

## Current Issues and Debates in SLA

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### ABSTRACT

*The existing scholarship on Second Language Acquisition is replete with different tensions and debates, which reflect diverging epistemologies, theoretical bases and schools of thought. This paper deals with the current issues surrounding the two major and salient approaches to Second Language Acquisition, the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp and the sociocultural camp. After providing an overview of the fundamental tenets and underpinnings of each camp as well as their subdivisions, I conclude by speculating on the future directions of Second Language Acquisition.*

**Keywords:** Second language, language acquisition, learning languages, theories in SLA

### INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (henceforth called SLA) in general refers to “the acquisition of a language beyond the native language” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 1). In the related literature, the additional language is, by convention, called a second language (L2), although it may actually not be the second (but the third, fourth) to be acquired. The rather young field of SLA is basically concerned with the processes underlying the development of second language among non-native language learners. Various parent disciplines of linguistics, psychology (and their subfields of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology), education and more recently even anthropology and sociology have come to inform SLA as a field and have at different points in time and to varying degrees influenced and continue to influence SLA, which is evidenced by the diverse perspectives in SLA. Whether SLA can be considered an independent field in its own right or not is still a matter of debate. Some scholars view SLA as an autonomous field with its own research agenda yet multidisciplinary foci; however, others consider it a sub-discipline of one parent discipline or another (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 159).

Thus far, there is no complete and integrated theory of SLA accommodating different approaches but rather, there are different theoretical attempts at accounting for second language acquisition. Like many other fields in academia, SLA has been a ground filled with tensions, debates, and a growing diversity of theories.

In terms of its developmental history, SLA primarily emerged as a field of study from within linguistics and psychology (and their sub-fields of psycholinguistics and later sociolinguistics). As a result, until mid-1980s, SLA was largely “mind/brain” oriented, but gradually as the “social” aspect of language learning started to receive more attention, alternative approaches to SLA began to emerge. In particular, the emergence of the powerful “sociocultural theory” began to influence SLA. Although, nowadays, different approaches to SLA recognize the role of both the individual and the social aspects in second language learning, what seems to be the source of debate and conflict among the rival approaches is the question of which aspect has primacy over the other.

### **COGNITIVE/ PSYCHOLINGUISTIC CAMP**

This theoretical paradigm, which has been dominating the field of SLA for the past few decades, attempts to account for SLA with more focus on the mental, cognitive and psychological processes underpinning the second language learning. Basically, scholars in this camp argue that mind/brain should be the focus of SLA research, since they contend that “after all, that’s where language resides, either as a special mental representation as the linguists would have it or as some manifestation of behavioral imprints as the psychologists would have it”, and “although learning may happen through interaction...language ends up in the mind/brain of the learner” (VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 5).

The cognitive/psycholinguistic camp is not monolithic. The scholarship in this camp can be broadly divided into the two main streams of “linguistic cognitivism” and “interactionism” (Ortega, 2011, p. 174). In this approach, “individual actions are believed to be driven by internally motivated states” (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 823). A pivotal tenet in this school of thought is that “all human languages are fundamentally innate and...the same universal principles underlie all of them”(Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 15). In other words, “the human language faculty is construed in the most reduced psychological sense of housing core syntax and its morpho-phonological and morpho-semantic interfaces, and environmental influences are defined as outside the scope of research programs”(Ortega, 2011, p. 174).

Linguistic cognitivism has been widely criticised as it does not attend much to the “developmental aspects of language acquisition” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 19). Moreover, the compartmentalisation of knowledge into the competence-performance dichotomy, and native competence have been critiqued for offering a “narrow notion of what is learned” (Ortega, 2011, p. 175).

The second and more contemporary strand of research in this camp, interactionism, encompasses not only the interaction approach but also general cognitive theories that often offer explanations for L2 learning. Scholars working within this perspective focus more on “interactions between clearly bounded learner-internal and learner-external variables” (Ortega, 2011, p. 174). These researchers “attribute considerably more importance to the

environment than the innatists [the former camp]” (p. 19). I think this stream, unlike the first one, brings in the social aspect into the equation or at least acknowledges its role.

Overall, in terms of the underlying epistemology, this camp is said to be leaning on positivism (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). With respect to research methodology, studies in this camp tend to be quantitative, correlational and involving relationships among variables and constructs. Using such methods to study social phenomena has been critiqued as such methods were “originally developed to describe the behaviour of inanimate objects” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 536).

The cognitive/psycholinguistic camp has been critiqued for its strong focus on the individual, and thus isolating the individual from the social context, and assigning a secondary role to the social milieu, as acknowledged by many scholars (e.g., Atkinson, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Swain & Deters, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Atkinson (2002) used the metaphor of “lonely cactus” (p. 536) to describe the way this camp explains language acquisition. Firth and Wagner (1997) in a thought-provoking paper in the *Modern Language Journal* called for more socially-oriented research, which invoked responses by SLA researchers, both in the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp (Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997; Long, 1997,) and those favoring the social dimension of SLA (Hall, 1997; Liddicoat, 1997; Poulisse, 1997;). Firth and Wagner (1997) portrayed the SLA research as disproportionately “individualistic and mechanistic” and “heavily in favour of the individual’s cognition, particularly the development of grammatical competence” and called for more research on the social and contextual dimensions of SLA (p. 288). They rightly noted that most research in SLA, up to that point in time, had been (and I think even after 15 years still is) “imbalanced in favour of cognitive-oriented theories and methodologies” (p. 286). Fifteen years later, I do not think this imbalance has significantly changed. As Mitchell and Myles (1998) observed the “dominant theoretical influences [in SLA] have been linguistic and psycholinguistic” and “while more socially oriented views have been proposed from time to time, they have remained relatively marginal to the field overall”( p. x).

Despite the challenges and questions posed, the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp seems to be well-supported by many SLA scholars. Second language acquisition for Davis (1995) takes place “mostly, if not solely, in the mind” (p. 428), for Ellis (1997) it is “essentially a psycholinguistic enterprise, dominated by the computational metaphor of acquisition” (p. 87) and for Doughty and Long (2003), it is centrally a cognitive process.

To summarize, the cognitive/ psycholinguistic tradition, the most widely accepted tradition in SLA, stresses the importance of human internal (mental) processes rather than external processes. In terms of future directions, I think the frontiers of this camp keep expanding as the field of psycholinguistics is becoming “increasingly intertwined with neurolinguistics and cognitive neuroscience” (Li & Tokowicz, 2011, p. 530), which is indicative of the fact that this camp not only will be further supported by its parent discipline, psychology, but also will gain foothold in other established sciences, all of which I think

contribute to its “scientific image”. In fact, as Atkinson (2002) notes, since its inception, this tradition has been “scientized” by its practitioners.

### **SOCIOCULTURAL CAMP: AN UMBRELLA FOR DIFFERENT THEORIES**

The foundation of the powerful sociocultural theory (called SCT henceforth) was laid on the work of the now-renowned Russian psychologist, Vygotsky. Interestingly, in the words of Lantolf and Beckett (2009), the late Vygotsky himself “rarely used the term ‘sociocultural’, preferring instead ‘cultural psychology’ or ‘cultural-historical psychology’ to refer to his theory” (p. 459). They credit Wertsch (1985) with having coined the term sociocultural “as a way of capturing the notion that human mental functioning results from participation in, and appropriation of, the forms of cultural mediation integrated into social activities” (p. 459).

For Lightbown and Spada (2006), SCT is “an explanation of knowledge and learning that is based on the assumption that all learning is first social then individual” (p. 204). In essence, SCT is predicated on the “ontology of the social individual” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 283). It should be noted, however, that the emphasis laid upon the social dimension in SCT does not mean “a divorce from psychological processes” (p. 283).

What all these definitions have in common is the primacy of the social over the individual aspect of the second language learning. SCT emphasises Vygotsky’s “insistent focus on the *relationship* between the individual physiological aspects and the social and culturally produced contexts and artefacts that transform the individual’s cognitive or mental functions” (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2010, p. 14). What makes SCT different from other alternative approaches is “its focus on if and how [second language] learners develop the ability to use the new language to mediate (i.e. regulate or control) their mental and communicative activity” (p. 24, Lantolf, 2011).

SCT has been taken up and extended differently by different scholars. This theory is, in fact, a catch-all term under which different, diverging approaches are subsumed. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) rightly acknowledge, “current SCT approaches include numerous and somewhat divergent emphases” (p. 3). There are now different alternative approaches to SLA all claiming to have developed from SCT. In what follows, I briefly explain the approaches known as: neo-Vygotskian, complexity theory, sociocognitive approach, and identity approach as some of the variants of SCT.

#### ***Neo-Vygotskian***

Lantolf and his associates were the first scholars to extend SCT to SLA (e.g., Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2000). This approach seems to have been increasingly embraced by other scholars (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2000, 2006a, 2006b).

This version of SCT, in the words of Lantolf (2011) “is distinguished from other SLA approaches by the fact that it places mediation, either by other or self, at the core of development and use” (p. 24). In fact, this approach is not much detached from the mental aspects of language learning. It has even been called a “sociogenetic cognitive theory” (Kinginger, 2002, p. 240). In this approach, learning is thought to happen through a “gradual process of internalization whereby a fully externalized social practice becomes a substantially internalized cognitive practice” (Atkinson, 2002 p. 537). Internalization is defined as “the process by which symbolic systems take on psychological status” (Swain, et al., p. 27). Also, concepts such as languaging, inner speech, and intramental processes further indicate the cognitive tendency of this approach. However, it should be noted that this theory differs fundamentally from other theories of mind in that it “takes into account the complex interaction between the individual acting with mediational means and the sociocultural context” (Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 821).

Early research (e.g. Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Saville-Troike, 1988) in this approach focused on the zone of proximal development (ZPD), self-regulation and private speech. But more recently, the neo-Vygotskian approach, probably in response to criticism, has “taken a pedagogical turn” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 589) focusing especially on dynamic assessment (e.g., Ableeva, 2010; Anton, 2009; Lantolf and Poehner, 2011) and concept-based instruction.

### ***Complexity Theory***

Another new SCT approach to SLA is complexity theory. Drawing on work in the biological, psychological and social sciences, Larsen-Freeman (1997) introduced this approach to SLA. Seeing SLA as “complex, dynamic, open, adaptive, self-organizing, non-linear system” (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, p. 52) opens up new ways of exploring questions about how people use, and learn languages. In this view of SLA, the term “development” is preferred over “acquisition”. The complexity theory perspective rejects the notion of language as something that is taken in – a static commodity that one acquires and therefore possesses (Larsen-Freeman 2002). This theoretical position seems to have been taken up by multilingual researchers like Kramsch and Whiteside (2008). While sharing with the neo-Vygotskian SCT the view that “cognition... emerges from ongoing social interaction”, this novel approach to SLA places learning “neither in the brain/body nor social interaction, but in their intersection” (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, p. 66).

In essence, this approach tries to provide explanations for the development –rather than acquisition– of language. However, it seems to me that it is still in its developmental stages and it remains to be seen if, and how this approach will be embraced by other scholars in the field and how its direction will change.

### ***Sociocognitive Approach***

Although having the word cognitive in it, this approach views cognition differently from the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp, in which cognition is merely “an information processor” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 591). The basic claim of this approach is that “the social and the cognitive are functionally integrated” (p. 591) based on the notion that “human cognition has developed evolutionarily to help us adapt to our varied and ever-changing environments” (p. 591). A central notion in this approach is the concept of alignment (Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, & Okada, 2007), which is “the complex means by which living beings dynamically adapt to the environments they depend on for survival” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 592).

This approach, while being based on a novel and appealing scientific idea, is still in its embryonic stage and as Atkinson (2011) admits, the “evidence supporting a sociocognitive approach is modest” (p. 592).

### ***Identity Approach toward SLA***

This approach foregrounds the social or rather sociological aspect of language learning more than other SCT approaches. The distinctive feature of this approach is its “focus on issues of power and inequality” (Norton, 2011 p. 87) and the assumption that a learner’s identities are dynamic and subject to change across time and space. As Norton and McKinney (2011) note, “every time learners speak, they are negotiating and renegotiating a sense of self in relation to the larger social world” (p. 73). According to Norton (2011), both the identity approach and SCT “view learners as historically and socially situated agents and learning as not just the acquisition of linguistic forms but as growing participation in a community of practice” (p. 87). However, the SCT approach is “centrally concerned with individual cognitive process...rather than with social processes” (p. 87). This approach has been applied by many researchers in SLA who have tried to study the highly social and situated nature of language learning (e.g., Dagenais, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Potowski, 2004).

In sum, SCT is an umbrella term under which different strands of SCT are collected. The unifying thread connecting these different strands is the primacy of the social over the individual. Clearly, different variants of SCT have contributed to a growing understanding of different aspects of second language acquisition and have helped open up SLA beyond its roots in linguistics and cognitive psychology to social theory, and sociological and sociocultural research. Yet, a general criticism of the SCT approaches (particularly the novel ones) is their lack of pedagogical applicability. It seems that SCT gurus and theorizers need to attend more to the practical applications of their theories. The cognitive/psycholinguistic camp, given its considerably longer history, seems to have offered more pedagogical applications.

It is healthy and promising for any theory to be further developed and extended so that it can continue to flourish. Nevertheless, my understanding is that in fact SCT is getting splintered and there seems to be a general tendency among the alternative approaches (as in

the sociocognitive approach and complexity theory) to try to connect with some science in the academy, probably to compete with the dominant psycholinguistic/cognitive camp.

In terms of research methodology, within this tradition, qualitative research methods are given higher status than statistically-driven quantitative methods. Longitudinal case studies, diaries, journals, and personal narratives are considered to provide important insights into the individual's cognitive development. It seems that there is more focus on particularities rather than on the generalizability of findings to a population at large.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

I divide the existing viewpoints of the scholars in the two afore-mentioned camps into two categories. In the first category, which I call a “pro-pluralism” or “symbiotic” perspective, different alternatives can co-exist and we can “let all the flowers bloom” (Lantolf, 1996, p. 739) so that they can “cross-fertilize” (Duff & Talmy, 2011, p. 111). Pro-pluralism scholars in SLA (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Block, 1996, 2007; Lantolf, 1996, 2006) are of the opinion that differences in approaches can be conducive to further enrichment of SLA.

The second view, which I call “exclusivistic” or “either/or” perspective, only favors one approach, cognitive/ psycholinguistic. Some scholars (e.g., Beretta 1991; Long, 1997) consider the cognitive/psycholinguistic paradigm to be superior to its alternatives and have called for making SLA a “normal science” (Long, 2004, p.230), implying the scientific image of their camp. As Zuengler and Miller (2006) rightly observed, there is an explicit positivism in this perspective. Long and Doughty (2003, p. 866) even go to the extreme of calling scholars not working within their cognitive/psycholinguistic camp “self-professed epistemological relativists, who express general angst with SLA’s cognitive orientation...while offering no alternative but the abyss” (p. 866).

I tend to agree with the pro-pluralists and concur with Zuengler and Miller (2006) in that the “tensions, debates, and a growing diversity of theories are healthy and stimulating for a field like SLA (p. 35). I think these differences can serve to enrich our understanding of SLA and break new ground in the scholarship in this field. In my view, the conflicting views and perspectives can be compared to the Asian fable of three blind men who were trying to describe an elephant. While each camp has made significant and worthwhile contributions, so far they failed to portray a holistic and integrated picture of SLA. I believe all perspectives are needed to provide a more profound understanding of the complex and amazing phenomenon of SLA.

In terms of future directions, I tend to think the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp will continue to dominate the field, given that its supporting fields (psychology and more recently neuroscience) are well-situated within academia. I do not envision this changing in the near future. I do not think a possible merger of the two camps is feasible, as they stem from two different epistemologies (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Due to the differential nature of their assumptions and different epistemologies, they employ different theoretical frameworks, use different methods for collecting and analyzing data, and reach interpretation of research findings and conclusions in different ways. It remains to be seen if it is possible to develop a new approach which would be broad enough to unify within its borders both cognitive and social perspectives.

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