

Book Review

Book Review: How Languages Are Learned

How Languages Are Learned

Patsy M. Lightbown & Nina Spada, 2013 (4th ed.)

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Reviewed by

Krishna Kumari Upadhayaya* 

Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

The book “How Languages Are Learned” introduces major theories of first and second language acquisition and their application in real classroom situations. It discusses early, foundational research studies on language acquisition and some latest research in the area. First published in 1993, it went through four editions by 2013. This shows the popularity of the book.

The book contains seven chapters altogether. Chapter 1 discusses the learning process of young children in their early three years, first with morphemes, then negation, and the formation of simple questions. The authors discuss how children develop linguistic competence early and what abilities the children bring to the task. Then, they discuss the environmental conditions that contribute to first language acquisition from behaviourist, innatist, and interactional/developmental perspectives. The chapter finally outlines the language disorders and delays during the stages of language development and points out that children delay speaking due to dyslexia,

* Reviewer Email: krisna_phele21@kusoed.edu.np

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2944-6834>



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deafness, articulatory problem, etc. Finally, the chapter discusses childhood bilingualism as well as language problems and delays that occur throughout the phases of language development.

Chapter 2 brings the reference to second language learning focusing on the development of new knowledge. It provides a glimpse of the contexts of learning a first and second language. The authors begin the discussion with the learner's characteristics and assume that knowledge of a prior language can be advantageous in learning a second language. However, it can also result in incorrect assumptions about how a second language functions, which could cause mistakes that first-language learners wouldn't make. Likewise, they draw on the learning conditions of second language acquisition, bringing cognitive maturity, metalinguistic awareness, world knowledge, and anxiety about speaking. Next, they highlight various hypotheses of error, which are contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage. After that, how second language acquisition takes place in learners through developmental sequences, grammatical morphemes, negation, question, possessive determiners, and so on convince us that interlanguage second language learners produce and understand changes as they have more exposure to the use of language.

In Chapter 3, the authors pin down the topic of individual differences in second language learning. They start with the successful/unsuccessful second language learning experiences with the difficulties and how individual characteristics contribute to the theories of SLA. Likewise, they discuss positive/negative correlations referring that positive correlation is related to motivation and language learning success, whereas negative correlation varies in the opposite direction. Similarly, the authors discuss crucial individual characteristics such as intelligence, language learning aptitude, learning styles, personality, attitudes and motivation, motivation in the classroom, identity, ethnic group affiliation, and age. Similarly, they also discuss the topic from the perspective of learner beliefs, age, advantages for older learners, etc., which would showcase individual differences in the case of second language acquisition. The chapter emphasizes that it is hard to interpret the research results regarding individual differences and relates this to the fact that learner characteristics are not independent. Learners' personalities, general and specific intellectual abilities, motivation, and age influence their learning. Individual differences and learning outcomes are interrelated to each other.

Chapter 4 discusses second language learning theories —behaviourism, innatism, cognitivism, and sociocultural perspectives. Krashen’s Monitor Model gets ample space, focusing on information processing, usage-based learning, competition, interaction, noticing, input processing, and processability theory. The innatists concentrate on the complexities of a proficient speaker’s language knowledge. Likewise, cognitive and developmental psychologists believe it is not enough to know the final state of knowledge. Similarly, interactionists argue that learners gain knowledge from the support of their interlocutors. Then, linguists with psychological orientations understand that the neurological approach explains language learning. Finally, the authors claim that language acquisition theories contribute insights into teaching languages in classroom situations.

Chapter 5 demonstrates language learning between the classroom and out-of-classroom learning environments. They claim that languages can be acquired naturally from contact with native speakers in society or learned in the classroom. The authors further divide language learning in classroom instructions into three: natural acquisition, structure-based instructional learning, and communicative instructional learning. In the natural setting, language acquisition takes place outside the classroom. Students engage in social interaction in this learning process, and a minor correction occurs. Then, in instructional learning, the learning process moves from simple to complex, with frequent error correction. Communicative instructional learning focuses on meaning and motivation for learning. Lastly, instances of chats and taxonomies help the reader perceive and comment more on the interactions between learners and educators in the classroom.

Chapter 6 focuses on six crucial proposals for classroom teaching and interacts with the authors’ research findings on how the proposals get interpreted in classroom practice. They bring the reference of classroom practices on the grammar-translation process and audiolingual instruction and propose that language acquisition takes place when learners expose themselves to comprehensive input through listening and reading. Then, they discuss content-based teaching and subject matter. Finally, the authors suggest that it is not necessary to choose between form-based and meaning-based instruction; rather, the challenge is to find the best balance between these two orientations.

Chapter 7 reflects on their research. They bring 18 topics related to commonly held beliefs and ideas. The writers believe people learn languages mainly through imitation, parents' correction in grammar, motivation, the number of new vocabulary through reading, teachers' grammar instruction from simple to complex, error correction, interaction, classrooms language learning, etc. Therefore, in this chapter, the authors focus on the issue that language learning is affected by many factors. At the end of this chapter, there is a glossary where readers can check the items that have distinct technical meanings in second language acquisition research and second language teaching.

Reading the book was a satisfying experience for me. It was interesting to discover how language acquisition theories gradually developed over time. I could abridge some practical applications, too; a learner needs exposure to several activities like extensive reading to increase vocabulary, listening to others carefully to pick out the correct pronunciation, interacting with constructive feedback, etc., to learn a language effectively. Talking and writing can also help understand the structure and new vocabulary.

Personally, I feel the book empowered me with self-confidence while teaching a second language. As a language teacher, I think the book inspires me whenever I suffer from frustrating situations in the classroom. After reading the book, I learned that language learning is a natural phenomenon, and we gradually internalize linguistic rules as all languages are rule-governed. In an early phase of learning a language, the learner picks up utterances without prior knowledge of the grammar and applies the new grammatical rules much in a later phase as they acquire the rules.

The book is a valuable asset for language teachers and researchers interested in second language acquisition. As a language teacher and researcher, the book asked me to reflect on my students' language acquisition process. The book encouraged me to be a researcher in my class. The instances, evaluations, and case studies throughout the book enabled me to relate the theories to real-life experiences in my language classrooms. This book is just the right one for language teachers, teacher trainers, researchers, and educators interested in discovering more about first and second language acquisition.

Finally, I recommend the book to anyone interested in studying second language acquisition and how some of the research's conclusions can be applied to the classroom in various ways. However, the book is not intended for teachers looking for classroom pedagogy, as the authors also hold the view that language learning can be a puzzle that requires scientists to continue working on it; even then, there may be issues with integrating theory and practice (p. 121).

Teachers looking for the best classroom management methods or instructional tactics may not find this book to be helpful due to its limitations. For example, though the authors claim that the grammar translation method does not prove to be effective these days, they do not completely convince the readers as they suggest "virtually little interaction in English with the teacher or other learners" and that pupils simply read books individually every day (p. 161). I am concerned about their suggestion for comprehension-based instruction and learning, as comprehension-based instructors don't frequently employ this strategy. Less advanced courses often promote active participation in the classroom. In higher-level programs, most comprehension-based instructors also assume that their students would use the target language to talk and occasionally write, if not frequently.

The book does not clearly address the optimum teaching strategy for second language learning in a classroom setting. But the book isn't entirely a waste of time. It does make general suggestions for language teaching that are supported by research. But there is still no definite consensus on the best way to teach. In my view, this is both what can make teaching languages challenging and frustrating as well as what makes it exciting and engaging. There is still a ton to learn.

Reference

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