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Title
How Languages are Learned, by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 135 pp.

Permalink
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Journal
Issues in Applied Linguistics, 6(1)

ISSN
1050-4273

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Publication Date
1995-06-30

DOI
10.5070/L461005210

Peer reviewed

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How Languages are Learned by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 135 pp.

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"We believe that information about findings and theoretical views in second language acquisition research can make you a better judge of claims made by textbook writers and proponents of various language teaching methods" (p. xiii), state Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada in their text *How Languages are Learned.* Their goal is ambitious: to summarize and synthesize current research in second language acquisition and to hold it up against the often misleading light of popular notions relating to the issue. This volume aims to enable ESL teachers to evaluate second language acquisition research and the popular ideas that surround it and encourage them to take a more critical view of ESL textbooks and their own teaching. The techniques that Lightbown and Spada employ to fulfill their goal are clear writing, organized, balanced, and non-partisan presentations of conflicting research, sound definitions of terms (all key technical terms within the text are italicized and are included in a well-written glossary), and interactive charts to develop and maintain the reader's role as a critic.

Chapter 1 introduces the behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist theories of child first language acquisition by means of a case study and Lightbown's own unpublished data. According to Lightbown and Spada, these positions define language learning, respectively, as a process of imitation and habit, the gradual development of innate capacities, or the result of interactions between the child's capacities and the linguistic environment in which the child is immersed.

Rather than perfunctorily dismantling and dismissing each theory on the basis of its pitfalls, the authors choose to apply each theory to a set of data in order to illustrate for the reader how a particular theory might work. In doing so, the authors present both the useful aspects and the shortcomings of different theories. This calls the reader's attention to what each approach can teach us about language development and learning. For example, Lightbown and Spada exemplify the behaviorist position with a transcript of a child's and an adult's speech. In this particular case, 30-40 per cent of the child's speech does imitate that of the adult. However, the authors note that children imitate to different extents and that what they imitate is not random, but it is "based on something the child already knows, not simply on what is 'available' in the environment" (p. 3). In Chapter 2, four selected

Issues in Applied Linguistics
ISSN 1050-4273
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Vol. 6 No. 1 1995 104-107

theories of second language acquisition are presented: behaviorism, cognitive theory, Krashen's creative construction theory, and Long's interactionist view. Theories about the role of correction, input, and imitation in second language acquisition are also described.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the influence of the learner's attitude and motivation, intelligence, and learning style on the acquisition process, and the authors describe the difficulty in measuring such factors. Studies conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) and Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) are used in the discussion on the effect of the age variable on language learning.

The information in Chapter 4 focuses more narrowly on the learner's language, centering upon error analysis and the stages in which particular grammatical structures are learned in both first and second languages. Both L1 and L2 data are used to present different stages in the acquisition of linguistic structures such as question formation and negation.

Chapter 5 concerns the language classroom. The authors present five teaching approaches: audiolingual/grammar-based, interactionist (emphasis on negotiated meaning and comprehensible input), 'just listen' (silent method), and 'get it right in the end' (developmental readiness: not all aspects of language can be taught, though some must). The effectiveness of these approaches is discussed in light of current research.

In Chapter 6, Lightbown and Spada offer a tempered discussion in which they compare prevalent notions about language learning with the research results that they have so carefully explained and plotted throughout the book. Though their discussion consciously avoids "theory bashing," the authors do have a point of view (and naturally so) and wish to persuade the reader that the popular slogans of how languages are learned are not subtle enough to answer many questions about the phenomenon. It should be noted that given the quite simplistic nature of some of the slogans presented, Lightbown and Spada most likely assume their readership to extend beyond ESL teachers to include readers who have no prior knowledge in the field of SLA and are simply interested in the process of language acquisition. However Lightbown and Spada's text scarcely suffers from this inclusion; *How Languages are Learned* presents a good introduction to SLA for all those interested.

This book suffers only from two minor errors of omission. In the chapter on SLA theories (Chapter 2), Lightbown and Spada explain that they have chosen theories which assume that first and second language acquisition are similar (p. 30). This chapter should be expanded beyond the exceptional cases of Genie and Victor, neither of whom was exposed to language beyond what has been argued to be the "critical period" for language learning. Including views of brain maturation, which represent a vast area of research in SLA, would provide the reader with a wider and more balanced theoretical base. Worthwhile additions to Chapter 2 would be Lenneberg's

(1967) classic study of the stages of language acquisition as potentially largely due to stages in brain development, and/or Long's (1990) recent, in-depth discussion and survey of research on critical vs. sensitive periods in language acquisition with regard to both first and second language acquisition.

Additionally, in the spirit of further aiding those without a background in second language acquisition research, annotating the topically organized bibliography at the end of each chapter [such as is found in H. Douglas Brown's *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (1994)] would be an asset to this book. It would furnish the non-expert with a better understanding of the nature of the sources suggested for further reading.

What emerge from Lightbown and Spada's accessible text, then, are ideas of consequence, especially for the ESL teacher. The most important of these is to convince readers that common opinions about language learning do not form a productive basis for an ESL classroom. Indeed, student progress can be impaired if a teacher implements the assumption that "When learners... are allowed to interact freely (... in group... activities), they learn each other's mistakes" (p. xv). Students may be equally inhibited by a firm adoption of the notion that "Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits" (p. xv). Secondly, it is important for ESL teachers to note that answering the questions of how and when second languages are learned is a subtle and complex endeavor. Consequently, a teacher should be prepared to be flexible in incorporating new ideas into the classroom about how languages are learned.

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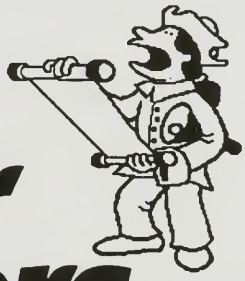
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