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Introductory Chapter: Second Language Acquisition - Pedagogies, Practices and Perspectives

Christine Savvidou

1. Introduction

This edited volume aims at exploring second language acquisition (SLA) research and second language teaching (SLT) with the goal of highlighting recent developments within these interrelated fields. At its core, the book is premised on the assumption that the intersection between SLA and SLT represents an interdisciplinary space in which there exist specific pedagogies, practices and perspectives that inform the teaching and learning of a second language. It is worth pointing out, at this juncture, that for the purposes of this book, SLA and SLT are defined as the acquisition, use, learning and/or teaching of any language which is not the learner's first language (L1).

The rationale for this book emerges from fundamental questions of how learners use and learn a second language and what constitutes effective second language teaching in today's global context. Thus, within this context, the authors in this book set out to explore what it means to learn, teach or research a second language (L2); they also examine issues that define research, shape policy and inform the practice of SLT. As such, this book is aimed at language teaching professionals, linguists, teachers and teacher educators with the purpose of providing insights into the field of SLA and contributing to more effective teaching and teacher education within SLT.

2. Background

While it might be assumed that there is a natural relationship between SLA and SLT, these two fields have rather distinct histories [1]. On the one hand, early SLA research was preoccupied with identifying general patterns of linguistic development and the incremental and sequential steps that learners undergo as part of the L2 learning process [2, 3]. Rooted in such theories as interlanguage [4], error analysis [5] and contrastive analysis and transfer [6], early SLA research prompted the notion that 'Instruction that is not compatible with the way L2 acquisition takes place cannot be successful' [7]. In other words, SLT was based on what was considered to be a natural order in SLA. However, subsequent research has highlighted the limitations of instruction on learning with observations that L2 learners do not necessarily learn what is directly taught [8].

The recognition that SLA research cannot not provide a panacea for modern SLT has led to a rich and diverse interdisciplinary space drawing on theories from linguistics, psychology, sociology and education and a shift towards more

‘usage-based learning’, which refers to the observation of actual language in actual communicative events [9]. Despite this shift, it is argued that such research remains ‘pure’ with the study of SLA for its own sake [10].

Meanwhile, the early history of SLT also has a distinct history drawing on cognitive psychology and educational research. As such, the development of SLT in the latter half of the last century was preoccupied with finding the most effective teaching methods. Indeed, this obsession with methods resulted in a pedagogical ‘swinging of the pendulum’ [11]. Since the mid-twentieth century, SLT has seen alternating shifts in pedagogy. For example, the focus on teaching grammatical explanation and translation shifted to teaching spoken language; the goal of achieving communicative competence shifted to acknowledging learners’ needs, learning styles and motivation; teachers’ insistence on the exclusive use of the target language in the L2 classroom shifted to integrating learners’ native languages; the goal of achieving native-like proficiency shifted to acknowledging World Englishes [12, 13]. It is against this background that modern SLT now operates within what is known as the ‘postmethods era’ [14] in which ideas of principled pedagogy, context-based teaching, technology-enhanced learning and values of citizenship now play a significant role.

In sum, developments in SLA and SLT highlight the need for an interdisciplinary space that goes beyond traditional notions of second language learning and teaching. This book, therefore, attempts to address this need by examining the pedagogies, practices and perspectives that occupy the space between SLA and SLT.

3. Scope of the book

The scope of this book encompasses the rich and diverse perspectives of language teaching professionals, academics and researchers from different disciplines and different countries. Each chapter presents distinct theoretical approaches and empirical evidence exploring an array of contemporary topics including L2 learners’ linguistic development, L2 pragmatic and prosodic competence, multidimensional networks for inclusive L2 education, transformative pedagogy for L2 teachers and innovative and context-specific practices in second language teacher education. Such diversity reflects a global vision on the current state of SLA and promotes a view of SLA research rooted in transversality [15], based on the idea that there is no one theory that monopolises the field. Indeed, such multiple and diverse theories and approaches to SLA and SLT research reflect innovative and creative ways of understanding this interdisciplinary space.

As one explores the different chapters within this book, it becomes apparent how each one directly or indirectly discusses SLA in relation to the three themes—pedagogies, practices and perspectives—around which this book is structured. In as much as these themes intersect, the chapters included in this volume also reflect one or more of the three themes. In relation to the theme of *pedagogies*, authors highlight the pedagogical approaches to second language learning based on an understanding of learners’ L2 linguistic development, the use of the L2, learning needs, learning identities and the social and cultural backgrounds that impact second language learning. Within the theme of *practices*, authors discuss methods and approaches to SLT and propose techniques, strategies and conditions for effective second language learning and teaching. Finally, within the theme of *perspectives*, authors discuss local and global issues, policies and frameworks that support second language teaching and teacher education in relation to language learning rights and values.

4. Conclusion

Finally, this book hopes to contribute to new understandings of SLA research, theory and practice that transcend traditional theoretical and research perspectives. While this edited book represents the significant research efforts of academics and leading professionals in this area, it does not intend to provide a definitive overview of this complex and interconnected area. It can, however, serve as a foundation for further research and inquiry into SLA. All in all, it is hoped that this book will enable readers to inquire into their own research and practice, challenge existing assumptions and add to their own professional knowledge and practice of SLA research and SLT. In this regard, it is hoped that the pedagogies, practices and perspectives discussed in this book will provide both insights and inspiration to second language teaching professionals, linguists, teachers and teacher educators working in a global context.


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