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## SLA and Classroom Research

**T. Karunakaran, Ph.D.**

**Y. Nirmala, Ph.D. (ELE) Research Scholar**

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### Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to discuss some concepts of second language acquisition and classroom research. When a teacher is aware of the basics of second language acquisition and classroom research, second language teaching and learning becomes better. In this paper, some fundamentals of second language acquisition and classroom research are elaborated and analyzed critically.

**Key words:** SLA , School of thought, Classroom Research.

### Introduction

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According to Long (1998) cited in Block (2003:5-8) ‘SLA as a modern field of study is generally accepted as dating from the late 1960’s, meaning that the field as we know is still relatively young by the standards of the social sciences’. From the above definition, it is understood that SLA is a recent new and complex term dating back to 50 years. SLA is a process through which someone acquires one or more second or foreign languages. In general, it is believed that SLA emerged from comparative studies between L1 and L2 (similarities and differences). The definitions below sum up ‘what is SLA’?

“It is the study of how learners learn an additional language after they have acquired their mother tongue” (Ellis, 1985:5).

“SLA is the study of the process of learning a language other than one’s native language” (Lalleman, 1996: 3). SLA is concerned with what is acquired of a second language, what is not acquired of a second language, what the mechanisms are which bring that knowledge (or lack thereof) about and ultimately, an explanation of the process of acquisition in terms of both success and failures (Gass, 1993: 103 in Block, 2003: 8).

SLA is thought of as a discipline devoted to discovering and characterizing how it is that a human being is able to learn a second language: what pre-knowledge does he/she bring to the task, what set of learning procedures does he or she use, what strategies are appropriate for certain phenomena and not others etc. (Schachter, 1993: 173).

By SLA we mean the acquisition of language after the native language has already become established in the individual (Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996:1).

### **Key Concepts in SLA Research**

The keywords in the above definitions like acquire, knowledge, study, discover, strategies and characterize help us to understand that SLA is a complex process because one has to involve in the above mentioned activities for success or failure in SLA. Along with this, various other Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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factors like learner characteristics, linguistic factors, learning processes, age and acquisition, instructional variables, context, purpose etc also have a bearing in making SLA a complex field. Though SLA is complex in itself, it is essential to understand that a major part of SLA takes place in formal settings in our context as it is a second and foreign language for us. Therefore, it is worth understanding the classroom which plays an essential role leading to success or failure of SLA.

## **Classroom Research**

Classroom research is another dynamic area of investigation which is relevant to the many facets of second language learning and teaching – syllabus design, materials development, testing, teaching, education and so on. Classroom research is a complex field comprised of two major fields (classroom + research). Nunan (2005: 5-8) defines “a classroom is a room in which teachers and learners are gathered together for instructional purposes.” And research is a “Systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: 1.A question, problem or hypothesis; 2. Data and 3. Analysis and interpretation” (Nunan 2005: 5-8).

According to Allwright (1983) “classroom centered research is just that – research centered on the classroom, as distinct from, for example, research that concentrates on the inputs to the classroom (the syllabus, the teaching materials) or the outputs from the classroom (learner achievement scores). It does not ignore in any way or try to devalue the importance of such inputs and outputs. It simply tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers come together.”

However, Nunan (2005) states that classroom research(C.R) includes empirical investigations carried out in language classrooms. In tracing the development of classroom research, Allwright and Bailey (1991) state that modern critical reviews emerged in the 1950s, among teacher trainers when they were trying to give feedback to the problems of their student – teachers during their teaching practice. However language teaching came much later to C.R after (experimentation) trial and error of various methods like behavioursim, audio-lingualism and so

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on. Even with the recent and rapid evolution of the ‘virtual’ classrooms, the concept of C.R still plays an important role because it brings learners and teacher together. So from the definitions and discussions, it can be understood that the Classroom is the crucible place where teachers and learners come together and language learning (second language) happens.

### **Why There is Need For SLA?**

Learning a language according to Brown involves a number of components like acquisition, retention of information or skill, memory, cognitive recall, motivation, conscious and subconscious learning styles and strategies, reinforcement – of all which happen spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction in first language learning is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic as the child grows. This reminds us of Scollon (2001: 272) who emphasized that “learning is not something that comes in nicely packaged units” and that it certainly is “a multiple, complex and kaleidoscopic phenomenon.” Any language is complex as it is a mixture of various essential subfields like phonology, syntax, lexis, semantics, phonetics and so on.

Therefore, from the above discussion, it can be understood that a teacher needs to have knowledge about the relationship between language and cognition, writing systems, non-verbal communication, and sociolinguistics and first language acquisition. The understanding of these components of language determines to a large extent how we teach a language. Also, it can be understood that teaching cannot be defined apart from learning. Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning because the learner comes with all the variables (acquisition processes, perception, memory storage systems, short and long-term memory, recall, motivation, conscious and subconscious learning styles and strategies, theories of forgetting, reinforcement, the role of practice) essential in the learning of a second language. So, second language teaching may be defined as “Showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study for something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand” (Brown ,2000:1-19).

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## **Various Methods for SLA**

Now let us understand how various schools of thought and various methods emerged over the time span for SLA.

### ***Structural Linguistics and Behavioural Psychology***

In the 1940's and 1950's , the structural or descriptive school of linguistics with its advocates like Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, Charles Hockett and others came up with an idea of rigorous application of scientific observation to human languages. They claimed only “publicly observable responses” could be investigated. So, they started to identify only the structural characteristics of language. The structuralists believed that language can be dismantled into small pieces or units and that these units could be described scientifically, contrasted and added up again to form a whole.

Their paradigm of linguistic research which viewed language as a linear, structural system had its implications on language teaching which came up with the landmark publications of Skinner's “Verbal Behaviour” (1957), Charles Fries (1945) “Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language” strengthened the Grammar Translation Method which focuses on structural drills, pattern drills, grammatical analysis, isolated word lists, translations from L1 to L2, memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary to produce perfect translations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 4).

Since the Grammar Translation Method does not attempt to tap the communicative abilities, students have low motivation to go beyond grammar analogies, translations and role exercises. As Richards and Rodgers (2001: 7) pointed out, “it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology or educational theory.”

### **Generative Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology**

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In the 1960s, Chomsky and his followers who emerged as generative transformational linguists tried to show that human learning cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses. They claimed that each language has a different descriptive and adequate grammar. Later, Saussure (1916) cited in Brown (2007: 11) claimed that there is a difference between Parole (what Chomsky called performance) and langue (similar to the concept of competence).

### **Second Language Learning versus First Language Learning**

Throughout the history of language teaching, attempts have been made to make second language learning more like first language learning: natural Method (a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learner's native language if meaning is conveyed directly through demonstration and action). The principles of the natural method gave rise to the Direct Method. The Direct Method is regarded as the first language teaching method. The Direct Method which gave importance to the teacher than textbook, correct pronunciation, grammar, concrete vocabulary, oral communication skills and use of target language soon received a lot of criticisms. The Direct Method placed too much emphasis on the teacher's proficiency, which would then be required to seem more like that of a native speaker, led to difficulties.

Subsequent developments like the Coleman Report 1929, Reinforcement of the principles of the Reform Movement (1880's) in the 1930's led to the development of the other approaches like audio-lingualism, oral approach or situational language teaching.

### **Constructivism: A Multidisciplinary Approach**

Constructivism is a new school of thought. Jean Piaget (2001) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) are associated with constructivism. An interesting principle about constructivism is integration of linguistic, psychological and sociological paradigms. It puts emphasis on construction of meaning or discovery and social interaction. Slavin (2003) states that "learners must individually

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discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own, (suggesting) a more active role for students in their learning than is typical in many classrooms.”

Constructivism lays stress on cooperative learning in constructing both cognitive and emotional images of reality. The champion of constructivism, Vygotsky (1978) advocated the view that “children’s thinking and meaning making is socially constructed and emerges out of their social interactions with their environment” (Kaufman, 2004: 304).

Closely related to the Vygotskian perspective is Bhaktin’s (1986) view which has captured the attention of SLA practitioners and researchers. Bhaktin ( 1986:75-85) proposed that “language is immersed in a social and cultural context and the central function is to serve as a medium of communication” (Brown, 2001: 14). In this direction, teaching of second language took a new turn and increased emphasis was laid on the socio-cultural dimensions of SLA. This led to a new paradigm what Watson (2004) calls “the language socialization paradigm for SLA” which led to the synthesis of certain reconsiderations - that cognition originates in social interaction and that it is shaped by cultural and sociopolitical processes.

The language teaching profession has mirrored these theoretical trends with approaches and techniques that have stressed the importance of self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, and cooperative learning, developing individual strategies for meaning-making and more importantly focusing on the communicative process of language leaning.

### **Communicative Language Teaching**

The main pedagogical methods of the last few decades are appropriately captured in the term Communicative Language Teaching today. CLT is an eclectic blend of the contributions of previous methods into the best of what a teacher can provide in authentic uses of the second language in the classroom.

CLT is popular today because it lays stress on all components of language rather than grammatical and linguistic competence alone. It engages learners in authentic and functional use  
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of language for real purposes, and fluency is given importance. Task-based instruction is another manifestation of CLT. Richards and Rodgers (2001) opine that CLT is best understood as an approach rather than a method.

### **An Array of Techniques to Choose from**

From the discussion above, it can be understood that no language teaching practice has guaranteed complete success. A significant difference between the current practices and the old ones is the absence of proclaimed orthodoxy. The old methods were too narrow to apply for different aspects of language teaching. As Kozlowski and Bell (2003), Brown (2001), Kumaravadivelu (2003) and others have stated “pedagogical trends in language teaching now spur us to develop a principled basis – sometimes called an ‘approach’ (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) of which teachers can choose particular techniques for teaching a foreign/ second language in a specific context.”

Here it may be right to quote Brown (2001: 18), who states that “Every learner is unique, every teacher is unique, every learner-teacher relationship is unique and every context is unique.” Therefore, it is the task of the teacher to understand and the properties of those relationships and contexts and put to work a better, enlightened and eclectic approach. These principles of second language learning and teaching may help the teacher to build a theory or bring about better changes in language teaching. Thus, it is necessary to boost teacher development for successful SLA in our language classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

Second language acquisition is a vast area and issues in the area of second language acquisition are very complex and debatable. However, many linguists do agree that SLA and classroom research are very important for second language teachers to do a self check for improved teaching and learning. This preamble only focused on some basic concepts of SLA and the need



of classroom based research that a teacher requires to practice in order to develop his/her ability to give his/her best to the students, particularly in L2 learning and teaching context.

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T. Karunakaran, Ph.D.  
Senior Lecturer in ELT  
University of Jaffna  
Sri Lanka

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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T. Karunakaran, Ph.D. and Y. Nirmala, Ph.D. (ELE) Research Scholar  
SLA and Classroom Research

[karuenglish@yahoo.com](mailto:karuenglish@yahoo.com)

Y Nirmala  
Research Scholar in PhD (ELE)  
English and Foreign Languages University  
Hyderabad – 500605  
Andhra Pradesh  
India  
[nimmi.ciefl@gmail.com](mailto:nimmi.ciefl@gmail.com)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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T. Karunakaran, Ph.D. and Y. Nirmala, Ph.D. (ELE) Research Scholar  
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