

Preface

The history of acceptance of new theories frequently shows the following steps: at first the new idea is treated as pure nonsense, not worth looking at. Then comes a time when a multitude of contradictory objections are raised, such as: the new theory is too fancy, or merely a new terminology; it is not fruitful, or simply wrong. Finally a state is reached when everyone seems to claim that he had always followed this theory. This usually marks the last state before general acceptance.

(Lewin 1943: 292)

I normally enjoy the process of writing a book, but this volume on the psychology of second language acquisition (SLA) has been an emotional roller-coaster at times. In fact, after I received the contract from Oxford University Press, I put off working on the manuscript for several years—I did have some good excuses, but the bottom line was that I was apprehensive about the enormity of the task: applied linguistics and second language research had clearly been shaken by a paradigmatic earthquake. This has been caused by (1) the rapidly growing influence of relevant brain research in psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, neuropsychology, neurobiology, and more generally, in cognitive (neuro)science; and (2) the emergence of new cognitive approaches to the study of language acquisition, such as connectionism, emergentism, dynamic systems theory, complexity theory, and usage/exemplar-based theories. The resulting changes in our field have been so fast and profound that the word ‘blitzkrieg’ seems oddly fitting to describe what we are currently experiencing.

Soldiering on in the ‘psycho-blitzkrieg’

I have spent most of my professional life at the interface of linguistics and psychology, yet even I was unprepared for the sudden emergence of the multitude of new metaphors, technical terms, measurement procedures, and theoretical orientations that cognitive and neuropsychological research has brought about. My first reaction was to ignore these new developments, saying that they do not apply to my specialization area, individual difference research. However, I had to realize that applied linguists simply do not have the option of ignoring the new psychological approaches because the advances in these areas are leading to a fundamental restructuring of our knowledge base of language acquisition and language processing. Disregarding these developments

would lead to the marginalization of the field of applied linguistics/second language research—a process that has already begun to some extent with many of the recent cutting-edge findings produced under the relatively new (and somewhat vague) banner of the fast expanding field of bilingualism. Thus, while many of the contemporary SLA courses and texts worldwide are still confined to talking about issues such as the limitations of Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, the most exciting discussions 'out there' concern topics such as the potentials and limitations of distributed connectionist models or the interfaces and neurobiological substrates of explicit and implicit language knowledge.

Even if we recognize the importance of investing in the psychological aspects of applied linguistics, it still remains the case that the task of coming to grips with the wide variety of relevant research areas and directions may seem overwhelming. If you have read any recent writings of the foremost contemporary psycholinguists or neurolinguists, you may have felt you were undergoing a psychedelic experience, often with catastrophically disempowering effects. Second-language (L2) neuroresearch, for example, is vigorously trying its wings by developing an unprecedentedly rich new metaphor-repertoire while re-examining everything we have known (or thought we had known) about language attainment through the lenses of neuroimaging. And, as with so many new initiatives, it is not easy for readers to distil what is truly worthwhile and what are merely intellectual dead-ends; there is a lot of confusion, a lot of contradiction, and many gaping holes in the findings, which makes following this literature hard going even for the specialists.

With all the above in mind, I would like to invite the readers to an orientation tour in the new stream of 'psycho-SLA'. (This is bound to be the most awful term in this book, although you might be surprised.) This book does not offer an 'all-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-the-psychology-of-SLA' summary but rather a 'what-you-definitely-need-to-know-about-the-psychology-of-SLA' crash course. In the following chapters, I will introduce the new language of 'Neuropsychologese', I will describe the main research methods in investigating the operation of the brain (Ch. 2), I will outline the most important psychological processes underlying second language attainment, and I will introduce several new emerging theoretical paradigms (Chs. 3–4). Building on these foundations, I will then summarize what we know about the language learner's role and impact in the SLA process (Ch. 5) and examine the effects of age (i.e. is younger really better?) (Ch. 6). Finally, I will discuss the psychological basis of 'instructed SLA', that is, language learning and teaching in educational contexts (Ch. 7).

All in all, this book is not unlike the diary of an explorer. I have done my best to visit what I thought were the most exciting and exotic places within this part of the (intellectual) world, and during my exploration I made extensive field notes to record and organize my experiences. *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* is in many ways the edited collection of these notes. As with other diaries, some of the insights are more discerning than

others, and some might turn out merely to outline intriguing states of affairs without getting anywhere near to the bottom of those. For many readers, the region explored is likely to be a strange land, full of odd and perhaps menacing elements. Yet, the inescapable truth is that SLA researchers need to become skilled rangers in these territories—the psychological aspects will not go away but will take up an increasingly central position within the study of the acquisition of a foreign or second language. I do hope that this book will be useful in gathering the right equipment and gaining confidence before embarking on the next expedition.

What this book does and does not offer

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.

(Proverbs 17: 28)

The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition is a book about language acquisition. Although this may sound self-evident, we will see in the first chapter that most of the SLA literature is not only, and often not even predominantly, concerned with how languages are learnt. This is because second language acquisition research is usually equated with second language research in general, and this latter domain involves two other key areas besides acquisition: second language representation (i.e. how L2 knowledge is structured in a formal system and stored in the brain) and second language processing (i.e. how an L2 is produced and comprehended). My interest, however, lies in the developmental aspect of L2 knowledge and this book, therefore, provides neither a detailed account of L2 representation nor one of processing.

Even after restricting the theme to the acquisition of an L2, the scope of the relevant topics is wide, ranging from Universal Grammar through the cognitive neuroscience of SLA to the psychological basis of language teaching methodologies. In covering the various areas, I will try to offer evaluative syntheses of the complex issues while also including numerous literal citations by leading scholars to represent multiple voices. The inherent difficulty of surveying the field was knowing that, given the speed of development in the area, a great deal of the current literature will be considered outdated or inaccurate in ten years' time. Thus, the challenge was to try and identify those aspects of our current knowledge that are likely to stand the test of time so that the summary is sufficiently forward-pointing.

Due to time and space limitations, and perhaps more importantly, due to my uneven knowledge, some potentially important areas have been omitted or covered only in insufficient detail. Examples include sociocultural theory, language transfer and fossilization, L2 attrition, and the psycholinguistics of literacy. In addition, I tended to spend the bulk of the time available for researching a particular topic reviewing the most recent literature, which left the historical background to some of the areas rather thin or sketchy. Even

with these restrictions, I found that the further I progressed, the more obvious it became that I was unlikely ever to get there, a fact graphically illustrated by the growing piles of unread papers and books on my desk. I therefore sincerely apologize to scholars whose work will not be discussed in appropriate detail in the following chapters.

Acknowledgements

Over the years of preparing for, and then actually getting down to, writing this book, I have been encouraged and helped by many people. First and foremost, I would like to express my thanks to Cristina Whitecross from Oxford University Press, who has been much more than merely a good editor. She embraced the vision of this book right from the beginning and provided ongoing support throughout the whole process of completing the manuscript. Special thanks are due to Simon Murison-Bowie, who not only polished the text and sorted out all the commas and colons but who also made many valuable suggestions on how to improve the content. I am grateful to Natasha Forrest for making sure that the production of the book went so smoothly.

I have been fortunate to have several friends and colleagues willing to read the whole or various parts of the manuscript and give me detailed suggestions on how to improve the text. My warm thanks are due to David Birdsong, Robert DeKeyser, Nick Ellis, Jan Hulstijn, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Patsy Lightbown, Peter MacIntyre, Lourdes Ortega, John Schumann, Tom Scovel, Norman Segalowitz, Nina Spada, and Henry Widdowson for their valuable feedback. I have done my best to take as many of their comments on board as possible and I do believe that the manuscript has improved considerably as a result of their contribution. Needless to say, the remaining faults are entirely mine.