

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a second language (L2), even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a target language (TL), which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. The scope of SLA includes informal L2 learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts, formal L2 learning that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. For example, “informal learning” happens

when a child from Japan is brought to the US and “picks up” English in the course of playing and attending school with native English-speaking children without any specialized language instruction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native

English speakers or with co-workers who speak English as a second language. “Formal learning” occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French, when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic, or when an attorney in Colombia takes a night class in English. A combination of formal and informal learning takes place when a student from the USA takes Chinese language classes in Taipei or Beijing while also using Chinese outside of class for social interaction and daily living experiences, or when an adult immigrant from Ethiopia in Israel learns Hebrew both from attending special classes and from interacting with co-workers and other residents in Hebrew. In trying

to understand the process of second language acquisition, we are seeking to answer three basic questions: (1) What exactly does the L2 learner come to know? (2) How does the learner acquire this knowledge? (3) Why are some learners more successful than others? There are no simple answers to these questions – in fact, there are probably no answers that all second language researchers would agree on completely. In part this is because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars studying SLA come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods. The multidisciplinary approach to studying SLA phenomena which has developed within the last half-century has yielded important insights, but many tantalizing mysteries remain. New findings are appearing every day, making this an exciting period to be studying the subject. The continuing search for answers is not only shedding light on SLA in its own right, but is illuminating related fields. Furthermore,

exploring answers to these questions is of potentially great practical value to anyone who learns or teaches additional languages. SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily from within linguistics and psychology (and their subfields of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology), as a result of efforts to answer the What is SLA? what, how, and why questions posed above. There are corresponding differences in what is emphasized by researchers who come from each

of these fields: ●Linguists emphasize the characteristics of the differences and similarities in the languages that are being learned, and the linguistic competence (underlying knowledge) and linguistic performance (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition. ●Psychologists and psycholinguists emphasize the mental or cognitive processes involved in acquisition, and the representation of language(s) in the brain. ●Sociolinguists emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and extend the scope of study to communicative competence (underlying knowledge that additionally accounts for language use, or pragmatic competence). ●Social psychologists emphasize

group-related phenomena, such as identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social contexts of learning. Applied linguists who specialize in SLA may take any one or more of these perspectives, but they are also often concerned with the implications of theory and research for teaching second languages. Each discipline and subdiscipline uses different methods for gathering and analyzing data in research on SLA, employs different theoretical frameworks, and reaches its interpretation of research findings and conclusions in different ways. It is no surprise, then, that the understandings coming from these different disciplinary perspectives sometimes seem to conflict in ways that resemble the well-known Asian fable of the three blind men describing an elephant: one, feeling the tail, says it is like a rope; another, feeling the side, says it is flat and rubbery; the third, feeling the trunk, describes it as being like a long rubber hose. While each perception is correct individually, they fail to provide an accurate picture of the total animal because there is no holistic or integrated perspective. Ultimately, a satisfactory account of SLA must integrate these multiple perspectives; this book is a step in that direction. As in the fable of the elephant, three different perspectives are presented here: linguistic, psychological, and social. I make no presumption that any one perspective among these is 'right' or more privileged, but believe that all are needed to provide a fuller understanding of the complex phenomena of SLA