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Psycholinguistic Approaches to Instructed Second Language Acquisition: Linking Theory, Findings and Practice. Daniel R. Walter. Multilingual Matters, 2023, 210 pp.
Reviewed by Norbert Francis

The linkage between basic research and practical application is not only of interest to language teaching. As this book shows, in the field of second language (L2) learning, the benefit goes in both directions. Starting with the title, an often neglected question that readers might ask is: Why haven't we seen a title (not even, as of this writing, of an article listed in Google) on approaches to "Instructed First Language (L1) Acquisition"? As we will see, the reason that researchers and practitioners offer will differ, starting from what appears, and is in fact, a fundamental theoretical difference in the broader field of linguistics. But, just as the author might agree, research findings from the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) present us with a special opportunity to discuss findings as they are related to the controversy. From both the laboratory and from the classroom, and from the point of view of two clearly divergent theories of language acquisition, the opportunity has appeared for a productive dialogue. It has emerged from an area of agreement, even though it may seem narrow, on specific observations of learning phenomena in SLA and other applied disciplines. The two contrasting theoretical frameworks are the Usage-Based (UB) perspective on language acquisition and that of Universal Grammar (UG), the former, in this book, defended by the author.

Chapters 2—6 outline learning and teaching strategies, useful for second language educators; here is where we will find the opportunity for discussion. Across the extensive presentation of practical recommendations, readers will find the examination of methods and materials of great interest even where they may be familiar with a different guideline or suggestion. What enriches all the examples is a parallel examination of the basic research on the psycholinguistics of language learning, which is not of one mind on all of the empirical evidence either.

Before reviewing the detailed pedagogical proposals, many of them supported by the author's years of experience in L2 teaching, what must call our attention is our question about the difference between L1 and L2, mentioned above. The reason for this question is directly related to the opportunity for dialogue between UB and UG. Why is it that the examples of *instruction* in Chapters 2—6, of *Instructed* SLA (ISLA), apply to L2, and not to L1, in the strict

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sense? Perhaps the emblematic case is that of how, often, L2 knowledge traces a course of development from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge. The evidence discussed in Chapter 4 is convincing and well documented in the research literature. But patently, there is no counterpart, or analogy, to a declarative→procedural transition in the development of phonology in newborns or of morphology and syntax during the ages of 2 to 4 years.

The exposition on the importance of the many aspects of metalinguistic awareness (MA) and metacognition, from Chapter 2 through to the concluding chapter, is an overarching theme. It is rightly so because for many years theory and practice in SLA did not emphasize its centrality (parallel, and not coincidently, to the denial of its importance for many years in literacy learning). For adult second language mastery, meta-level processes permeate learning even in naturalistic settings and without recourse to language textbook terminology. In stark contrast, MA and any variety of instructed language program play no necessary role in early child language development, of the mother tongue grammar of the typical five-year old kindergartener. Well-meaning caregivers sometimes attempt to provide it to toddlers and preschoolers; but its effect on the linguistic competence of the core grammar is the same as so-called simple immersion (the development of higher-order discourse ability related to subsequent school language use, tied to literacy learning, is a different and important research question).

Returning to the emphasis on MA and focused instruction on form and pattern, this theme brings us back to the UB-UG exchange. At the beginning of Chapter 4, a reference to generative approaches to second language calls attention to the different ways of thinking about the relationship between L1 and L2. The relevant passage on page 75 doesn't call it by name, but only one current within UG-oriented research in SLA actually participates productively in the dialogue (that this book review argues in favor of). The short section entitled "The initial state" outlines a UG-oriented approach to second language learning known as Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) (White, 2015), compatible with other hypotheses that recognize the important factor of previous L1 knowledge in L2 development, an aspect of its "initial state." "Full access" refers to the proposal that in L2 development (even after the so-called Critical Period) learners do not lose access to the UG-related acquisition mechanisms of the Faculty of Language. This explains why in our L2 we can still avail ourselves of implicit acquisition resources to a large extent, acquiring components of the L2 grammar beyond what is available in the input via practice and instruction. In other words, according to White, there still exists a Poverty of

Stimulus problem in explaining L2 development. What accounts for the greater difficulty in mastering the L2 (across the population of L2 learners, unlike in L1, a significant variation in ultimate attainment) is the effect of the L2 "initial state" (in large part "full transfer").

One need not agree with the FTFA explanation of the difference in L1-L2 initial state, course of development and ultimate attainment to appreciate that there appears an important common ground with UB models of L2 learning. According to FTFA, second language students will benefit from:

- the engagement of metalinguistic awareness (pp. 162—163),
- structured focus-on-form learning (pp. 154, 161), and
- direct instruction (pp. 63—64), practice and deliberate attention,

because FA is not unfettered in L2, as it was in L1. UB models recommend the same triplet of learning/teaching resources, for different theoretical reasons. The reason for why UG models set them aside in L1 acquisition (of the core grammar) we can defer for another occasion.

In the meanwhile, an interesting discussion is on hand in Chapters 2—6, from both points of view. Almost all of the examples of teaching method that are proposed call attention to pending empirical questions: do they in fact, and to what extent do they, contribute to L2 proficiency? Then we can ask why. The reason for why the last question is not set aside for either side of the exchange is because FTFA accepts (joining UB on this point, so to speak) that *domain-general* learning processes participate productively, and necessarily for optimal mastery, in L2 development.

An application of MA to learning is noticing: as in directing one's attention to error in output, or in general, mentally confronting a grammar pattern from L1 and the corresponding pattern in L2 (pp. 63, 100), for example, in L1→L2 translation (p. 88). Metalinguistic awareness (metacognition applied to the domain of language) of cross-language differences allows learners to attend to and benefit from negative evidence (p. 103) that they can provide to themselves (in the case of noticing), or invite usable observations from other learners and teachers. An especially effective provision of negative evidence takes the form of self-correction in written expression (pp. 86—91) that in addition promotes advanced self-monitoring through L2 practice in learning activities of high face-validity for students—all writers, in L1 and L2, must master the demanding skills of proof-reading and editing. Explicit corrective feedback (CF), a subcategory of negative evidence, provided by a more advanced speaker or on-line application

(pp. 74, 157—158), when implemented correctly (i.e. in such manner that the learner can receive and process it productively), is again specific to L2 learning as a valuable resource. Some L2 specialists would make the claim that receiving consistent negative evidence is essential. Here, recent advances in interactive machine-learning (p. 128) provide for unambiguous and systematic CF in formats that are virtually unlimited (the computer never loses patience) and always accurate, among other advantages (human CF is often socially awkward, misleading, or sometimes even wrong). For learners, receiving enriched negative evidence, especially when they are the protagonist, is perhaps the most useful and efficient kind of focus-on-form.

Direct instruction is the vehicle that launches MA-driven self-teaching, stage that learners must attain as soon as possible. For example, in Content-Based Language Instruction (CBLI) (pp. 149, 161—162) the grammar, or language, objective is selected deliberately and is attended to explicitly in the contexts in which it appears in the content lesson and textbook passage. The "I" of CBLI—the most powerful second language teaching methodology—is the key "I" of ISLA. New grammar patterns are either *content-obligatory* language objectives or *content-compatible*, an important distinction in the L2 immersion lesson plan and in the future or parallel language study plan of the autonomous L2 learner.

In the interest of the dialogue proposed in this review, a second edition of the book could amend a characterization of UG in the first chapter, citing P. A. Seuren, that does not accurately portray one of the differences of viewpoint. In fact, the Seuren (2004) critique of UG, specifically "Chomsky's ideas" (p. 29), is a caricature that only serves to distract readers from the relevant issues at hand. The quoted passage misleadingly portrays the UG proposal, attributing to it a view that "grammar [is] as a random sentence generator." To the contrary, the faculty of language is not a "random ability" (p. 29). Rather, grammar, as conceived by UG, is just the opposite of unsystematic. Examples of sentences, non-sensical from the point of meaning, but syntactically well-formed, are not constructed with words arbitrarily selected and combined without pattern of morphology and syntax. Natural language abounds with grammatically well-formed phrases and sentences for which the meaning cannot be easily decerned or even sometimes reliably determined by any means. Hypothetical examples such as "colorless green ideas sleep colorlessly" are apt illustrations. Literary language use illustrates the idea, that morphosyntax and meaning are not subsumed by the same cognitive domain. This is a

hypothesis that many readers may not agree with; but the discussion should not be sidetracked by misunderstanding.

A related proposal on the prospects of another exploratory exchange, along the same lines, "When does second language learning lead to first language attrition?", forthcoming in *Communication & Cognition,* takes the hypothesis of MacWhinney (2005) on L1 attrition as a basis, among other proposals, for another convergent discussion between UB and UG. Readers may object to the entire approach taken in this review: if the differences of concept are so deep-going and fundamental, what is the purpose of going through the motions of discussion? There are two potential benefits: (1) working toward clarity on the actual scientific questions in contention, as opposed to misunderstanding, helps us better understand ideas presented from opposing viewpoints as well as viewpoints that we think we favor, and (2) in the realm of clearly identifiable applied linguistics-related educational practice, a well-defined and circumscribed UB-UG consensus has already contributed positively to one discussion in particular—on learning and teaching application—in the field literacy education (Rayner et al. 2001). As readers will take note of from studying the book, a similar bracketing of theoretical assumptions is possible in the field of second language development, because, as mentioned above, all sides recognize that domain-general learning plays a role. In another discussion we can consider the possible role of domain-specific acquisition mechanisms.

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