Second Language Acquisition

Textbook

The textbook is Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages Are Learned*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; ISBN 0-19-442224-0). There’s a copy in the Common Room, but you must buy your own. (You can buy it wherever you wish; within amazon.co.jp it’s at http://snipurl.com/amj-lightbown. Of course you are welcome to buy a used copy; but if you do so, make sure it’s the 3rd edition and not the 1st or 2nd.)

Supplementary texts

If there’s something you can’t understand in the book (or in what I say or write), read it again slowly or ask me, and also check that you’ve understood what preceded it. If you’re still in trouble, try looking in an additional book – sometimes a different perspective makes everything clear.

Below, I name a lot of books. You may not have to look in any of them, but it’s more helpful to let you choose among a large number than to specify just one or two books that are likely to have already been borrowed by somebody else.

For each of the books below, “[RR]”, “[L1]”, “[LB1]”, “[LB2]”, “[LB3]”, “[LB4]”, or “[TL]” means the GIS Research Room (or Common Room), 1st floor of the library, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th basement of the Ichigaya library, or Tama Library respectively.

What’s between “{” and “}” is the “call number”: the number on the label on the spine that says where on the shelves the book should be.

Books may have been moved from the Research Room to the Common Room, or vice versa. For some books, a copy of a newer edition, listed here, is in the Research Room and a copy of an older edition is in the Common Room. Try to find the newer one.

In Ichigaya library (or online), you can order books from Tama (or Koganei) library.

On second language acquisition

Here are some books about second language acquisition in general. Some are much bigger than others. You’ll find some quite a bit harder than others; but there’s useful stuff in each, and none is impossibly difficult.


**Introductory books about language and linguistics**

First, five textbooks. Blake’s is compact and easy. *Language Files* is large but easy. The other three go into things more deeply.


The following are written not as textbooks but in order to interest their readers or to clear up misunderstandings. Among them, Pinker’s is by far the most substantial.


**Reference books about English grammar**

If you need a reference grammar book for any purpose, don’t use one that’s intended for high school, to help people enter university or to help native speakers write “correct” English. Books like these, even from good publishers, tend to repeat older misunderstandings or concentrate on trivia, or both. By contrast, here are some good ones.


**Reference books about language and linguistics**

Reference books ranging from the compact to the enormous. None - not even the largest - should be too difficult for an interested and fairly energetic beginner.


There’s no rule against using books in Japanese, of course.

**How Languages Are Learned**

1. **Language Learning in Early Childhood**

   p. 11  *playing with a dump truck*: Playing with a *toy* dump truck, of course!

   p. 16  Example (e): Italicize the word *himself*.

   p. 16  Examples (i) and (j): of course “(non-finite clause)” and “(finite clause)” are outside the examples, and describe the examples. Briefly, a *finite* clause depends in some way on tense and person (e.g. “want” in “I want/wanted to be a pilot”), whereas a *non-finite* does not (e.g. “be” in “I want/wanted to be a pilot”).

   p. 17  There’s a French film about Victor: *L’Enfant sauvage*. (In English-language markets, it’s either *The Wild Boy* or *The Wild Child*; in Japan, it’s *野性の少年*.)

   p. 18  *whether either of them suffered from brain damage, developmental delays, or a specific language impairment*: A *specific language impairment* (SLI) is a problem with a person’s first language that is not accompanied by any other mental problem or any damage to the brain. In short, people with SLI are normal and intelligent, except for language. The impairment need not be specific *within* language, but it’s specific to language.

   p. 20  *For Vygotsky, thought was essentially internalized speech, . . .* We now know that
Vygotsky was wrong about this. People don’t normally use language when they are thinking. See Chapter 3 (“Mentalese”) of Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct.*

including learning to “see”: This probably refers to the way that normal brains interpret visual cues as objects in space. If you’re interested, see Chapter 8 (“Learning how to see”) of Richard L. Gregory’s *Eye and Brain.*

## Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

Here and for the following chapters, I show you which among Lightbown and Spada’s recommendations are where in the library or on the internet, when I’ve found them. And I add a very few recommendations of my own. When there’s a copy of a book at Tama as well as Ichigaya, I don’t usually mention the one at Tama; when there’s a Japanese translation as well as the English original, I don’t mention the translation.


## 2. Explaining Second Language Learning

the acquisition-learning hypothesis: Krashen is using “learning” to mean the result of a conscious process (as opposed to the result of an unconscious process). This special use
of the word is not unusual, but other writers about SLA (including Lightbown and Spada themselves) use “learn” and “acquire” interchangeably.

p. 37  affective filter hypothesis: Lightbown and Spada explain “affective hypothesis”. Note that this is “affective” (with an “a”), not “effective” (a much commoner word). What “affects” you has an “effect” on you, which is confusing; but the noun “affect” (related to “affective”) means something quite different from “effect” (related to “effective”).

p. 45  La sigue el señor: Lightbown and Spada tell us what this means, but they don’t add that it’s Spanish.

p. 45  4th paragraph: from their own intuitions about language: There is a little truth in this description of “linguists working from an innatist perspective”, but it’s an exaggeration: many of these linguists use a lot of empirical research.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading


3. Individual differences in second language learning

p. 68  *Joseph Conrad . . . became a major writer in the English language:* However, he spoke English with a strong foreign accent.

p. 74  *Teachers tended to teach to a lower common denominator:* “Teachers tended to teach to the highest ability that was possessed by everybody in the class” (i.e. to a low ability).

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading


4. Learner language

Foot of the page: learners may do well in supplying articles in certain obligatory contexts but not others: A reminder about article use:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>indefinite</th>
<th>definite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
<td>a grain</td>
<td>the grain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>grains / some grains</td>
<td>the grains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uncountable</td>
<td>sand / some sand</td>
<td>the sand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some here is always pronounced /sʌm/ (unlike the /sʌm/ of “somebody”). Of course, the table says nothing about how to distinguish between the definite and the indefinite; a distinction that is not simple.

No tienen muchos libros: This is Spanish, and means “They don’t have many books.”

In Stage 5: How do you say “proche”? It’s a French-speaking learner; proche is French for “near”.

Second line: the possessive determiner: the French and Spanish equivalents of his, her, their, my, etc.

Son chien: There’s actually a female form of this, sa chienne, his or her (female) dog.

Table 4.2 and the description of relative clauses (RC) are a bit confused. The left column is titled “Part of speech”, but these are instead constituents. (“Parts of speech” are nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) Let’s just look at the top two rows under the titles in Table 4.2. With their subjects underlined, they are: The girl who was sick went home and The story that I read was long. In each, the relative clause is in the subject position. What’s relativized is different. So:
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RC in subject position</th>
<th>RC in direct object position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>{The girl ...} went home.</td>
<td>I miss {the girl ...}.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>{The story ...} was long.</td>
<td>I liked {the story ...}.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject is relativized</td>
<td>The girl who was sick went home.</td>
<td>I miss the girl who was sick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story that won the prize was long.</td>
<td>I liked the story that won the prize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct object is relativized</td>
<td>The girl that I met went home.</td>
<td>I miss the girl that I met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story that I read was long.</td>
<td>I liked the story that I read.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Don’t worry about which is used among who, that, which, etc; or indeed about whether anything appears: we treat the girl that I met, the girl who(m) I met and the girl I met in the same way.) At the foot of p. 90, we read about sentences with relative clauses in the subject or object positions (at the top of the list). Literally, relative clauses in the subject or object positions refers to the contrast between the second and third columns of the table above, which is something that is not shown in Table 4.2 of the book. Lightbown and Spada don’t really mean this; their Table 4.2 instead distinguishes among what is relativized (the second and third rows of the table above).

p. 92  **lexical aspect:** First, within linguistics, aspect normally means the way grammar marks duration and other properties of time (aside from tense). He’s gone, He goes, and He’s going are all present tense but they differ in aspect. Lexical aspect (or, from German, Aktionsart) means the classification of verb phrases by their time-related meaning. Simply, there are four classes. A state is not thought of as an activity and is assumed to continue unless something happens: examples are wear jeans and be Japanese. If an activity is similarly assumed to continue, it’s called an activity. Examples are chat and walk. An accomplishment is an activity that is assumed to terminate: walk to the station, put on jeans. An achievement is something thought to occur instantaneously, such as wake up and burst. These four classes of verb tend to differ grammatically, although a description of the grammatical differences in English isn’t so simple.

p. 96  **some would treat “teach, teacher, teaching, and taught” as separate words:** I doubt it. Yes, although you can add either -er (or -or) or -ing to just about any verb, the relationship of teacher to teach is not the same as that of, say, lifter and presser to lift and press; it instead suggests a job or social role. But there’s nothing special about teaching; it’s not separate. The tricky one here is taught: it’s simply the form of the past and past participle (cf drank and drunk), so it wouldn’t normally be a separate word; but (unlike “breached”, “beached”, “leached”, etc) it has an irregular form that must be learned specially, so in this sense it is separate.

p. 97  **It is estimated that, in order to guess the meaning of a word even in a helpful context, one needs to know nearly all the other words in the text.** The writers seem slightly disorganized. Just three pages later they cite research by Bhatia Laufer and others that say “95 per cent or more”; on p. 188 (and without any specific source) it’s “90 per cent or more”. (In order to make such precision meaningful, we’d have to agree on what “know” means. For example, a lullaby is a gentle song that’s intended to make a child fall asleep;
if you know that a lullaby is some kind of song but don’t know its purpose, or if you know what the purpose of a lullaby is but think it’s a story, do you “know the word lullaby”?

The definitions of cognate given here and in the glossary (p. 196) are wrong. Cognates are words that have the same origin. They may look similar but often do not; they may have the same meaning but often do not. Astre and étoile (both French), star (English) and seren (Welsh) are all cognates and have the same meaning. Skirt and shirt (both English) are cognates, though of course they don’t mean the same thing. Boy (English) and 坊や have similar meanings and sound similar but are not cognates.

words that look similar in the two languages but have different meanings: These pairs are called faux amis (French for “false friends”, and pronounced in English /fɔɔazami/) or (less often) “false friends”.

Second line: Bisusteki is surely some kind of mistake. What do you think has happened?

Example near the top: It’s not “blue tack” but instead “Blu-Tack”, the trademark of a mild adhesive that is often used for sticking posters on walls.

One of the controversial issues in pronunciation research is whether intelligibility rather than native-like ability is the standard that learners should strive toward. This would be research into language teaching rather than research into SLA. The latter observes how and why learners progress, without discussing what they should do. Still, even in SLA there is often a comparison between learner language and the “target language”. The latter is often assumed to be the language as spoken by a native speaker. If that is not the target, then the “target language” changes, which has an effect on SLA research too.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading


5. Observing learning and teaching in the second language classroom

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

p. 135 Unfortunately the second item in Lightbown and Spada’s list is not at Hosei. But if you want to look for it (e.g. via the library “Consortium”), note that the first author is not “Allright” but Allwright.


6. Second language learning in the classroom

pp. 171–72 The meaning of gender here is only tenuously related to what is now its commonest meaning in English. In many languages - and in most European languages (modern English is an exception) - nouns are divided into two or more classes, called “genders”. Various grammatical matters (e.g. the form of the words corresponding to a, the, this, that, and those) depend on the gender. Typically, the words corresponding to girl, woman, cow, etc are in one gender and those corresponding to boy, man, bull, etc are in another. These genders are then called feminine and masculine respectively. (However, there are exceptions. For example, the German word Mädchen, meaning girl, is neuter.) Gender fits the word, not the concept: for example, French has alternative words for bicycle - vélo (masculine) and bicyclette (feminine) - and there’s nothing “masculine” or “feminine” (in the everyday sense) about either.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a ...</th>
<th>the ...</th>
<th>this/that ...</th>
<th>my ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... brother</td>
<td>un frère</td>
<td>le frère</td>
<td>ce frère</td>
<td>mon frère</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... sister</td>
<td>une soeur</td>
<td>la soeur</td>
<td>cette soeur</td>
<td>ma soeur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... bicycle</td>
<td>un vélo</td>
<td>le vélo</td>
<td>ce vélo</td>
<td>mon vélo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>une bicyclette</td>
<td>la bicyclette</td>
<td>cette bicyclette</td>
<td>ma bicyclette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p. 172 it is safe to assume that words that end in “-ette” are feminine, while those that end in “-age” are masculine: The former assumption is indeed pretty safe, but remember
masculine squelette (skeleton). The latter assumption has several conspicuous exceptions: feminine plage (beach), page (page) and image (image).

p. 173 a “hybrid article” that could be interpreted as either masculine or feminine: This is about the definite article (the word corresponding to “the”). The masculine (le) is pronounced [lɛ] and the feminine (la) is pronounced [lɑ]; a hybrid would be pronounced somewhere (/lɛ/ or /lɑ/) between the two.

p. 178 students in French immersion may need guidance in distinguishing between French “avoir/être” and English “have/be”: Simply, avoir corresponds to “have” and être corresponds to “be”. However, there are some big differences that come up in elementary French classes for native speakers of English. For example, translated literally into English, the normal conversational French for “I wrote”, “I read”, “I slept,” etc is the literal equivalent of “I have written”, “I have read”, “I have slept”, etc (using avoir); however, for “I came”, “I stayed”, etc, it is instead “I am gone”, “I am come”, “I am stayed”, etc (using être).

p. 179 the article system in English is both complex and abstract and notoriously difficult to teach: Part of the system is pretty easy (see the note above about p. 83). What’s difficult is the concept of “definiteness” (or the distinction between the “definite” and the “indefinite”).

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading


7. Popular ideas about language learning revisited

p. 184 (Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors): *Me and Fred are going outside now*: This is completely idiomatic in some lects. See Huddleston and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, pp. 462-63

p. 185  

*Highly intelligent people are good language learners*: As for first language acquisition, of course people of normal intelligence are good language learners and high intelligence is not needed. Moreover, some people of very low intelligence can acquire language very well: see what Pinker writes in *The Language Instinct* about people with Williams syndrome.

p. 186  

*The earlier a second language is introduced*. . . . This discussion assumes that a considerable amount of the second language is introduced by native or near-native speakers of the language. The assumption won’t hold if “English” is introduced in primary schools by people who pronounce it as if it were *gairaigo* within Japanese, or if it’s introduced in small quantities (for each distinct sentence in English, five or more explanatory sentences in Japanese).