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THE IMPORTANCE OF FIVE CONTEMPORARY THEORIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. COMPLEMENTARY LENSES ON SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Second language acquisition (SLA) is a theoretically plural field in which no single account has achieved consensus; rather, a set of complementary theories each illuminates a different facet of how additional languages are learned. This article examines the importance of five contemporary theories that together define much of the current landscape: the Interaction Approach, Sociocultural Theory, Skill Acquisition Theory, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, and usage-based (emergentist) approaches. For each, the article outlines the central constructs, summarises the empirical and conceptual contribution the theory makes, and considers its implications for language teaching. It argues that the significance of these frameworks lies less in their competition than in their complementarity: the Interaction Approach specifies the conditions under which input becomes usable; Sociocultural Theory locates development in mediated social activity; Skill Acquisition Theory explains the proceduralisation of knowledge through practice; Complex Dynamic Systems Theory reconceives development as nonlinear and emergent; and usage-based approaches ground acquisition in the statistical properties of input. Understanding these theories equips researchers and teachers with a repertoire of explanatory lenses, each answering questions the others leave open, and collectively advancing a fuller account of second language development.

Keywords: second language acquisition, SLA theory, interaction approach, sociocultural theory, skill acquisition, complex dynamic systems theory, usage-based learning

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is among the most theoretically diverse areas of applied linguistics. Unlike disciplines organised around a single dominant paradigm, SLA is characterised by a plurality of theories, each developed to explain a particular aspect of the complex phenomenon by which learners come to command a language beyond their first (VanPatten, Keating, & Wulff, 2020). This diversity is not a sign of immaturity but a reflection of the object of study: language learning implicates cognition, social interaction, neurobiology, motivation, and time, and no single framework can capture all of these dimensions at once. As Long (1990) argued in an influential statement of the field's aspirations, an adequate theory of SLA must account for a wide range of well-established findings — among them the role of input, the limited effect of instruction on developmental sequences, and systematic variation in ultimate attainment — and any theory that ignores these phenomena is incomplete.

This article examines the importance of five contemporary theories that, taken together, define much of the present landscape of SLA: the Interaction Approach, Sociocultural Theory, Skill Acquisition Theory, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, and usage-based or emergentist approaches.

These frameworks span the cognitive–social spectrum along which the field is often mapped, from largely cognitive accounts of how input is processed to thoroughly social accounts of how development is mediated (Ortega, 2009). For each theory, the discussion sets out the core constructs, considers the conceptual and empirical contribution the theory makes, and notes its implications for language teaching. The central argument is that the importance of these theories lies not in their rivalry but in their complementarity: each answers questions that the others leave open, and a researcher or teacher conversant with all five commands a far richer explanatory repertoire than any one framework could provide.

2. The Interaction Approach

The Interaction Approach occupies a central place in cognitively oriented SLA. Its foundational claim, formulated in Long's (1996) revised interaction hypothesis, is that the interactional adjustments speakers make when negotiating meaning — clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and reformulations — facilitate acquisition by connecting input, learners' internal capacities, and output in productive ways. When communication threatens to break down, the negotiation that follows renders input more comprehensible, draws learners' attention to gaps between their interlanguage and the target, and creates opportunities for modified production. The approach integrates several complementary constructs: the provision of comprehensible input, Schmidt's (1990) claim that noticing is a necessary condition for input to become intake, and Swain's (1995) argument that pushed output obliges learners to process language syntactically rather than merely semantically.

The importance of the Interaction Approach lies in its specification of the conditions under which exposure becomes usable for learning, and in the strength of the empirical base supporting it. Building on the descriptive foundations laid by Gass (1997), experimental studies such as Mackey (1999) demonstrated that learners who engaged in interaction outperformed those who received premodified input alone, and a meta-analysis by Mackey and Goo (2007) confirmed robust positive effects of interaction on second language development across a large body of studies. These findings give the approach considerable pedagogical reach: it furnishes the theoretical rationale for communicative and task-based language teaching, for the use of information-gap and problem-solving tasks, and for the provision of interactional feedback in the classroom. By locating learning at the intersection of input, attention, and production, the Interaction Approach bridges purely input-based and purely output-based accounts of acquisition.

3. Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory (SCT), derived from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and developed for SLA principally by Lantolf and colleagues, offers a fundamentally different vantage point. Where cognitive theories locate learning inside the individual mind, SCT holds that higher mental functions, including second language ability, originate in social activity and are subsequently internalised (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Its central construct is mediation: humans do not act on the world directly but through culturally constructed tools, of which language is the most important. Two further constructs give the theory its analytical power. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) designates the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with the assistance of a more capable other, and it reframes assistance not as interference but as the very site of development. Regulation describes the movement from other-regulation, in which a learner depends on external support, to self-regulation, in which the learner controls the activity autonomously.

The importance of SCT is evident in the way it reconceptualises phenomena that cognitive theories treat quite differently. In their influential study of corrective feedback, Aljaafreh and Lantolf

(1994) showed that effective help is negotiated and graduated within the ZPD — becoming more explicit only as the learner requires — rather than delivered uniformly, a finding that reframes error correction as a collaborative, developmental process. The theory has generated productive pedagogical applications, including dynamic assessment, in which teaching and assessment are integrated so that the mediation a learner needs itself becomes diagnostic, and concept-based instruction (Lantolf, 2000). By insisting that development is mediated, social, and jointly constructed, SCT supplies an account of the interpersonal and instructional dimensions of learning that individualist cognitive theories are not designed to address.

4. Skill Acquisition Theory

Skill Acquisition Theory returns to the individual learner but frames language learning as an instance of a far more general process: the acquisition of any complex cognitive skill, from playing chess to driving a car. Drawing on cognitive psychology, and in particular on Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought model, the theory posits that skills develop through three stages. Learning typically begins with declarative knowledge — explicit "knowledge that," such as a stated grammatical rule; through relevant, meaningful practice this knowledge is proceduralised into "knowledge how"; and with continued practice it becomes automatised, so that it can be deployed rapidly, accurately, and with little demand on attention (DeKeyser, 2007). Crucially, the theory predicts a characteristic learning curve, described by the power law of practice, in which gains are initially rapid and then gradually taper.

The importance of Skill Acquisition Theory lies in the precise account it offers of the role of practice, a variable that many other theories underspecify. DeKeyser's (1997) experimental study of the automatisation of second language morphosyntax demonstrated that practice effects were skill-specific — practice in comprehension improved comprehension, and practice in production improved production — supporting the theory's claim that proceduralised knowledge is tied to the conditions of its acquisition. This has direct consequences for instructional design: it implies that explicit teaching can be beneficial provided it is followed by systematic, communicatively relevant practice, and that the type of practice must match the target performance (DeKeyser, 2007). The theory is best suited to explaining learning under instructed conditions and to accounting for the development of fluency and accuracy, and it therefore complements theories that focus on naturalistic input or social mediation.

5. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory

Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), introduced to applied linguistics by Larsen-Freeman (1997), reconceives second language development not as the steady accumulation of discrete items but as the behaviour of a complex, dynamic system. On this view, the many components implicated in learning — the learner's developing linguistic system, cognitive resources, motivation, and social environment — are densely interconnected and continually interacting, so that change in one reverberates through the whole. Development is therefore nonlinear: progress may be sudden or gradual, plateaus and even regressions are expected, and outcomes are sensitive to initial conditions. Variability, far from being noise to be averaged away, is treated as meaningful data that reveals the system in the process of reorganisation (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007).

The importance of CDST is both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, it dissolves a number of long-standing dichotomies — between acquisition and use, between the individual and the environment, between competence and performance — by treating them as mutually constitutive aspects of a single evolving system, and it makes emergence, the appearance of new patterns from the interaction of simpler elements, central to the explanation of development. Methodologically, it has

driven a turn towards dense, longitudinal, case-based designs capable of capturing moment-to-moment change, exemplified by Larsen-Freeman's (2006) analysis of the emergence of complexity, fluency, and accuracy in the writing and speech of individual learners (see also Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). By foregrounding time, variability, and interconnection, CDST offers a framework for phenomena — individual developmental trajectories, non-uniform progress, the interplay of variables over time — that more static theories tend to obscure.

6. Usage-Based and Emergentist Approaches

Usage-based, or emergentist, approaches propose that linguistic knowledge is not innate and modular but emerges from experience with language in use. On this account, learners are sensitive to the statistical properties of the input — the frequency with which forms occur, the reliability with which cues signal meaning, and the contexts in which patterns recur — and they gradually abstract constructions, or conventionalised form–meaning pairings, from concrete exemplars encountered in communication. Ellis (2002) synthesised extensive evidence that language processing is intimately tuned to input frequency across every level of language, from phonology to morphosyntax to formulaic sequences, and argued that much of acquisition can be understood as implicit, associative learning driven by the distributional regularities of the input, complemented at points by explicit learning.

The importance of usage-based approaches lies in the way they connect language learning to general cognition and to the observable characteristics of input. By grounding acquisition in frequency, chunking, and analogy rather than in an autonomous language faculty, the approach explains why formulaic sequences are learned early and processed rapidly, why high-frequency patterns are acquired before rare ones, and why entrenched first-language patterns can block the learning of second-language constructions (Ellis, 1996, 2002). The framework also forges a natural link between SLA and corpus linguistics, since the frequency and distributional information on which it depends can be measured directly in corpora of authentic language. In this respect usage-based approaches share deep affinities with Complex Dynamic Systems Theory: both treat language as an emergent, experience-driven system rather than a fixed body of rules, and the two are frequently pursued in tandem.

7. Why These Theories Matter: Complementarity and Reach

Presented in isolation, each of these five theories can appear to compete with the others for the status of the correct account of SLA. Considered together, however, they are better understood as complementary lenses, each bringing into focus a different dimension of a phenomenon too complex for any single framework to capture (VanPatten, Keating, & Wulff, 2020). The Interaction Approach explains how input becomes usable through negotiated communication; Sociocultural Theory explains how development is mediated within social activity; Skill Acquisition Theory explains how knowledge is proceduralised and automatised through practice; Complex Dynamic Systems Theory explains why development is nonlinear, variable, and emergent over time; and usage-based approaches explain how linguistic knowledge itself arises from experience with the statistical structure of input. A question that one theory cannot answer is frequently central to another: where Skill Acquisition Theory is largely silent on social mediation, SCT places it at the centre; where the Interaction Approach treats the learner's system as relatively stable, CDST foregrounds its continual reorganisation.

This complementarity has direct practical value. A teacher who understands all five theories can design tasks that promote meaningful interaction, scaffold learners within their zone of proximal development, sequence explicit instruction towards communicative practice, interpret uneven progress as a normal feature of a dynamic system rather than as failure, and ensure that learners meet high-frequency target patterns often enough to acquire them. The enduring importance of these

contemporary theories, then, is that they collectively furnish both researchers and practitioners with a coherent yet multi-faceted account of second language development — one in which cognition and society, stability and change, and rule and experience are treated not as competing explanations but as intersecting parts of a single, richly interconnected process (Ortega, 2009).

8. Conclusion

The five theories examined here — the Interaction Approach, Sociocultural Theory, Skill Acquisition Theory, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, and usage-based approaches — represent central strands of contemporary thinking about how additional languages are learned. Their importance is not diminished by the absence of a single unifying theory; on the contrary, it is precisely their diversity that allows the field to address the full breadth of second language development, from the negotiation of meaning in conversation to the statistical learning of constructions and the nonlinear unfolding of individual trajectories over time. For the researcher, familiarity with these frameworks is a prerequisite for framing questions and interpreting findings; for the teacher, it is a source of principled, theoretically grounded practice. Rather than seeking to crown one theory, the discipline is served best by understanding what each contributes, where its explanatory power ends, and how, in combination, the five together bring us closer to a comprehensive account of second language acquisition.

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