



Second Language Acquisition



In a global society, knowing several languages is vital for communication, commerce, and even civility in international discourse. With many nations tense about security, understanding languages is also important for gathering intelligence and mediating conflicts. While, clearly, learning the languages of our trading partners, allies, and adversaries is important, many unanswered questions remain about the processes of second language acquisition (SLA).

How does language acquisition change as we age? What is the best way for English speakers to learn Chinese? Do language immersion classes yield truly bilingual children? Does Rosetta Stone software or a Berlitz course do a better job of teaching Arabic? These and other questions lie at the heart of trans-cultural communication. Who is asking? Middle-school teachers, executives managing global supply chains, and military procurement officers needing robust and ready language instruction materials. Who is finding the answers? Researchers at the University Maryland in fields ranging from languages, linguistics, and cognitive psychology to education, philosophy, and hearing and speech studies.

Robert DeKeyser studies critical period theory--the idea that language acquisition becomes more difficult after adolescence--to develop language practices that improve SLA.

Michael Long examines second and third language acquisition, paying particular attention to how learning a second language improves a person's ability to learn additional languages. He is particularly interested in SLA of Arabic, Farsi, Korean, and Russian.

Colin Phillips co-directs the Cognitive Neuroscience of Language Laboratory where he advances neurolinguistic research that describes the fundamental cognitive processes of SLA.

Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) is a national research center for issues of language and national security. CASL director Richard Brecht is an expert on military and intelligence applications of language study. Catherine Doughty, assistant director of CASL, applies psycholinguistic methods to assess the effectiveness of SLA products for government training.

Understanding the "Critical Period" for Language Acquisition

Robert DeKeyser works with critical period theory to understand how cognitive development affects SLA.

While people often assume that there is a "tipping point" in early childhood after which learning a second language is a real struggle, language-learning cognition is more complicated. After a "critical period," typically near adolescence, the brain functions differently while acquiring a new language. Before this critical period, the brain learns a second language much like it learns the first language; after this critical period, the brain works differently. Understanding the psychological differences before and after the critical period can help improve SLA instruction in both K-12 education and in adult-learning contexts, like university courses and workplace training classes.

DeKeyser's work considers learner aptitude in adult language learners. He has shown that, contrary to popular and some scholarly opinions, adults can obtain syntactic fluency in a second language. The process is just different from natural language acquisition, so instruction should be different too. DeKeyser also researches the effectiveness of study-aboard immersion programs.

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Efficient Acquisition of Crucial Languages

Michael Long's research examines some of the factors that affect the acquisition of difficult, politically important languages like Arabic, Korean, Persian and Russian.

His recent studies on third language acquisition suggest that people who learn a second language as adults can learn a third language more quickly than those who acquire two languages as children. Long believes

that the SLA process increases overall language aptitude, thereby making third language acquisition easier. Long is also interested in how typological similarities between languages can influence acquisition rates. For example, native speakers of Hebrew can learn Arabic faster than native Spanish speakers. Long's work on third language acquisition and typological similarities can improve the efficiency of language training in business and government. Managers can focus their training resources on personnel who can most quickly acquire a specific language

Long is widely known in the SLA research community for his analysis of theory change in SLA. His work has refined critical period theory by incorporating additional variables like maturational constraints and language aptitude.

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Understanding the Cognitive Machinery of SLA

Colin Phillips, co-director of the Cognitive Neuroscience of Language Laboratory, studies SLA from a neurolinguistic perspective. Specifically, he examines how SLA can inform and be informed by our understanding of the brain's language processing apparatus. For example, SLA studies rely on a linguistic understanding of how grammatical knowledge relates to real-time language processing.

Recent work by Phillips includes cross-language cases (comparisons of grammars between languages) examining aspects of Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. For example, Japanese interrogatives – questions – can take many word orders. This “scrambling” poses difficulties for second language learners of Japanese. Studying learners as they approach a new grammar can isolate difficulties. Identifying the range and type of learning obstacles “in situ” can guide specific revisions to teaching methods and technologies.

Phillips is also known for synthesizing a range of models and observations, serving as a gateway between linguistics and SLA instruction best practices. Linguists make practical observations about the two components of language acquisition: how learners process the first language and subsequent languages and how a language's grammar and structure should shape efficient instruction.

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Coordinated SLA Research for National Security

Increasing the nation's foreign language capacity is a vital national security priority. The University of Maryland is home to the Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL), a national information clearinghouse and laboratory that coordinates security-related research on SLA.

CASL research is yielding strategies for adult learners to quickly acquire proficiency in less well-known languages with critical security implications. These innovative ways to learn and maintain second language skills will streamline the training process for diplomats, intelligence officers, and other government workers. CASL distributes both primary reports and best practice documents to government language professionals.

CASL is directed by Richard Brecht, whose work in U.S. language policy design and SLA military applications is widely known.

CASL's assistant director, Catherine Doughty, designs and evaluates SLA curricula and instructional materials based on psycholinguistic principles. Doughty's team also designed the High-Level Language Aptitude Battery (HiLAB), an assessment tool that identifies personnel who can learn a language quickly and proficiently

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