books) or the 'ing' (going) form before third person singular 's' (he speaks).

# SLA

- Second language acquisition is the study of learning a 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, etc. language having learned/started to learn an L1.
- It may take place in naturalistic or classroom settings.
- Researchers look at both the language used at various stages of learning (product) as well as the mental processes and environmental factors that influence that learning (process)
- Understanding SLA is important for knowing how to approach the teaching of 2<sup>nd</sup>/foreign languages
- Emerged from contrastive analysis studies (of similarities and differences between languages)
- Built on prevailing theories of psychology and linguistics as well as knowledge/ understanding of L1 acquisition

## SOME FACTS ABOUT SLA

- Errors are important for SLA (both for learning the L2 and for studying the process of L2 acquisition)
- SLA is systematic and, to a large extent, universal
- Order in which grammatical features such as morphemes are acquired are largely fixed regardless in which order they are taught.
- Individual differences do determine how well Ls acquire a language.
- Many learners stop developing while still short of target-like competence

# LANGUAGE ERRORS

- were seen as something bad / to be avoided at all cost: in line with behaviourist psychology.
- Now seen in SLL as a stage through which Ls must go through
- Errors that L2 learners make are universal:
  - omission (compare with L1 acquisition)
  - overgeneralization (compare with L1 acquisition)
  - transfer errors (from L1)
    - Positive transfer
    - Negative transfer

# STUDIES OF ERRORS

- Studies have shown that errors are:
  - Systematic (not random)
  - Cannot always be predicted by CA
  - Ls move through certain stages characterized by particular types of errors, i.e. go through an **interlanguage** phase
  - Ls attempt to construct their own rules of language based on existing knowledge which may result in errors such as overgeneralization of regular past tense form

# EARLY STAGES OF L2 ACQUISITION

- Silent period : Ls may be learning but they make no attempt to say anything
- Early speech characterized by:
  - Formulaic chunks, e.g *Can I have ...; What's your name? I was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1989*
  - Propositional simplification: Ls leave out words, e.g. *Me no blue = I have no blue crayon*
- Ls then begin to acquire grammar and as they do so, they appear to follow a similar route in terms of accuracy and the errors they make

# STAGES OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Stage	Description	Example
1	Ls fail to mark the tense for past time	'eat'
2	Ls begin to produce irregular past tense form	'ate'
3	Ls overgeneralize regular past tense form	'eated'
4	Sometimes Ls produce hybrid forms	'ated'
5	Ls produce correct irregular past tense forms	'ate'

# INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND SLA

- Age
- Language aptitude
- Motivation
- Learning skills, styles and strategies
- Personality type (introversion/ extroversion)
- Tolerance to errors

# FOSSILIZATION

- Most learners do not reach full competence in every aspect of the target language, i.e. they do not go through all the stages of learning outlined in slide 11 for every aspect of the language.
- In such cases their **'interlanguage'** is said to have **fossilized**, i.e. their errors are consistent and systematically used
- At what point learners language development fossilizes depends on a number of factors including:
  - Ls' language aptitude
  - Ls' motivation to acquire language proficiency
  - Ls' needs

# CRITICAL AGE HYPOTHESIS

- At around puberty the two spheres of the brain begin to harden and the left hemisphere takes on the responsibility for language.
- Prior to this, the brain has a great deal of plasticity which seems to facilitate language learning, at least in terms of pronunciation.
- After reaching this critical age, Ls appear to have greater difficulty in acquiring a 2<sup>nd</sup> language
- Research has suggested that there may not be a cut-off point for language – rather a different critical period for pronunciation and for syntax
- Few adults after reaching the critical period learn to pronounce a 2<sup>nd</sup> language without a trace of an accent.

## WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL AGE FOR SLL?

- Because of the CP hypothesis → young children are believed to be more efficient language learners than adolescents or adults.
- This is true in terms of acquiring a native-like accent, **but** no so in terms of the rate at which they learn vocabulary or structures of the new language.

# AGE DIFFERENCES IN SLA

## Younger advantage

- Brain plasticity
- Not analytical
- Fewer inhibitions (usually)
- Weaker group identity
- Simplified input more likely

## Older advantage

- Learning capacity
- Analytic ability
- Pragmatic skills
- Greater knowledge of L1
- Real-world knowledge

## WHEN DOES SLA TAKES PLACE?

- Like babies learning their L1, SLL need to have opportunities to hear and practice the language they are learning.
- The following may facilitate SLL:
  - modified input - foreigner talk / comprehensible input
  - interaction in which negotiation of meaning takes place
  - scaffolding: the process by which Ls utilise discourse to help them construct structures that are outside their competence
  - opportunities for comprehensible output

# INTRODUCTION IS OVER

- It's time for you to READ, COMPREHEND, SUMMARIZE and SHARE in the form of class presentation.
- Source: Ortega, Lourdes. 2013. *Understanding SLA*
- The chapters are to be presented in similar order as in the book.
- Max 20 slides with short texts, your explanation & presentation abilities are highly appreciated!
- Do the task in partners!