FEATURE

Second Language Acquisition:
A General Overview

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Abstract: *Second language acquisition (SLA) is known as both the process of learning an additional language and the field where issues pertaining to the teaching and learning of a second language (L2) are discussed (Ellis, 2010; Nunan, 2001). The field of SLA has experienced exponential growth over the past 3 decades. As Ellis (2010) states it rightly, SLA is "now an established discipline" (p. 182). This is evident in the growth of SLA research, SLA textbooks, and increase in number of theories, principles, and strategies that are found in the field of SLA. While this tremendous advance has been heavily demonstrated particularly in the United States, growth seems sparing in other countries. In fact, few are higher education institutions that offer Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs where SLA courses should normally be offered. Without proper knowledge and understanding of how L2s are taught and learned, it is quite likely that teaching English to non-native speakers in these non-English speaking countries is negatively affected. This paper synthesizes important topics pertaining to SLA to help TESOL experts with some fundamental understanding.*

Keywords: Second language acquisition, ESL, EFL, TESOL,
             theories, review

Introduction

SLA has become a broad field (Long, 2015), even though it started just a few decades ago. Globalization is certainly playing an important role in this growth due to the millions of migrants moving from one country to other for education, tourism, business, employment, or other reasons. At this beginning of the 21st

Century, many people have become significantly mobile in search of a different setting of life for various reasons. More and more people have to learn another language for their daily life. SLA experts are busy discovering and developing second language (L2) teaching and learning strategies. As a result, the field of SLA has grown, especially when pertaining to TESOL.

As complex as the SLA field has become, this paper presents a review of the literature on a few major topics. First, the paper begins with an overview of SLA. Next, the paper discusses an important number of SLA theories that can be helpful to TESOL professionals. In addition to different SLA theories, the paper also provides several tips for practical application. This paper cannot possibly synthesize all research conducted so far in the whole field. It is intended to give a general overview of the field of SLA to help TESOL professionals with the basis for their work.

Overview of SLA

SLA has become quite a vast field. Just like many other fields, it has a rich background. Understanding this overview can help TESOL professionals understand the reasons behind the start of SLA as a field. In this section, the paper presents the background of SLA, its importance, the distinction between SLA and L2 learning, the connection of SLA to other fields, and the difference between SLA and first language (L1) acquisition.

Brief Background of SLA

There are several definitions of SLA. Generally, SLA is defined as both the study of people who are learning an additional language after they know how to speak their first; and the process that these individuals or groups of people go through in trying to learn another language (Saville-Troike, 2006). For the sake of this paper, the definition can be expanded to the academic course taken to understand how L2s are learned and taught and even the research that is done on the ways L2 learners learn L2. Last, the field of teaching, learning, and research on L2 teaching and learning is also part of what SLA is. The diversity of the definitions above is an indication of how vast a field SLA is.

The specific dates of the origin of SLA are contested among different experts (Block, 2007; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013; Thomas, 2013). Although she is maybe the only one who looks at SLA from centuries ago, Thomas (2013) states that the majority of SLA scholars place its origin somewhere between the 1950s and 1970s. Those who place the origins of SLA somewhere around the 1970s believe that SLA as a field began as a result of catering to the needs of millions of migrants to the United States of America. That is the time when SLA started as a field, according to Thomas (2013). During that time, a significant wave of

migrants who needed to learn English before entering the American labor market prompted the need to develop SLA strategies for both English teaching and learning.

At first, educators tried to teach L2 like the mother tongue or L1. They believed that the migrants could just learn L2 the same way L1 was learned. Contrastive analysis and audio-lingual translation method, therefore, played an important role as emphasis was placed on how similar and different L2 and L1 were (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Saville-Troike, 2012; Selinker, 1972). From there, the field of SLA, both from research and teaching perspective, continued to go hand in hand with whatever was happening in the field of education. From the early emphasis on behaviorism in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus switched to constructivism and communicative approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, and then to learner-centered instruction in the 2000s and beyond. Although the field of SLA continues to grow, the fastest growth seems to have been experienced in its first two decades of existence.

Importance of SLA

SLA is important today for several reasons. It provides research to lead the field. It generates teaching and learning strategies to meet better the needs of L2 learners. In general, it contributes greatly to the success of globalization. This paper cannot provide an exhaustive elaboration of the importance of SLA; only these three aspects are considered here.

Over the recent decades, SLA research has contributed tremendously to the understanding of L2 learning, teaching, and the development of related theories (Gass et al., 2013; Mackey & Gass, 2015; Long, 2015, VanPatten & Willaims, 2015). SLA theories would be incomplete if they were presented without proven research. Research findings help confirm the extent to which SLA theories can apply. Because of SLA research, much is now known about different L2 learning strategies, best L2 teaching practices, factors promoting effective L2 learning process, individual, social, and environmental factors to be considered for L2 learning, and many more.

Starting with the early publication on interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) and Krashen's compilation of theories (1981), the number of publications on SLA theories has risen over the past 3 decades (see for instance, Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013; VanPatten & Williams, 2015). SLA theories vary from social factors, individual factors, linguistic factors, brain factors, contextual factors among others. Without a good understanding of these factors as related to different SLA theories, educators involved in teaching L2 learners often face challenges that they could have easily avoided. These theories are the basis of effective L2 teaching and learning. Thus, the need for a deep understanding of SLA before anyone can become a teacher of English to speakers of other

languages. Commonsense alone is not enough for a native speaker to teach English to non-native speakers. Proper training is highly needed.

Last, due to the significant advancement in SLA, globalization has become successful. Though it used to be a challenging option in the past for people to migrate to a foreign country due to the language barrier, it is no longer so today. With the self-learning strategies and L2 learning tools designed as a result of SLA advance, people are now able to learn many languages with less external help than was needed before. SLA is playing an important role in globalization.

SLA vs. Second Language Learning

Krashen (1982) was probably the first to distinguish between SLA and L2 learning. According to him, these two processes are different and should be considered separately when dealing with L2 teaching or learning. He believes that L1s are *acquired*; meaning, they are learned unconciously. No one sits in a classroom to learn their L1. Parents do not make their children memorize L1 rules. Rarely do they even correct the grammar of their children. On the other hand, when it comes to L2, a conscious effort is needed to learn the language. L2 learners develop and use different L2 learning strategies to consciously learn an additional language. Therefore, adult learners *learn* L2 instead of *acquiring* it.

While Krashen has tried to push the idea that L2 should also be acquired instead of being learned, most people believe that L2s are learned rather than acquired, especially when it comes to adults. Children who have not reached the critical period (estimated around puberty) can still acquire L2 but most people beyond that age usually intentionally and consciously learn the L2.

If L1 learning is focused solely on *acquisition* and L2 learning mainly on *learning*, it is quite a wrong practice to expect language teachers to teach L2 if they were never trained in SLA. In the case of English teachers who did not complete an SLA training, their effectiveness can be questionable. Their tendency is to teach L2 as if English was the native language of the L2 learners.

Connection of SLA to Other Fields

SLA does not exist in isolation. It is connected to many other fields (Nunan, 2009). Of the many fields to which SLA is connected, a few are synthesized here. SLA is directly connected to the field of education in general. It is found under the big umbrella of education. SLA borrows a number of education theories to develop and implement new SLA theories. SLA is also connected to psychology. SLA has borrowed significantly from brain research to understand how the brain processes L2 learning. Additionally, SLA is connected to sociology as this field helps SLA researchers understand better the social factors involved in L2 learning and interaction. Last, SLA is related to other linguistic branches such as corpus

linguistics, psycholinguistics, general linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and recently, Internet linguistics. As a field, SLA is interconnected with other fields.

SLA vs. L1 Acquisition

Research on L1 acquisition has provided a foundation for SLA (Mitchell et al., 2013). Many of the constructs of one are relevant for the other. Knowledge from L1 literature influenced the development of L2 knowledge. Further, questions about the influence of innate abilities versus the influence of the context, input and interaction, comprehension and production, stages and order of acquisition, among others, have interested researchers from both L1 and L2 acquisition literature. Furthermore, instructional methods for L2 teaching, such as Gouin's Series Method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977), and the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1982), were rooted in the belief that SLA is similar to L1 acquisition. Practice, theory, and research make it clear that although there may be some similarities, L2 learning is different from L1 acquisition.

An L2 learner differs from a child acquiring his/her L1 in many regards (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In general, the L2 learner is older than the L1 learner. This difference in age implies differences in cognitive and socio-affective developments as well. Moreover, the L2 learner has already experienced learning another language and has already constructed a mental representation of the world, which leads him/her to employ different cognitive processes.

Some Understanding of L1 Foundations

To understand SLA, it is important to draw from some L1 literature. L1 acquisition provides some basis for understanding of SLA. After all, learning and L2 is going through an additional language learning process. It is somehow the repeat of what a learner has already gone through with their L1. In this section, special attention is placed on the synthesis of the Universal Grammar and also on the discussion on whether languages are learned based on *nature* or *nurture*.

Universal Grammar

Based on behaviorism, the first theories in the field of SLA argued that acquisition was the result of practice and reinforcement (Nunan, 2009). In other words, acquisition happened when the student received the appropriate amount of stimuli and continued practicing until the language became automatic. This view of language acquisition was based on behavioristic views of learning that considered language learning as an external phenomenon with no active processing on the part of the student.

One of the strongest oppositions to this view of learning was presented by Noam Chomsky (1965). He noticed that there was not an evident relationship between stimuli and the learner's production. He observed that almost all children acquired their L1 at approximately the same age and followed a similar pattern. He hypothesized that each person has been equipped with the ability to learn a language and that input or stimuli only activates that ability that he called Language Acquisition Device (Krashen, 1981). Chomky's followers took this idea further and studied how different languages share universal characteristics (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). For instance, they considered that all languages have a certain word order, morphological marking tone, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, nouns classes, verb tenses, predication, negation, and question formation. These characteristics that are shared by all languages have received the name of Universal Grammar. Being aware of the Universal Grammar can help L2 teachers to facilitate L1 transfer to L2 learning.

Language Acquisition: Nature vs. Nurture

Nativists like Chomsky and his followers viewed language development as determined by a genetic capacity (Gass et al., 2013; Mackey & Gass, 2015; Nunan, 2009). They argued that only innate predispositions could explain the amazing ability of children to master a language in a short period of time despite its complex and abstract nature. Furthermore, the fact that a child can create an infinite number of utterances, and this creativity is not bounded to the language he or she hears only, supports the nativist's view of language acquisition over the behaviorist's one. One more contribution of nativists relates to the systematicity of a child's language in each developmental stage. They noticed that even small children using two-word sentences follow certain rules. Their language is systematic, coherent in its level. Thus, nativists contended that the language children use in each stage is not a group of separate items but it is part of an integrated system built into each person.

On the other hand, connectionists, emergentists, and constructivists have emphasized the influence of the environment on language acquisition (Brown, 2014; Nunan, 2009). Connectionists supported the idea that language is acquired from neurological associations which result from experience (Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986). In other words, the thousand instances the learner hears a certain language feature give place to neurological connections that are part of language development. Emergentists such as MacWhinney (1999) and O'Grady (1999, 2005) also underlined the influence of the environment on language acquisition even though they did not completely reject the idea of a biological predisposition for language acquisition. On their part, constructivists emphasized the functional aspect of language in social interaction as an essential aspect of language development (Long, 2015). In conclusion, these groups view language

acquisition as nurtured by the environment and social factors instead of being the result of a natural biological capacity only.

In summary, with what is known today through SLA theories and research, it can be argued that both nature and nurture are needed for effective L2 learning. Also, L2 learners need a brain that can handle the complexities of L2. Additionally, teachers must create an L2 setting that is conducive to effective L2 learning. In other words, both nature and nurture are needed for effective L2 teaching and learning.

L2 Knowledge

One of the major foci of SLA is to know exactly what L2 learners learn in the SLA process (Saville-Troike, 2006), in addition to how people learn L2 and why some are more successful than others. This section synthesizes a few concepts that help SLA experts understand what L2 learners actually get out of the L2 learning process. This synthesis is based on some of the major perspectives that have shaped the understanding of L2 knowledge.

Comprehension vs. Production

Language skills can be divided into comprehension skills (listening and reading) and production skills (speaking and writing), (Brown, 2014; Saville-Troike, 2006). In most cases, *comprehension* or *reception* skills have been found to be superior to *production* or *performance* skills. In other words, L2 learners can understand more than they can produce and L2. For instance, children may understand the meaning of relative clauses but not be able to produce them correctly, or they may mispronounce some words that they clearly comprehend. Similarly, L2 learners can easily pass English grammar quizzes but not be able to use those same structures in conversations.

The difference between comprehension and production is one of the best explanations why most L2 find it easier to hear what people say in L2 but struggle more to speak or write that in that L2. Additionally, due to limited opportunities of producing L2 in countries where English is not an L1, those who learn English as a foreign language take much longer to start using it. While it is important to promote comprehension, L2 teachers need to spend more time focusing on production as it is much more difficult that comprehension.

Linguistic vs. Communicative Competence

For a long time, knowing a language was equated with knowing its grammar. The goal for language learners was to master the structures of the language, basically, to be able to translate texts (Brown, 2014). This view, however, started to shift after the mid-nineteenth century (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Language

came to be considered a means to express meaning involving other aspects of language hitherto disregarded. Trying to broaden Chomsky's *linguistic competence*, Hymes (1972) coined the term *communicative competence* as the "aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts" (Brown, 2007, p. 219). The cultural and social aspects became part of language understanding and production.

Some years later, Canale and Swain (1980) described communicative competence as having four subcategories: *grammatical competence* (lexis, morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology), *discourse competence* (inter-sentential connections), *sociolinguistic competence* (pragmatics), and *strategic competence* (verbal and nonverbal strategies used to prevent communication breakdowns). This categorization was later modified by Bachman (1990), who discriminated strategic competence from language competence. Aside from the different details of the taxonomies, it is evident that knowing a language is more than knowing its grammar. In non-English speaking countries, it is therefore an instructional mistake to focus solely on a language's grammatical and syntactical features without any attention to that language's overall communicative competence. Teaching only the linguistic characteristics of an L2 is doing half of the work expected from an L2 educator.

Academic vs. Personal Competence

Taking into consideration the use of the language in different contexts, Cummins (1981) proposed a distinction between the command of the language required in academic contexts and the proficiency required for interpersonal interactions. He named the first one, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and the second one, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). CALP, also known as academic language, consists of abstract context-specific communication aspects such as the ones necessary to problem-solve, hypothesize, reason, and imagine. On the one hand, BICS or conversational language involves context-embedded communication which is not cognitively demanding. Cummins also argued that conversational language in an L2 is developed independently of the learner's L1 conversational proficiency. On the other hand, the learner's L1 academic proficiency facilitates the development of academic proficiency in L2. Furthermore, Cummins noted that while it usually takes around two years for a learner to develop second language BICS, 5 to 7 years are necessary for the same learners to master CALP. It therefore comes at no surprise that some adult learners struggle for quite some time to learn English before they can start using it to study in higher education institutions.

Needs Analysis

Before even designing L2 instructional materials, it is important for L2 professionals to conduct a thorough needs analysis (Nunan, 2009). Three key elements in SLA needs analysis are the learner, the learning process, and the language (Nunan, 2009). Some good understanding of these three elements can make L2 teaching and learning more effective.

Lately, the SLA pedagogical focus has been greatly on the learners and their needs (Brown, 2014; Nunan, 2009). These needs can be *objective*—diagnosed by teachers, and related to the learner's proficiency and patterns of language use. On the other hand, the learner can present *subjective* needs as well—his/her wants, desires, and expectations regarding the learning process and its outcomes. The needs analysis consists of a "sets of tools, techniques, and procedures for determining the language content and learning process for specified groups of learners" (Nunan, 2009, p. 149). Balance between these two perspectives is essential to tailor the goals, according both to what the student needs to learn—representing the teacher's perspective—, and what he or she wants to learn—representing the learner's own perspective.

The techniques and procedures for identifying needs are designed, taking into account not only the content *per se*, but the process (Nunan, 2009). This means, for example, that students may perceive a greater need to work in groups than their teachers do. Then, both content and learning process questions are included in questionnaires and/or interviews designed to assess students' needs. Once assessed, these needs can be used to determine what, when, how, and with whom learners will acquire language. The negotiated curriculum among teacher and learners enhances the learning process and favors a participative and warm classroom climate.

Learners' Characteristics

Every person—learners included—in the world has unique, distinctive characteristics (Brown, 2014; Saville-Troike, 2006). These particular components condition learning and thought processes, and influence the acquisition of an L2. Among these various characteristics, some can be considered of special importance: age, personality, motivation, degree of language anxiety, self-esteem, language aptitude, linguistic background, and socio-cultural background (Brown, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Age

Psycholinguistists have studied what is the optimum age for acquiring an L2 and have concluded that it is during the first 10 years of life when the brain still retains its maximum plasticity (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Nunan, 2009). It is

believed that around puberty, the two hemispheres become more independent of each other (Nunan, 2009). Each hemisphere adopts some specific functions, such as language which is assigned to the left hemisphere. According to the critical period hypothesis (Bickerton, 1981; Lenneberg, 1967), after lateralization has occurred, acquiring another language becomes increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, the only aspect of acquisition in which children have demonstrated to outperform adults is in pronunciation (Nunan, 2009). The inefficiency of the hypothesis to explain why the loss of plasticity only affects pronunciation becomes an argument against it. No matter whichever any perspective anyone takes, the tendency is for most to agree that it becomes harder and harder to learn an L2 beyond adolescence.

Personality

Personality has been defined as the "characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving" (Pervin & John, 2001, p. 4). Personality and affective characteristics are intricately related to SLA since the use of it involves interpersonal interaction. One of the aspects of personality that has generated abundant research in SLA is extraversion. Extroverts are often perceived in contrast to introverts. According to Brown (2014), extraverts are sociable, like excitement, take risks, and are lively and active. Conversely, introverts are reserved, quiet; they prefer reading to meeting people, and avoid excitement.

It can be assumed that introverts have good academic skills, and extraverts, who engage more in social interaction, have better communicative skills. Hence, both types may have success in different tasks (Gass & Selinker, 2008). After a thorough review of literature, Ellis (2012b) commented that the assumption that introverts have better academic abilities has not found ample support. Nevertheless, he states, "traits such as extraversion and openness to experience are related to measures of communicative language use, especially fluency" (Ellis, 2012b, p. 676). When it comes to developing communicative competence, extraverts are believed to be better L2 learners (Brown, 2014).

Motivation

Motivation is an element that has garnered much attention in the field of psychology as well as in the field of SLA. Growing evidence has proven that "motivation is a predictor of language-learning success" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 426). Two of the main proponents in the area of language motivation, Gardner and Lambert (1972) proposed that there are two basic orientations of language motivation: instrumental (motivation for practical reasons) and integrative (motivation for cultural reasons). Instrumental motivation can be equated to the desire to learn the language to get a job, obtain a degree, or a promotion. On the

other hand, integrative motivation can be understood as a personal interest in being accepted by the target culture.

Which of the two orientations above contributes more to successful language learning has been a source of debate. Both types of motivational orientations, however, seem to be related to success in SLA. "The degree of impact of either orientation will depend on individual learners, educational contexts, cultural milieu, teaching methodology, and social interaction" (Brown, 2007, p. 172). Furthermore, research suggests that the two orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that more important than the type of motivation is its intensity (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). This discussion implies that, it is the role of the L2 professionals to find way to increase the intensity of the motivation of L2 learners.

A recent approach to research on motivation in educational settings was proposed by Dörnyei (2001, 2005). It focuses on the dynamic aspect of motivation, describing three phases that are normally experienced by students. The first phase called *choice motivation* refers to the generation of motivation and the settings of goals. The second phase, *executive motivation*, is the one experienced during the action and that is responsible for maintaining interest and focus. The third phase, *motivation retrospection*, is an evaluation of the performance, which will influence the setting of new goals. Dörnyei (2001, 2005) also points out that these phases do not happen in isolation but rather in a simultaneous manner giving place to the occurrence of multiple cycles of motivation at the same time. Moreover, he suggests that the teacher can make use of different methods and techniques to generate and sustain students' motivation.

Language Anxiety

Neuroticism or anxiety is another aspect of personality closely related to SLA. There is no question learners experience anxiety when learning an L2. Even when anxiety can have positive effects in some cases, research has most often negatively related anxiety to learning (Ellis, 2012a). In addition, for a long time, anxiety has been viewed as a stable trait and scales such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety were used to measure anxiety following this view (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). More recent discussion, however, has focused on anxiety as a temporary and context-related characteristic which has been called *language anxiety* (Brown, 2007, Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Possible sources of anxiety have been investigated, and the results reflect that public performance is situated among the main stressors, along with competitiveness, tests, and perceived relationship with teachers (Ellis, 2012a). Anxiety has also been correlated to low proficiency, but it is not clear whether anxiety is the source or the result of low proficiency (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2012b). In any case, it is important for L2

professionals to implement ways to lower the L2 learners' anxiety level for learning to be more effective.

Gregersen (2003) observed that anxious students made more errors than less anxious learners, supporting the idea that anxiety does affect the quality of oral production, not only the quantity. Another study (Sheen, 2008) analyzed how anxiety prevented or facilitated the enhancement of oral production in response to recasts, and found that anxiety affected it negatively. Thus, it seems that even when some students can benefit from anxiety, most of them find it detrimental to language production and learning.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has been defined as "an attitude of approval or disapproval, [that] indicates the extent to which individuals believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful and worthy" (Coopersmith, 1967, pp. 4-5). According to Brown (2007), self-esteem can be described in three levels: global, situational, and task self-esteem. Global self-esteem refers to a general and stable self-concept. Situational self-esteem denotes personal beliefs about the efficacy of oneself in certain situations such as home, work, and school, or regarding certain abilities like sports, and communicative ability. Task self-esteem relates to the appraisal of self with regards to a particular task, skill, or aspect of a process, such as a specific subject-matter, or a language skill.

Weiner's (1985) attribution theory highlights the significance of self-esteem for learning. It deals with how people explain their successes or failures. He and other researchers proposed that people attribute their failure or success in achieving personal goals to four reasons: ability, effort, perceived difficulty of a task, and luck. When people have a high a sense of their capability to complete a task and they fail, they attribute failure to lack of effort. On the other hand, people with a low sense of their ability to carry out a certain task, that is people with low self-efficacy or low self-confidence, attribute their failure to either external factors (difficulty of the task, luck), or to initial low ability to perform the task.

The implications of this theory for all kinds of learners (including language learners) are that their beliefs about their capability can make them strive for success or create a self-fulfilling sense of failure from the beginning. L2 professionals need to develop and implement strategies that can boost L2 learners' self-esteem. They need to remove all factors that may lead to L2 learners' development of low self-esteem.

Language Aptitude

Language aptitude is "one's ability to learn another language" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 417). Its delimitation is not clear-cut, and for this reason,

language aptitude has not been extensively studied. There are, however, some characteristics that define language aptitude. Skehan (1989) suggests four elements as part of language aptitude. These are the following: *phonemic coding able*—the ability to differentiate sounds, *grammatical sensitivity*—the ability to understand the functions of words in context, *inductive language learning ability*—the ability to generalize rules about language, and *memory and learning*—the ability to make associations and to remember language material. Skehan proposes that all these elements can be combined in one: language analytic ability. The most well-known attempt to measure this ability has been the Modern Language Aptitude Test (commonly known as MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1959) although, its accuracy has been questioned in recent years.

While it may be scary to make the statement, some people are simply better at learning L2s than others. Having a high language aptitude means leads to easier learning of different languages. It is important to note, however, that there are many other factors in addition to language aptitude that influence successful L2 learning, as discussed in this paper. Low language aptitude should not be discouraging to L2 learners.

Measuring and classifying students according to their aptitude, moreover, do not seem to be the safest pedagogical road to take. The aptitude a student has can be developed under the teacher's guidance and encouragement. Even though this is not proven in all studies (Gass & Selinker, 2008), teacher's perceptions and attitudes are still great predictors of success in L2 students. The L2 teacher's role, therefore, is highly important to help students develop motivation, which is, according to Dörnyei (2005), linked with aptitude in the end.

Linguistic Background

Human beings come into the world with the physiological capacity to produce all sounds that exist, according to the nativists (Nunan, 2009). The fact that a baby listens and is trained in one or more particular languages determines that he or she will practice the sounds contained in his or her mother tongue. The remaining sounds of the spectrum will still be plausible to be produced, even though this training will require more time and dedication.

The phonological background a learner brings when learning an L2 is a key element as well, therefore, with respect to the "sounds bank" it provides to the speaker. The loosing of some sounds characterizes language production, giving a distinct flavor to different speakers in their learning journey. These characteristics are manifested very clearly in spoken language in general, and in pronunciation features in particular. For example, Spanish speakers have trouble distinguishing English vowels, since in Spanish has only five vowels (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). These differences are marked not only in pronunciation, but in grammar as well. The order of the words in a sentence varies from language to

language, and so does the production of learners that translate their message directly from their mother tongues to the English as an L2.

Socio-cultural Background

Languages are not used in cultural isolation. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), language and culture influence each other. This is not only true in the sense that the L2 is affected and influenced by its particular culture, but in the sense that the learner's culture influences his or her own learning of the L2 as well. The two aspects relate to each other. As Brown (2007) points out, "Culture establishes for each person a context of cognitive and affective behavior, a template for personal and social existence" (p. 189). In an effort to capture the target culture, language learners might tend to stereotype its members. A rough generalization of the L2 culture, however, might help L2 learners to develop the communicative competence better.

Generalizations can help L2 teachers as well to understand the learner's background. Generally speaking, for example, Asians are considered responsible and quiet learners, and Latinos are spontaneous and noisy ones. It is important to note, however, that this "intercultural awareness" (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002) is challenged in the 21st century multi-cultural reality. The melting-pot type of society is no longer only associated with the United States of America; it is present in all the important cities around the globe. This reality makes it essential that both teachers and students contrast the generalizations made against a conscious discussion and sharing of the values and opinions of each other. Teachers and learners, then, need to recognize their own subjectivity and challenge their presuppositions to have a more productive educational journey together in an L2 instructional setting.

L2 Learning Context

The L2 learning context plays an important role in SLA (Brown, 2014; Saville-Troike, 2006). L2 experts need to be aware of a few perspectives to understand better what they need to do for different L2 learning contexts. For the purposes of this paper, this section focuses on TESOL as an illustration.

Common Types of L2 Learning Contexts

SLA experts have considered different L2 contexts to try to understand how the L2 learning context affects L2 learning. For the purposes of this paper, a brief look is placed on English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, and academic vs. non-academic setting (Brown, 2014).

There is a clear distinction between ESL and EFL settings (Brown, 2014). In an ESL setting, L2 learners are exposed to much more input of L2 (in this case,

English) than those studying L2 in an EFL setting. In other words, L2 students learning English in the United Kingdom have much more exposure to English than those who study it in Russia or China. This reality affects both L2 teaching and learning, just because of that greater exposure of L2 input in an ESL setting than it is in an EFL setting. This distinction partially explains why EFL learners are less successful and slower than their ESL counterparts when it comes to learning English.

Another distinction that Brown (2014), Nunan (2009), and Saville-Troike (2006), among others, have discussed is that of academic vs. non-academic settings; that is, formal and informal settings of L2 learning. Ideally, informal L2 learning is preferred over formal L2 learning. In other words, it is better to acquire L2 the way children learn their L2. The problem, however, is that after the critical period, L2 learners depend more on *learning* rather than *acquiring* the L2. While children can still benefit primarily from informal or non-academic setting to learn an L2, adults seem to benefit better from both settings, with formal or academic setting taking the lead (Saville-Troike, 2006).

World Englishes

The number of users of English is rapidly growing to the point that it is believed that soon there will be more ESL speakers than native speakers (Graddol, 1997). According to the status of English in different countries, Kachru (1986) proposed a categorization of the *world Englishes*. He divided the settings where English is used into three groups: *inner circle* (countries where English is spoken as a first or native language), *outer circle* (countries where English is spoken as a second or additional language), and *expanding circle* (countries where English is spoken as a foreign language).

While the use of English in the inner and expanding circles does not present major variations, the situation in the outer circle is different. The use of English along with other languages in the outer circle countries has led to linguistic and phonological modifications. Nevertheless, there is no agreement whether some structural features that reflect the speakers' mother tongue should be considered errors or *nativization* of the language; neither has much research been conducted on SLA in outer circle settings (Ellis, 2012b).

TESOL professionals need to take into consideration the circle in which they are functioning. L2 learners in each of the three circles have different needs and therefore must be taught differently. Using English teaching strategies in the outer or expanding circles that are used for native speakers of English can simply lead to unsuccessful or challenging L2 learning process.

L2 Culture

The acculturation model (Schumman, 1978) proposes that a language is acquired successfully when learners want to be part of the new culture. A new language involves a new culture, with its own pragmatic characteristics. Some learners tend to translate their own language-culture features—pragmatics—into the English language, which often causes pragmatic failure; that is, the impossibility to understand "what is meant by what is said" (Fernández Amaya, 2008). For example, Korean learners are taught to minimize compliments received for giving a gift by saying, "No, it is not that good." The pragmatic failure occurs when they use this phrase in an English-speaking context, in which the speaker is supposed to simply accept the receiver's expression of gratitude.

Researchers have proposed that cultural awareness favors and enhances communicative competence in L2 learners (Byram et al., 2002). This is why teaching culture as a trend has gained value as a pedagogical strategy that points to the objective of communication as a whole process. Language competence plus pragmatic competence, then, are the factors that assure a learner to have communicative competence. Therefore, ESL teachers in particular are encouraged to discover the multiple possibilities of enhancing their practice by incorporating cultural elements (e.g., music, poetry, and customs) to the English classroom.

Other Important Considerations

The field of SLA has been influenced by a number of theories, hypotheses, and approaches to learning and teaching. Here a few are synthesized, particularly the input and output hypotheses, the interactionist theory, the affective filter theory, and the explicit vs. implicit instructional approaches.

Input and Output Hypotheses

Stephen Krashen (1981), one of the leading theorists in the field of SLA, proposed that learning and acquisition are different and exclusive mental processes. *Learning* is a conscious process that focuses on language forms, and the other one *acquisition* is a subconscious process that focuses on meaning. He argued that even when a learner can memorize grammatical rules and recognize grammatical errors, this knowledge does not intervene in meaningful communication. In other words, learning does not help acquisition and cannot be converted into it. Furthermore, he contended that SLA follows a very similar process to the one experienced by children acquiring their L1. Thus, he formulated the *input hypothesis* suggesting that comprehensible language input was the only necessary condition for acquisition. That is to say, language that the learner can understand and that is a little beyond his or her current competence is all that the learner needs to acquire a new linguistic feature.

Even though the input hypothesis received much attention, subsequent studies challenged it. Swain (1985) observed students in Canada receiving content instruction in a different language than their L1. Despite the great amount of comprehensible input received, they were not progressing as it was expected. Thus, Swain (1985) proposed the *output hypothesis*, in which he argued that input was not enough for acquisition but also opportunities to use the language were needed.

Another study analyzed the influence of practice in communicative situations on acquisition (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985). This research was an experimental study in which the control group received grammar instruction only, and the experimental group received the same instruction plus opportunities to use the language in communicative situations outside the classroom. The results showed that the scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than the control group, not only regarding communicative interaction, but also in a grammar test. The researchers concluded that both instruction and interaction were important for language acquisition. Both input and output are needed for L2 learners to be able to learn and produce an L2.

Interactionist Theory

Long's (1983) *interaction hypothesis* also considers interaction as a key element for SLA. In the first formulation of his hypothesis, Long (year?) contended that interaction facilitates acquisition by making input comprehensible. The second version of his hypothesis stated that interaction enhances acquisition by drawing the learners' attention to linguistic forms. This second version was later elaborated into what Long (1991, 2015) called form-focused instruction. This instructional approach emphasizes planned or incidental attention to forms within a meaningful communicative context.

Similar conclusions were drawn in a case study from Schmidt's personal experience learning an L2 in an immersion setting (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). The researcher reported that instruction and interaction were important, but he also proposed the *noticing principle*. This principle states that acquisition happens only when the learner notices the difference between his own production and the native speakers' production. This idea challenged Krashen's (1981) hypothesis of subconscious acquisition, since clearly noticing is a conscious process.

Affective Filter

Anxiety has been considered as one of the possible causes of failure in SLA (Brown, 2014; Krashen, 1985). Krashen argued that anxiety works as an affective filter that may or may not allow input to be processed by the brain, thus facilitating or preventing acquisition. He further hypothesized that affective filter

was the reason for the differences in individual achievement, especially between children and adults, because according to him, children do not have a affective filter that inhibit learning from happening. Similarly, Ehrman (1993, 1999) studied how anxiety and inhibition affect SLA. From her research, she proposed that people with thin ego boundaries (openness) are in a better position to acquire a language than those with thick ego boundaries (inhibition).

Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction

Another important distinction refers to whether explicit or implicit instruction is preferred in the classroom. Explicit instruction is related to explicit learning, which is learning consciously and with an intention to learn (Brown, 2007). This process includes "input processing to find out whether the input information contains regularities, and if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured" (Brown, 2007, p. 291). Explicit learning requires intentional and systematic ways of learning an L2 with a clear conscious effort.

Explicit teaching, then, is organized in a logical order, beginning with a demonstration, followed by an explanation and ended with practice (Nunan, 2009). The attention of the learners is crucial for this instruction to be successful. This type of instruction is useful, for example, to provide an understanding of a new topic or skill. The good side of it is that provides a structured approach, with clear explanations and rules. On the other hand, it does not provide opportunities to individualize the learning process, and it does not always work in consonance with the communicative learning approach.

Implicit learning is claimed to occur without awareness or intention (Brown, 2007). It supposes, then, a passive process, one in which students are exposed to information, and they acquire it simply as a result of being exposed to it. Some of the concepts associated with this type of learning include inductive, automatic, and subconscious exposure to language.

Implicit instruction involves teaching a particular topic in a suggestive or implied manner (Long, 2015). The objective is not manifested and clear to the students. The rules, therefore, are inferred from the examples presented first. This type of instruction is also good to present a new concept, but the focus is not the teacher but the student. The advantages of the implicit instruction are to enable students to infer rules and generalize on their own. This way, the learning process can be more meaningful. Some disadvantages are that this instruction can be vague and time consuming. Sometimes, it might be also difficult for student to imply the rules by themselves, or they might misinterpret them.

Each one of the instruction types has its advantages and disadvantages; therefore, the ESL teacher can use both methods according to the L2 learning setting and learners' needs. One consideration that helps to understand why teachers need to provide a varied learning experience is the fact that students are different and come to the classroom with diverse backgrounds and intelligence types (Gardner, 1983). Offering a learning experience promotes success in the L2 classroom.

L2 Assessment

Evaluation is a word that scares a bit because it might represent judging or prejudicing somebody. To evaluate means to assess somebody's competence, dominion, or even the learning process of a student. SLA presents various assessment approaches, tools, and techniques. Each one of the approaches has strong points and weak ones. This paper focuses on feedback, and formative versus summative assessment.

Feedback

To provide feedback means assessing the student in his or her L2 production. This is one way to evaluate the learning process. Feedback needs to be provided taking into account the previously established goals for the learning process. Feedback is used to help L2 learners know where they are making progress and the areas in which they need improvement (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Feedback helps students monitor their own learning progress.

Visual, written, and verbal cues can be used to provide feedback (Brown, 2007). Visually, the teacher can use many gestures to send a message (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010): a smile, for approval, or a frown for expressing that something needs to be modified—namely, a word, or even a misconduct.

Written feedback as a tool gives the teacher the opportunity to reach the student in a personal way, but one that allows him or her to save face. Some things might be easier to be expressed in a written form, therefore, the written feedback can go beyond a particular assignment evaluation, and to the multiple aspects that need to be encouraged or not based on the student's performance.

Verbally, the options to provide feedback are numerous as well. The spoken word can be used not only to encourage but also to correct the mistakes occurring in the communication process. Brown (2007) has identified at least six types of verbal feedback.

Recast. It is used to reformulate or expand an utterance. For example, if the student says "I go yesterday," the teacher corrects "Oh, yes, you went yesterday."

Clarification request. It is used to elicit a reformulation or repetition. For example, if the student says "I want listen music," the teacher asks "I'm sorry?"

Metalinguistic feedback. It is used to provide comments, or asking for information related to the student's utterance. For example, if the student says "I am married for ten years," the teacher prompts "Okay, but remember our class about present perfect tense?"

Elicitation. It is used to help the learner's self-correction. The teacher can use this feedback response even if the student is not addressing him or her in particular. For example, if the student asks another student "What you want?," the teacher can help by saying "Remember; how do we say that in English? What do…?"

Explicit correction. It is used to point out directly the mistake and show the correct form. For example, if the student says "My brother has 25 years old," the teacher can correct saying "No, not has. You want to say: My brother is 25 years old."

Repetition. It is used to point out the mistake, without any other explanation, but usually with a different intonation. For example, if the student says "My mother love cats," the teacher echoes "My mother *loves* cats."

Formative vs. Summative Assessment

As mentioned above, evaluation needs balance between different approaches. This balance is obtained in the process of evaluation when both formative and summative assessments are taken into account. Summative assessment supposes a more formal evaluation, and it is usually held as the final step of a period of instruction (Brown, 2007). There is, however, an emphasis placed on formative assessment, which is the evaluation that takes place during the learning process (Brindley, 2001). This type of assessment serves better for the purpose of tailoring the educational goals, helping students to achieve them in an individualized way.

Formative assessment, then, claims to focus on the learner, in concordance with a student-centered learning. Moreover, the new paradigm reflects the change "in education in general and in second language teaching in particular" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 335). Other elements of this type of evaluation include a focus on communication, integrated skills, open-ended questions, and multiple-solutions activities. In this sense, this process-focused assessment consists of tests that also teach, and are seen as more authentic means of evaluating L2 learning process.

L2 assessment is a broad umbrella that covers a plethora of topics. For the purposes of this paper, more details could not be provided. For a complete review of the different L2 assessment topics, readers are directed to Brown and Abeywickrama (2010).

Conclusion

SLA is a vast field. What this paper has done was to present some of the most important concepts that professionals involved in teaching or researching L2 teaching and learning should be aware of. The paper has provided a synopsis of the background of SLA, a number of different theories and perspectives of SLA, and some practical application of SLA theories to L2 teaching and learning. Readers are encouraged to utilize the sources shared in this article to explore further the SLA ideas they are interested in and those that were not discussed. Everyone involved in L2 teaching and learning in one way or another must make it a priority to develop a good understanding of SLA. Such an endeavor will help improve the teaching and learning of L2s.

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