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KEY TERMS

IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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continuum

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Introduction

What is second language acquisition?

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a research field that focuses on learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching. In their best-selling text, Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 1) define SLA as “the study of how learners create a new language system.” As a research field, they add that SLA is the study of what is learned of a second language and what is not learned.

An examination of any other introductory or overview texts would reveal similar definitions and discussions of the scope of SLA research (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; VanPatten, 2003; White, 2003). Moreover, such definitions would include a concern for both processes and products involved in how languages are learned, as the field is informed by a variety of disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, and education. These different influences are most easily seen in the edited volume by VanPatten and Williams (2007) on theories in SLA. The mainstream theories represented in that volume reflect the multifaceted nature of SLA as well as the various parent disciplines that have come to inform research on language learning.

Some make the distinction between *foreign* language learning and *second* language acquisition. The former is used to refer to language learning in contexts in which the language is not normally spoken outside the classroom, such as learning French in Newcastle, United Kingdom or Greek in Omaha, Nebraska in the United States. SLA is used by some to refer to those contexts in which the language is used outside the classroom, as in the case of learning English in the United States or learning Spanish in Spain. While such distinctions are useful from a sociological perspective, they have little linguistic or psychological validity. As has been argued repeatedly in the literature, people and the mechanisms they possess for language learning do not change from context to context. The mind/brain still has to do what it has to do

whether instruction in language is present or not, and whether there is presence or absence of opportunities to interact with speakers of the language. To be sure, context impacts rate and ultimate proficiency, but context does not impact the underlying processes involved in learning another language. Thus, it is common in SLA to place all contexts of learning under the umbrella term *second language acquisition*.

Looking at the various definitions of SLA what emerges is a concern about learners and learning. The field of SLA addresses the fundamental questions of how learners come to internalize the linguistic system of another language and how they make use of that linguistic system during comprehension and speech production. Although, we can draw some pedagogical implications from theories and research in SLA, the main objective of SLA research is learning and not teaching, although we will touch upon the relationship between SLA and language teaching later in this introduction.

A brief history of SLA

Contemporary research in SLA has its roots in two seminal publications. The first is S. Pit Corder's 1967 essay "The Significance of Learners' Errors." Concerned largely with teaching, Corder noted that advances in language instruction would not occur until we understood what language learners bring to the task of acquisition. Influenced by L1 research—which had repudiated any kind of strict behaviorist account of child language acquisition—Corder suggested that like children, perhaps L2 learners came equipped with something internal, something that guided and constrained their acquisition of the formal properties of language. He called this something "the internal syllabus" noting that it did not necessarily match the syllabus that instruction attempted to impose upon learners. Corder also made a distinction between **input** and **intake**, defining input as the language available from the environment, but intake as that language that actually makes its way into the learner's developing competence. This distinction is one still held today in the field.

A second seminal publication was the 1972 publication of Larry Selinker's "Interlanguage." In this article, Selinker argued that L2 learners possessed an internal linguistic system worthy of study in its own right, a language system that had to be taken on its own terms and not as some corrupted version of the L2. He called this system an "**interlanguage**" because the system was neither the L1 nor the L2, but something in-between that the learner was

building from environmental data. Selinker also posited a number of constructs still central today in L2 research, notably L1 **transfer** and **fossilization**—each of which is described elsewhere in this book.

Thus, these two critical thinkers laid the foundation upon which the next decades of work on SLA was forged.

The 1970s

The 1970s was marked largely by descriptive studies that sought to refute behaviorism and to apply the basic ideas of Corder and Selinker. During this time frame we saw the emergence of research on **acquisition orders** (the famous “**morpheme studies**”) that replicated both the methodology and the findings of L1 acquisition research in the L2 context. We also saw the emergence of research on **transitional stages** of competence, which again replicated important findings from L1 research. The picture that began to take shape was that indeed L2 learners possessed built-in syllabi that directed their course of development just as Corder had previously suggested. This time period also gave birth to **error analysis**, the careful examination of learner output with particular attention to “errors” (deviations from L2 normative language). From error analysis scholars began to minimize L1 influence on SLA; that is, researchers revealed that L1 transfer was not as widespread as once thought. To be sure, this period was heavily marked by research on English as a second language, especially by nonclassroom learners, leaving some professionals in other languages to dismiss the findings as inapplicable to classroom learners and to learners of other languages. However, research in the 1980s and 1990s would subsequently demonstrate that the general tenets of SLA were applicable to all languages in all contexts.

The 1980s

By the early 1980s, Krashen’s ideas on acquisition (see **Monitor Theory** and **acquisition versus learning**, and **Input Hypothesis**, for example) were mainstream. He had posited that learners acquire language through interaction with language, most notably through comprehension of the input they are exposed to. While fundamentally true, Krashen’s ideas left a good amount of acquisition unexplained and the 1980s overall is marked by a critical review of his ideas and the quest for more explanatory models about the specifics of acquisition. For example, if L1 influence is limited, why was it limited? If learners had a built-in syllabus, what was this built-in syllabus and where did

it come from? And if all learners needed was exposure to input, why were so many L2 learners non-native-like after so many years of interaction with the language?

It is in this time frame, then, that we see the application of theories from other domains. For example, Lydia White led the charge to use linguistic theory to describe learner competence and to speculate why that competence looked the way it did. Manfred Pienemann began to explore the use of Lexical Functional Grammar and speech processing models to explain the developmental nature of learner output. We also see the beginnings of the application of cognitive theory and other psychological approaches (e.g., connectionism) to SLA, applications that would not reach any real impact until the 1990s. The point here is that SLA researchers began looking seriously at the nature of theories and what theories needed to do in order to explain SLA.

The 1990s

The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of competing theoretical ideas and approaches regarding SLA, with an additional plethora of isolated hypotheses that took hold in the general literature (e.g., **noticing**, the **Output Hypothesis**, the **Interaction Hypothesis**—all of which had roots in the 1980s). Nonetheless, two major approaches dominated the field: the application of linguistic theory and the application of certain psychological approaches, namely, skill theory and the modern version of associationism (see **connectionism**). The linguistic theoretical approach continued to be concerned with an adequate description of interlanguage as well as its explanation. That is, scholars in this camp focused on the nature of the learner's internal mental representation and what constrained it. A central tenet of this approach is that language is special. By special these scholars meant that language is uniquely human, is encapsulated in its own module in the mind/brain, and comes equipped from birth with a set of language-specific constraints called **Universal Grammar**. Thus, acquisition was a particular kind of experience for humans that involved the interaction of Universal Grammar with data from the outside world.

Scholars in the psychological camp tended to eschew any linguistic description of an interlanguage and indeed some went so far as to say that there was no mental representation at all. Interested largely in behavior, this camp did not concern itself with underlying knowledge per se but more with

what learners did with language. Because they saw language as just another instance of human behavior, the belief was that theories of behavior should be sufficient to account for SLA and thus there was no need to posit unique faculties of the mind that dealt exclusively with language. As such, there was nothing special about language—and if indeed the learner had any mental representation that could be called language, it was an artefact of learning, a latent structure that emerged based on data the learner encountered in the environment. Language acquisition was the interaction of general human learning mechanisms with data from the outside world.

Again, other approaches emerged such as Processability Theory (see **processability**), **input processing**, and others, but in many ways these theories could be seen as compatible with either linguistic theory or cognitive theory, depending on the particulars of each theory. One theory that emerged in the 1990s largely due to concerns with educational practice was **Sociocultural Theory**. As an account of SLA, it dismissed both linguistic theory and cognitive theory as being too “mind/brain” oriented and instead situated the learner as an active agent in learning within particular social contexts.

The 2000s and beyond

It is fair to say that as of the writing of this book, SLA looks pretty much like it did in the second half of the 1990s in terms of foci. As a discipline, it is splintered, with certain camps not in dialogue with others. Both linguistic and cognitive approaches continue to dominate the field and we do not envision this changing in the near future, largely because of the sheer number of people working within these fields and also because of the healthy research agenda both camps enjoy outside the field of SLA; that is, linguistic theory is alive and well and is applied to a range of endeavors from child first language acquisition to natural language processing, and psychology as a discipline is very well situated within academia and has been for over a century. Thus, we see the field of SLA staying largely focused on the mind/brain. 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. In the end, even those who take a strong social context approach to acquisition would have to admit that language is a property of the mind and although learning may happen through interaction and through “dialogic discourse,” language ends up in the mind/brain of the learner.

Second language acquisition and second language teaching

Because the contemporary field of SLA research has its roots in concerns for language instruction, it is natural for many language teaching professionals to look to SLA research for insights into teaching. In the early days of SLA research, for example, people wondered how information on acquisition orders could be applied to language teaching. Should we teach language structures in the order in which they are acquired? Because these structural elements are acquired in a fixed order anyway, should we forget about teaching them altogether and just let them emerge on their own? These and similar questions have “stalked” the field since the mid-1970s and by the 1980s there seemed to be some pressure on SLA specialists to “produce applicable results” for language teachers. To this end, Patsy Lightbown published a widely cited piece titled “Great Expectations: Second Language Acquisition Research and Classroom Teaching” in 1985. In that paper she described the tension between teacher expectations about research and what researchers were interested in and what they researched. It was clear from her discussion that there was a gap, and that SLA had emerged as a vibrant field of research that may or may not have immediate implications for instruction.

Nonetheless, a subfield within SLA research emerged to address the role of formal instruction on second language development: instructed SLA. Unlike general SLA research, which focuses on the learner and the development of language over time, instructed SLA focuses on the degree to which external manipulation (e.g., instruction, learner self-directed learning, input manipulation) can affect development in some way. Since the mid-1980s, a good deal has been learned about the effects of formal instruction, some of which are described elsewhere in this book. The point here is that the picture that now exists is the following: any focus on instruction must consider what we already know about SLA more generally. That is, both instruction and instructed SLA cannot ignore the findings of SLA research and must be informed by it. Here is one example: if we know that particular linguistic structures are acquired in a particular order over time, what is the purpose of instruction on those same structures? If an instructor believes he or she can get learners to learn something early that is normally acquired later in acquisition, is that instructor making the best use of his or her time? When researchers in instructed SLA choose to examine the effects of formal instruction, how do they select

the linguistic features and why do they select the ones they do? These are important questions and it is SLA research that can help to inform instructors and researchers about the choices they make.

Our perspective, then, is that even though a significant gap exists between research on SLA and teacher expectations, there is enough of SLA research in existence that is useful for general teacher edification. The more one understands the nature of the object of one's profession, the better one is situated to make choices, answer questions, and to best utilize one's time and efforts. Unfortunately, from our perspective, language teachers are often woefully undereducated in the general findings of SLA. While a general course on SLA often forms the background of those prepared at the graduate level in TESOL, this is not the case for those who teach other languages and is certainly not the case for those who enter the language teaching profession with a baccalaureate degree or equivalent. Even though the present book is not about instructed SLA or language teaching, hopefully it will inspire language teachers to learn more about acquisition and to reflect on language teaching more generally.

About this book

Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition is divided into three major parts: Key Issues, Key Terms, and Key Readings. In Key Issues, we present nine of the major questions that confront SLA research today. Our presentations are necessarily brief as our goal is not to be exhaustive but rather to sketch the basics for the novice reader. Citations provided within this section will lead the reader to original and more thorough treatments. In Key Terms, we provide encyclopedia-like descriptions of a good number of terms used in the SLA literature. To be sure, this list is not exhaustive and we apologize in advance for any terms we may have left out. In preparing a book like this, one has to make the cut somewhere in order not to have a multivolume collection of all terms used in SLA research.

Finally, in Key Readings, we provide information not only on the references cited elsewhere in this book, but also additional references that may be of use to the novice reader. Again, we apologize if we are not all inclusive. Our hope is, though, that we have provided enough for the beginning person to bootstrap him- or herself into a complicated field of inquiry.

The reader will note that throughout the book, certain words and phrases appear in bold as in the following one taken from an earlier paragraph in this introduction:

“The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of competing theoretical ideas and approaches regarding SLA, with an additional plethora of isolated hypotheses that took hold in the general literature (e.g., **noticing**, the **Output Hypothesis**, the **Interaction Hypothesis**—all of which had roots in the 1980s).”

The boldface signals a key term that can be found in this book. Thus, when reading the above, the reader can turn to the Key Terms section and find descriptions of noticing, the Output Hypothesis, and the Interaction Hypothesis. At other times, the reader may see a key issue referenced within the text as in the following example: “How far learners get in terms of acquisition is open to debate (see **Can L2 learners become native-like?**)” Again, in such cases the reader can turn to the Key Issues section and find the relevant information.

Key Issues in Second Language Acquisition

Like any field of inquiry, SLA research is driven by a number of major issues or questions. These include the following:

1. What is the initial state? That is, what do learners bring to the task of acquisition in terms of underlying knowledge related to language?
2. Can L2 learners become native-like?
3. Is there a critical period?
4. What does development look like?
5. What are the roles of explicit and implicit learning in SLA?
6. What are the roles of input and output in SLA?
7. What are individual differences and how do they affect acquisition?
8. Does instruction make a difference?
9. What constraints are there on acquisition?

To be sure, there are other questions that scholars address, but many of these are related to the above questions. For example, some scholars are deeply interested in the role of interaction (e.g., conversation) in language acquisition. We see this topic related to the role of output more generally and will treat it in that section.

We would also like to state here that all of the questions listed above are themselves related to an overarching question that lurks in the background of SLA: To what extent are first and second language acquisition the same thing (i.e., involve the same learner-internal processing and acquisition mechanisms)? Everyone knows that first and second language acquisition must differ due to contextual differences: quality and quantity of input and interaction; topic and focus of interactions; exposure to formal rules; differences between children and adults; and so on. But ultimately, acquisition is something that happens in the brain/mind as it processes and stores language. Is SLA like first language acquisition in this regard, or is SLA guided by fundamentally different internal mechanisms? And if there are processes and

mechanisms common to L1 acquisition and SLA, then why do SLA learners vary so much in terms of outcome while L1 learners all seem to converge on the same linguistic system and same general abilities (metalinguistic and educational knowledge regarding language notwithstanding)?

So, in a sense, all of the questions listed above (as well as related questions) are various manifestations of the issue of L1 versus L2 acquisition in one way or another. Because of their interrelatedness, the reader may see some overlap in discussion of each question and for sure will see the interconnect-edness of the issues presented. We hope that this brief overview of key issues in SLA inspires the novice reader to pursue SLA research to a greater degree. There are some excellent overview texts as well as handbooks that provide much more detailed information and evaluative comments that we cannot provide here (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Kroll & de Groot, 2005; VanPatten & Williams, 2007). The reader ought to consider our short descriptions here as "advanced organizers" for reading more detailed and sometimes more technical material on SLA.

Issue 1: What is the initial state?

The concept of initial state refers to the starting point for L2 learners; namely, what they bring to the task of acquiring another language. There are two basic positions on the initial state of SLA: (1) the learner transfers all properties of the first language at the outset (the L1 = initial state hypothesis); (2) the learner begins with “universals of language” and does not transfer L1 properties at the outset. All other positions are some variation of these two (e.g., there might be partial transfer). Under no scenario does any theory or framework believe that the learner comes to the task of acquisition as a “blank slate.” Everyone believes something is there at the beginning of SLA; the question is what.

L1 = Initial state

A number of scholars believe that from the very beginning, all the properties of the L1 are transferred into SLA (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). Under this scenario, the learner assumes (unconsciously) that the L2 is just like the L1. This is commonly referred to as *full transfer*. The job of the learner subsequently is to replace L1 properties with appropriate L2 properties. Within one theory (**Universal Grammar**) this is often called “parameter resetting” (see, for example, White, 2003). We will illustrate with a simple example from English and Spanish.

Spanish is what linguists call a null subject language. Null subject languages allow free omission of subject pronouns in finite sentences or clauses (sentences that have tense). Thus, *Habla mucho* ‘He talks a lot’ is a perfectly fine sentence as is *Él habla mucho* (*él* = the overt subject pronoun ‘he’). English is a non-null-subject language, and thus ‘Talks a lot’ is not normally permitted; the subject pronoun ‘he’ is required as in ‘He talks a lot.’ Compare (an asterisk indicates a sentence is not well formed):

SPANISH

Maria: ¿Conoces a Juan? ‘Do you know John?’

Julietta: Sí. Habla mucho. ‘Yes. He talks a lot.’

ENGLISH

Mary: Do you know John?

Juliet: Yes. *Talks a lot.

At the same time, there are sentences in Spanish in which a null subject is actually required and an overt pronoun is prohibited. These include weather and time expressions: *Está lloviendo* 'It's raining,' *Es la una* 'It's one o'clock'; impersonal expressions with "it's": *es imposible* 'it's impossible,' *es difícil* 'it's difficult'; and existential statements such as *¿Hay café?* 'Is there coffee?' That is, in these kinds of sentences, an overt subject pronoun is not allowed (e.g., **Ello es la una*). In English, these kinds of expressions require the dummy subject 'it' or 'there' (in existential sentences): *It's one o'clock*/**Is one o'clock* and *There's lots of food*/**Is lots of food*. We would say that Spanish has the parameter set to +null subject while English has it set to –null subject.

Proponents of the L1 = initial state position would claim that speakers of Spanish begin acquisition by unconsciously assuming that English is +null subject, and thus it has all the same null subject properties as Spanish. At the beginning, these learners would believe that *Is raining* is a perfectly fine sentence in English. Researchers would also claim that speakers of English would begin acquisition assuming that Spanish is –null subject, again with all the properties associated with this **parameter**. These learners would initially believe that *Ello está lloviendo* is fine. In each case, it would be the job of the learners to reset to the appropriate parameter during acquisition.

Various theories would talk about the properties of the L1 in different ways; that is, not all would talk about parameters. Some would talk about **form-function** relationships and meaning (e.g., as in **functional approaches** or **connectionism**); others might refer to **processing** and **parsing** routines (how learners compute syntactic relationships in real time while listening or reading), claiming that L1 processing routines are transferred in SLA. Still, other theories might claim that something different is transferred. The point here is that regardless of the theory, they would all agree that the L1 is the starting point and that learners must "overwrite" the properties (or processing routines or whatever) to create a new system. Errors that learners make should reveal influence from the L1. In addition, researchers could administer certain kinds of tests (e.g., **grammaticality judgment** tests, truth value tests) to probe the underlying competence of learners for L1 influence.

Universals = initial state

Proponents of the universals = initial state hypothesis believe that L2 learners begin acquisition much like children learning their first language. That is, they come to the task of SLA with whatever internal mechanisms guiding language

acquisition that L1 learners have and little else in terms of “linguistic baggage.” This can be called the *no transfer* position. Depending on the theory the researcher uses, these internal mechanisms can be linguistic or cognitive in nature. Returning to the example of null subjects from above, proponents of the universals = initial state hypothesis would say that the learner begins acquisition without making any assumptions; that is, the learner is “open” to the language being either +null subject or –null subject. Rather than “reset” the parameter, learners would simply “set” it based on the evidence they receive. Errors made by the learners would not necessarily reflect influence from the L1, and tests that scholars would give them to probe their underlying competence should likewise not reveal L1 influence.

For those researchers who do not ascribe to a linguistic theory like Universal Grammar, the universals may be of some other sort. For example, they could be processing universals related to *computational complexity*. Computational complexity refers to structural complexity. The more “stuff moves around” in a sentence and is syntactically far from its starting point, the more difficult it is to process and thus acquire. An example would be *Wh-* movement in questions with subjects and objects. *Wh-* elements (questions words such as *who*, *what*, *where*) are said to move from a point of origin in a sentence to occupy a spot higher in a syntactic tree. In practical terms, this means the *Wh-* element moves to the front of the sentence. The subject *who*, for example, moves from the subject position before the verb to the front of the sentence, and is represented like this (note that this is not how syntacticians would annotate the sentence; we are taking liberty here for illustration): *Who* [_s ____ [_{vp} met Mary]]? The subscript _s stands for ‘sentence,’ the _{vp} stands for ‘verb phrase’ and the ____ stands for the place where *who* originated. This contrasts with object *who* which originates behind a verb and within a verb phrase: *Who* [_s did Mary [_{vp} see ____]]? The object *who* has to travel a longer syntactic distance: it crosses a verb phrase and a subject node to get to where it is. The subject *who*, however, crosses only the sentence node. Thus, it is syntactically easier to compute in acquisition. Research on both first and second language acquisition has shown this to be the case (see, for example, O’Grady, 2003) and subject *who* appears in speech before object *who*. Thus, processing accounts are more concerned about how learners compute syntactic relations during comprehension and how this affects acquisition (remembering that acquisition is input dependent; learners have to process the input before they can actually acquire anything). Computational complexity

falls under universals because the complexity is seen as the same for all learners regardless of first language; that is, all learners will have more difficulty computing grammatical information that crosses multiple syntactic boundaries compared to computing those that cross only one, for example.

Limited or partial L1 transfer

Some scholars working from a linguistic perspective believe that there is L1 transfer but that it is limited. For example, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996) have advanced the idea of *partial transfer*. They claim that learners transfer the **lexicon** and its syntactic properties (e.g., arguments that a verb requires for the sentence to be grammatical, such as *put* requires three arguments—a putter, something put, and the place it is put—while *die* only requires one—the entity experiencing the death) but not the functional features of language related to things such as tense, person-number, agreement, and so on. They would predict that learners would make limited L1-influenced errors such as basic word order. For example, an L2 learner of Japanese with English as L1 would begin acquisition transferring subject-verb-object word order, when Japanese is subject-object-verb. However, that learner would not transfer the features related to how English makes agreement on verbs or the features related to how English encodes pastness on verbs.

Pienemann (1998), coming from an output processing perspective, believes that L1 output procedures (how people put together syntax and lexicon in real time while speaking) are not fully transferred into SLA. In his framework (see **processability**), learners must acquire L2 output processing procedures that interface with the learner's developing grammar, and that these are responsible for learners' spontaneous production. L1 output procedures can only be transferred when the learner is at a point in acquisition where he or she has acquired the L2 processing routine *and* there is similarity between the L1 and L2 structure in question. (The issue is more complex than this and the reader is invited to review the work on processability and L1 transfer.)

Assessment

Based on the published literature to date, it seems that the L1 = initial state position is more widely accepted and appears to have the most empirical support. This is especially true for researchers who use linguistic theory (such as

Universal Grammar) as their framework, but is also true of researchers coming from cognitive or processing perspectives. The exception would be Pienemann's framework, which continues to limit transferability of L1 because of his focus on processing procedures for speech and not on the underlying competence of L2 learners.

The reader should be aware that research on the initial state relies on spontaneous spoken data as well as tests that attempt to tap underlying competence. Language instructors may see much more evidence of L1 influence in learners because they tend to deal less with spontaneous data and less with concern for underlying competence. Because classroom learners may be pushed to produce beyond their current capacity, they will often create utterances by relying on their L1 and "dressing it up" in L2 words. However, this is not transfer as understood here. This type of language production may be classified more as a communication strategy used by someone who is not linguistically ready to produce needed language.

Issue 2: Can L2 learners become native-like?

Most L2 learners have some kind of perceptible accent, and it is not uncommon for someone to ask “Where are you from?” when detecting something in the non-native’s speech. One major question that has been researched extensively in the L2 literature is the degree to which an L2 learner can develop native-like ability with the language. Currently there are three positions: (1) L2 learners cannot develop native-like L2 ability; (2) L2 learners can develop native-like ability; and (3) L2 learners can develop native-like underlying competence in some if not all domains, but there may be problems in terms of the interface between underlying competence and production. These positions are tied to the concept of **ultimate attainment**: How far can learners get in acquisition? This issue of ultimate attainment may also be linked to the concept of a **critical period**, which we discuss in a different Key Issue.

L2 learners cannot become native-like

This position holds that L2 learners are unable to achieve native-like ability, and the bulk of evidence comes from research on grammatical development as well as **phonology** (sound system and pronunciation). Typically in this research, very advanced native-like L2 learners are compared with native speakers on a variety of grammatical features (e.g., **tense**, **aspect**, syntactic structures). The researcher first determines if someone is native-like by recording them and having a panel of judges (all natives) listen to the recordings and rate the speakers on a scale of, say, 1 to 5. To be considered a native-like speaker, the participant has to receive a score that is statistically not different from that given to native speakers who have also been recorded and mixed into the fray. Subsequently, the researcher administers a battery of tests designed to tap the underlying competence of the participant. These are usually paper and pencil tests designed to get at intuitions about the language that native speakers typically possess, but more recent research has begun to examine processing and parsing (how learners create syntactic structure in real time while listening to or reading sentences).

Research from this side of the question has shown, for example, that few if any native-like speakers demonstrate native-like underlying competence. Their scores on the tests of intuitions may yield scores that are significantly different from those of a group of native speakers. One of the most widely cited studies in this camp, which was foundational in nature, is the study by

Coppieters (1987). He tested very advanced learners of French L2 on morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties and compared them with native French speakers. On his measures, he found considerable deviation between natives and non-natives. A number of other studies have echoed Coppieters' work, all in the realm of syntactic properties of language. Another widely cited study is Johnson and Newport (1991). In that study, Chinese learners of English L2 were found to differ substantially from native speakers on their intuitions about **subjacency** violations.

In terms of phonology, a number of studies suggest that non-natives cannot achieve native-like pronunciation. James Flege and his colleagues, for example, have demonstrated that early L2 learners (i.e., children) can attain a native-like accent but that late L2 learners (i.e., adolescents and adults) do not. To be sure, Flege does not wholeheartedly endorse that learners "can't" become native-like; his conclusion is that native-likeness decreases with the age of learning an L2.

L2 learners can become native-like at

On the other side of the question are those researchers who have found some support that L2 learners can become native-like. On the question of phonological properties of language, Theo Bongaerts and his colleagues have produced a number of studies that demonstrate that L2 learners can become native-like in pronunciation; that is, their pronunciation is consistently mistaken by native judges to be native-like, and these judges mark them as 'native' on the measures Bongaerts has used.

One name associated with the idea that L2 learners can become native-like in the **syntax** and **morphology** of language is David Birdsong. His well-known 1992 study was a direct response to Coppieters' work (see above). He found problems with Coppieters' research design and addressed these in his own work, also on L2 learners of French. The result was that he found a significant number of his participants who were indistinguishable from natives on his tests. His conclusion was that L2 learners can become native-like.

Another well-known study that is a direct response to Johnson and Newport's study (see above) is that of White and Genesee (1996). They tested learners from a variety of L1 backgrounds on subjacency violations in English and compared their performance to that of native speakers. They found that non-natives can attain native-like intuitions about language. One main



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Key Terms

in Second Language Acquisition

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