

# Introduction

## What Is Second Language Acquisition?

The term *second language acquisition* (SLA) takes in multiple contexts. It includes both naturalistic (“on the street”) and instructed (classroom) learning. It refers to both second and foreign language learning. Second language (sometimes actually third or fourth language) learning occurs in a setting in which the language is used in most areas of life at most times. Immigrants to a country learning the national language are studying in a second language context. Somali immigrants learning English in Columbus, Ohio (USA), are studying English as a Second Language (ESL). Foreign language learning occurs usually in classrooms, but not in the world outside. Students studying Arabic in Columbus, Ohio, are studying a foreign language. Much of the early research published in English in SLA reported on students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Those students were learning English to enter U.S. universities.

As we will see, Stephen Krashen has made a distinction between learning and acquisition and that distinction has led to this paragraph appearing in most books about SLA. Basically, this distinction is between traditional classroom learning (learning the rules) on the one hand and meaning/input-based teaching leading to acquisition, *feel for the language*, on the other. We will make no distinction unless discussing Krashen’s work.

## About This Book

*Second Language Acquisition Myths* was written to be a first book in SLA for upper-division undergraduate and introductory M.A. courses. It is not the final statement on SLA. There are “introductions” to SLA that are 400 and 1,000 pages long. This book comes out of our experience

teaching the introductory SLA course that is required for education majors, foreign language education majors, and English majors. We hope it's useful for non-specialists, as well as for practicing teachers who would like to brush up on their SLA knowledge.

We have structured this book in the same way that the other volumes in the University of Michigan Press's *Myths* books are structured. Each chapter begins **In the Real World**, an anecdote introducing the theme of the chapter. **What the Research Says** forms the largest part of each chapter. It surveys the relevant research but is not exhaustive (and also not exhausting to the non-specialist audience). **What We Can Do** applies the research to the classroom, either through policy suggestions or possible activities.

Because we approach the topics from myths, and by extension from questions that students have at this level, we have combined some topics in non-traditional ways. There is an advantage to approaching SLA this way. First, it makes the research real to prospective (and practicing) teachers. It allows us to present the information as an answer to a series of classroom-related issues. It also directly addresses the often very real myths that non-specialist teacher candidates (and sometimes teachers) have about language learning.

Most introductory SLA texts are organized by either theories of SLA or through a vaguely historical approach, or both. Theories and history are necessary, but we would submit, not in a first book. We have not included every theory of SLA and have left out bits of its past, but we think we have done so in a principled way, with the principle being attention to what is uppermost in the minds of our students.

Likewise, we have focused on selected studies and gone into some depth in the case of some in order to give novices an idea of how the field operates. Our prejudice is that it is better to look at a limited number of studies than to have novices read sentences like *There is general agreement that learning must be explicit* (Jones, 1989; Takahashi, 1995; Park, 2001, Smith, 2009). We have also defined terms within the text itself that we think will be unknown and explained some research methodology that readers might not know. However, this book makes no attempt to teach research methodology.

We also, where appropriate, tie SLA research to research focused on education more broadly. Language learning is learning.

We hope you find this approach useful.

A word about the first two chapters: Myths 1 and 2 are necessarily a little more technical than the others. Ideally, they probably wouldn't go first, since they are by far the most difficult reads. But since they deal with childhood language acquisition, we thought it made sense to put them before the others. If you're a general reader, don't be afraid to skip the first two chapters and then come back to them after you get a better sense of the whole subject. The myths are largely self-contained. SLA studies make extensive use of graphs and charts. If you know what you're looking for, they give you the information faster than words. If you're a word person, that's fine. Ignore the graphs and read the prose.