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Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Theories of learning English as a second language

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Abstract: This article explores the major theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) with a particular focus on learning English as a second language. The study examines key theoretical perspectives including behaviorism, nativism, cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, and modern interaction-based approaches. The paper also discusses the role of motivation, age, environment, and psychological factors in the language learning process. By analyzing and comparing these theories, the article highlights their significance for modern language teaching and learning practices. The findings emphasize that successful second language acquisition requires an integrative approach that combines theoretical insights with communicative and learner-centered methods.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, SLA theories, English as a second language, language learning, input hypothesis, communicative approach, motivation, bilingualism, language pedagogy

1.INTRODUCTION



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In the era of globalization, English has become the dominant language of international communication, science, education, and technology. As a result, learning English as a second language has turned into a priority for millions of learners around the world. The process through which individuals acquire a language other than their mother tongue is studied within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). SLA is an interdisciplinary area that combines linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, and sociology in order to explain how people learn additional languages and why the outcomes of language learning differ from person to person¹. Understanding SLA theories is especially important for English language teachers and students because these theories provide scientific explanations for how language learning occurs and how teaching methods can be improved. Over the past decades, several major theoretical approaches have been developed, each offering different perspectives on the mechanisms of language learning. These include behaviorism, nativism, cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, and interaction-based approaches. This paper discusses the most influential SLA theories and analyzes their contribution to modern English language teaching.

Main Part

Behaviorist Theory of Language Learning

One of the earliest explanations of language learning is the behaviorist theory, strongly associated with the American psychologist B.F. Skinner. Behaviorism views language learning as a process of habit formation based on stimulus, response, and reinforcement².

According to this theory, learners acquire a second language through:

¹ Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How Languages are Learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

² Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.



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imitation

repetition

reinforcement

practice

For example, when learners repeatedly practice sentence patterns and receive positive feedback, correct language habits are formed. Errors, in this view, are considered the result of incorrect habits that must be corrected immediately.

Although behaviorism influenced early language teaching methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method, it has been criticized for failing to explain creativity in language use. Humans are able to produce completely new sentences that they have never heard before, which behaviorism cannot fully explain.

Nativist Theory and Universal Grammar

A major shift in language acquisition research occurred with the work of Noam Chomsky, who challenged behaviorism and proposed the nativist approach. Chomsky argued that humans are biologically programmed for language learning. He introduced the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and the theory of Universal Grammar (UG). According to this perspective:

Humans are born with an innate ability to learn language.

The human brain is naturally prepared to understand grammar.

All languages share universal structural features.

This theory explains why children learn languages quickly and with little formal instruction³. In SLA, the nativist approach suggests that second language learners rely on innate linguistic knowledge when learning English.

³ Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press



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Krashen’s Monitor Model

One of the most influential contributions to SLA comes from Stephen Krashen, who proposed the Monitor Model consisting of five key hypotheses.

Acquisition vs. Learning Hypothesis

Krashen distinguishes between acquisition (subconscious learning through communication) and learning (conscious study of grammar rules)⁴.

Monitor Hypothesis

Grammar knowledge acts as a monitor that checks and edits language production rather than creating it.

Input Hypothesis

Learners acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level ($i+1$).

Affective Filter Hypothesis

Emotional factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence strongly influence language learning. High anxiety creates a mental barrier that blocks learning.

Natural Order Hypothesis

Grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable sequence.

Krashen’s ideas strongly influenced communicative language teaching and modern ESL methodology.

Cognitive Theory of Language Learning

Cognitive theorists view language learning as part of general mental development.

The work of Jean Piaget played an important role in shaping this perspective.

From the cognitive viewpoint:

⁴ Krashen, S. (1982). Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Pergamon Press.



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Language learning involves thinking, memory, and problem solving.

Learners actively construct knowledge through experience.

Practice and meaningful use of language are essential.

Cognitive theory highlights the importance of active participation and meaningful learning activities in English language classrooms⁵.

Sociocultural Theory

Another influential perspective is sociocultural theory, based on the work of Lev Vygotsky. This theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning.

A key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance.

According to this theory:

Interaction with teachers and peers is essential.

Language learning occurs through communication.

Collaboration enhances learning outcomes.

This approach forms the theoretical basis of communicative and collaborative teaching methods.

Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis, proposed by Michael Long, argues that language acquisition occurs through communication and interaction.

When learners communicate:

they notice gaps in their knowledge

they receive feedback

⁵ Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (3rd ed.). Routledge.



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they modify their language

Interaction helps learners improve both fluency and accuracy.

Output Hypothesis

The Output Hypothesis, developed by Merrill Swain, complements the Input Hypothesis by emphasizing the importance of language production.

Swain argues that learners must:

speak

write

actively use language

Producing language helps learners notice their mistakes and develop linguistic competence⁶.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Second Language Acquisition is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by a wide range of psychological, social, and environmental factors. The major SLA theories discussed in this paper—behaviorism, nativism, Krashen’s Monitor Model, cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, the Interaction Hypothesis, and the Output Hypothesis—demonstrate that language learning cannot be explained by a single approach. Each theory contributes valuable insights into how learners acquire English as a second language.

Behaviorism highlights the importance of practice and reinforcement, while the nativist approach emphasizes the role of innate linguistic ability. Cognitive theory explains how mental processes such as memory and problem solving support language development. Sociocultural theory and interaction-based approaches underline the significance of communication, collaboration, and real-life language use. Krashen’s model integrates emotional and motivational factors, showing that

⁶ Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.



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effective learning depends not only on exposure to language but also on the learner’s psychological state.

Modern English language teaching benefits from combining these theoretical perspectives. Effective instruction should provide meaningful input, opportunities for interaction, and chances for learners to actively produce language in supportive and motivating environments. Therefore, an integrative and learner-centered approach is essential for successful second language acquisition.

In conclusion, understanding SLA theories helps educators design more effective teaching strategies and enables learners to achieve better outcomes in English language learning.

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