

Research on Second Language Acquisition in China: Review and Prospect

Huiyan Zhang

School of Social and Humanities, North University of China, Taiyuan, China.

Abstract

Since the 1980s, there has been an upsurge of research on second language acquisition in China. This paper reviews and summarizes the main contents, characteristics and methods of the study of second language acquisition in China, this paper points out the deficiencies in the current study of second language acquisition in China and puts forward some suggestions for future research, with a view to exploring a broader space for future English teaching.

Keywords

Second Language Acquisition; Domestic research; Review.

1. Introduction

The study of Second-language acquisition (SLA) began in the west in the late 1960s or early 1970s, which aims to describe the acquisition and development of the whole language ability and specific language skills of the second language learners, and explain why learners are able to acquire a second language and the role of external and internal factors in second language acquisition. Since the mid-1980s, the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has started in China, and the results of SLA research have had a profound impact on SLA and foreign language teaching.

As a multi-level and pluralistic independent discipline, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research has developed vigorously in China. Over the past 40 years, many scholars have made unremitting efforts for the practice and research of SLA theory, and have also made positive contributions to the development of SLA research. Therefore, it is necessary for us to make a brief review and summary of the development of SLA research in China, and to explore and look forward to the future.

2. Research and Development Context of Domestic Second-language Acquisition

Due to historical reasons, it is more than 10 years later than foreign countries that Chinese scholars come into contact with second language acquisition theory and carry out relevant research. Prior to this, domestic research has long focused on "How to teach language", while the related theories of language learning carried out less systematic research. Since the introduction of SLA theory into our country in the mid-1980s, domestic language teaching researchers have been greatly inspired by it, and they believe that it is of more practical significance to study SLA in the context of China.

2.1. At the Beginning of Germination

The study of second language acquisition in China started relatively late. In the early 1980s, some famous linguists and researchers in this field began to introduce the theories and methods of SLA, such as Hu Zhuanglin, Hu Wenzhong and Gui Shichun. Most of the researches in this period mainly introduce or comment on the achievements or new viewpoints of the Western

scholars on second language acquisition, which provides information and broadens the train of thought for foreign language teaching and second language acquisition research in our country, it has laid a foundation for the prosperity of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition research.

The study of second language acquisition in its infancy has been greatly influenced by behaviorism and structuralism linguistics. The behaviorism point out that language learning is a process of behaviour formation, and that language development is the formation of a series of habits, while structuralism stresses that the study of language should focus on the form and the level of its structure. It is the organic combination of behaviorism and structuralism linguistics that gives birth to the contrastive analysis theory in the study of second language acquisition. This theory attributes the main difficulties of second language acquisition to the differences between the mother tongue and the target language, and holds that the comparison of the structural similarities and differences between the two can predict the learners' errors and difficulties in learning. Of course, there is a fundamental limitation of this theory, that is, the use of simple linguistic forms of comparative analysis to explain the complex psychological cognitive problems. Therefore, due to its limitations, the nature of SLA research has not been fully revealed, and the effectiveness of SLA theory in teaching practice needs further study.

2.2. Towards Maturity

Since the 1990s, the research on second language acquisition has been in full swing in China, and the research on second language acquisition has gradually become mature, with Dai Weidong (1994) , Liu Runqing (1993) and Wen Qiufang (2004) as the main scholars. At this stage, the researchers can objectively examine the individual differences of Chinese EFL learners according to their actual level. At the same time, it points out that the individual differences of learners, such as language potential, cognition, motivation, attitude, learning method and emotion, should be the primary factors to be considered in foreign language teaching, we began to critically evaluate and study the theories and research methods of second language acquisition in the west.

With the development of cognitive linguistics, people begin to explore the second language acquisition research from a new perspective. More and more research is no longer confined to monotonous teaching needs, but to meet the basic cognitive needs of human beings. Some scholars begin to pay attention to the influence of learner's psychology, cognitive process and mechanism, language variation and language processing ability on second language acquisition. In addition, this stage is influenced by cognitive linguistics and interactive sociolinguistics, and the socio-cognitive psychology, socialization, communicative strategies and pragmatic features of language have also become a hot topic in the study of second language acquisition. To a certain extent, it promotes the study of second language acquisition and provides a new perspective for further study in the field of second language acquisition.

2.3. Continue to Develop

In recent years, the research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in China continues to develop, especially on college students' English acquisition in our country. Most researchers have conducted empirical studies on the characteristics and rules of Chinese EFL learners in their acquisition of English. On the basis of a thorough understanding and study of SLA theories, domestic scholars have explored the acquisition characteristics of Chinese L2 learners, replacing subjective perceptions and judgments with objective facts or data, it represents the trend of second language acquisition research.

On the whole, the study of second language acquisition in China began to be localized, oriented by the combination of practicality and humanism, and aimed at cultivating excellent foreign language talents in the 21st century. Many experts and language researchers in China have

written monographs, academic papers, academic activities and research projects on second language acquisition, which has laid the theoretical foundation and practical guidance for the further research and development of second language acquisition.

3. The Current Situation of Chinese Second Language Acquisition Research

3.1. Research Content

At present, we can analyze the research content of second language acquisition from both theoretical and practical aspects. The study of second language acquisition can be divided into theoretical SLA and applied SLA, with the former mainly establishing SLA theory, we can study the psychological, cognitive and linguistic processes of second language acquisition from the perspectives of sociology, psychology and linguistics. The study specifically explores how learners “Learn a second language” after mastering their mother tongue, to understand what the learner “Learns”, “Does not learn”, “Why the learner can not reach the level of the mother tongue” in the process of learning the second language, therefore, the author tries to explore the influence of mother tongue on second language acquisition and the process of second language application.

For the latter, researchers pay more attention to how to use the research results of SLA to improve the practical teaching problems such as the second language or foreign language teaching, the compilation of teaching materials and teaching methods, classroom activities, etc. . At the same time, it is expected that by studying the influence of different factors on language acquisition, such as classroom language teaching and individual differences of second language learners, and it will further explore how to improve the teaching effect in the classroom environment and enliven the classroom atmosphere, promote the acquisition of a second language.

In recent years, as far as the development of second language acquisition is concerned, the focus of domestic research has been on the discourse analysis of learners’ input. The research has also gone deep into the direction of language transfer, input language, language variation and so on, showing the process of language acquisition from the study of language ability, a shift towards the study of learners’ acquisition of pragmatic and cross-cultural communicative competence. At the same time, the research mode breaks through the situation of the general grammar, and turns into the research mode of functionalism and other cross-subjects. The corpus used also breaks through the level of sentences, more use of discourse or discourse-level corpus.

3.2. Research Characteristics

3.2.1. Multi-inclusive, Cross-border Integration

At present, the study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is integrated with other subjects such as linguistics, pedagogy, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, which shows the multi-disciplinary nature of SLA. At the same time, the researcher’s research turn on interaction and Synergy, Chinese acquisition and individual differences fully reflects the trend of learning from each other. And, the integration of SLA is also reflected in the integration of theoretical research and foreign language teaching, theoretical construction and practical exploration, the integration of SLA research and Chinese SLA research, the integration of SLA and research tools, and the integration of SLA research from different perspectives. Since the development of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, cross-border integration has become one of the characteristics of SLA research.

3.2.2. Active Exploration and Theoretical Innovation

Theoretical Innovation is the cornerstone of the healthy development of a discipline, theoretical innovation is to better practice of innovation. After the introduction of Western theories, the study of second language acquisition in our country has gradually entered the stage of independent innovation (Yang Lianrui 2009). In recent years, the study of second language acquisition in our country has been closely following the international research frontier, exploring and developing advanced theoretical achievements, and gradually completing the theoretical reserve and original accumulation of the study of second language acquisition in our country.

Based on years of research on the theory of interaction and synergy in second language acquisition (SLA), as well as a lot of teaching practice and empirical research, professor Wang chuming put forward the "Continuation theory" creatively. This is a major breakthrough in the field of second language acquisition theory by domestic scholars, which enriches the second language acquisition theory in our country and provides reference for future foreign language teaching, it also opens up a new perspective for the further study of second language acquisition. In addition, the second language acquisition research in our country is devoted to the integration of foreign theories with the actual situation of Chinese second language learners, and to actively explore the construction of a theoretical system that conforms to Chinese second language learners, it will create a good academic atmosphere for the study of second language acquisition in our country and open up more characteristic research fields.

3.2.3. Empirical Research Dominated the Subject and the Corpus Developed Rapidly

With the rapid development of the research on second language acquisition in China, the empirical research on college students' English acquisition in our country is becoming more and more active. The importance of scientific research in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has attracted much attention in our academic circle. Empirical research has become the main paradigm of SLA research, and the research results are significant, which provides guidance for foreign language teaching.

Another feature of domestic research is the use of corpus-based interlanguage research, learner-based corpus-based research results continue to emerge. The Chinese interlanguage corpus system and the Chinese English learner corpus have been established in China, which have great influence on the development of L2/FL learner corpus, there are also a number of different levels of Speech corpus being developed for Chinese English learners. In recent years, corpus-based interlanguage research in our country has developed rapidly and gradually reached the international advanced level, which has laid a solid foundation for foreign language teaching research.

3.3. Research Methods

Scientific research methods are effective tools for solving research problems and improving research efficiency. The research methods of second language acquisition can be generally divided into two types: qualitative research (case study, observation study) and quantitative research (experimental study, correlation study, investigation study). At present, the qualitative research based on interviews, observations and other materials lags far behind the quantitative research based on data materials, the study of organic combination of quantitative method and qualitative method is still a minority. In fact, many studies in the field of second language acquisition do not adopt a single research method, most of them can combine multiple research methods and use abundant qualitative data to supplement the original quantitative data, this study provides a more reliable and practical basis for the further study of second language acquisition.

3.4. Discipline Positioning

The study of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) aims to explore how people acquire a second language after mastering their mother tongue. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) was originally a branch of applied linguistics that primarily contributed to language teaching, but with the introduction of the interlanguage hypothesis, many scholars separated it from applied linguistics and generative linguistics theories, make it an independent discipline. As a new discipline, second language acquisition studies pay more attention to the scientific orientation of its disciplinary nature and the scientific construction of its disciplinary system.

Nowadays, second language acquisition (SLA) has developed into an independent subject with a clear object of study and a complete set of knowledge systems and research methods independent of General Linguistics and general language acquisition theories, and it has rapidly developed into the forefront of contemporary applied linguistics and basic theoretical research in related disciplines, such as the theory of foreign language teaching methodology. As an independent subject, teaching and systematic study of second language acquisition is the focus of researchers in China. In recent years, researchers have been devoting themselves to the cultivation of a multi-channel system of master's and doctor's talents in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) , and to the cultivation of a high-quality reserve force for SLA research, this also fully shows this new discipline strong vitality and broad prospects for development.

4. Insufficient Research of Second Language Acquisition in China

The research in the field of second language acquisition in China has made some achievements both in research contents and research methods, but there are still many deficiencies.

4.1. A Serious Disconnect Between Theory and Practice

At present, there is a serious disconnect between theory and practice in the study of second language acquisition in China. Many language teachers in universities are also theoretical researchers of SLA, but in practice they can not apply SLA theory to foreign language teaching and learning effectively. Some researchers still stay on the surface of the theory, research methods are still static-based, the overall lack of qualitative leap.

According to the characteristics of foreign language learners at home and abroad, we should explore the process of foreign language learning scientifically and find the best teaching mode, the effective application of SLA theory in foreign language teaching practice reflects its practical significance and application value, which has not been truly reflected in the teaching practice of many universities in China.

4.2. Many Theories with Different Objectives

At present, there are many theories in SLA research both at home and abroad, which have different goals and contradict each other in different fields. First of all, our domestic theoretical research is not systematic enough, in the theoretical construction, involving specific aspects of the micro-research more, the lack of macro-theoretical construction of the study. Secondly, the originality of the theory is not strong, and many studies still remain at the level of interpretation and comment on some theoretical principles, in the context of China's actual establishment of second language acquisition theory and language teaching theory, there is no theoretical system of its own. Therefore, there is still a long way to go to explore and summarize the "Chinese experience" and promote the innovation and development of SLA theories and methods.

4.3. “Mechanization” of foreign language teaching research

Although the study of second language acquisition has made great achievements, the current situation of foreign language teaching in our country is still far from ideal. Many people often mechanically apply second language acquisition theory and research conclusions, blindly copy the theory, but do not delve into its profound connotation, which is very disadvantageous to our foreign language teaching. On the other hand, scholars often pay more attention to the practical value of second language acquisition theories and research results than to the differences between foreign language teaching and second language teaching, regardless of whether the theory is suitable for the reality of foreign language teaching in China and whether it is suitable for the conditions of learners in China, the result of this kind of blindly copying and applying will not make the foreign language teaching in our country change qualitatively.

5. Research prospect of Second Language Acquisition in China

5.1. “Systematization” of second language acquisition

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as a cross-disciplinary and multi-level emerging discipline, has broad prospects for development. Therefore, the study of this subject in our country should grasp the subjectivity of SLA research and take “Multi-disciplinary, inclusive” as the basic principle, the establishment of an all-round, multi-level, dynamic and open SLA research system in line with the reality of China will push SLA research and foreign language teaching in China to a brand-new situation, thus further promote the development of human language, the development of cultural universality and the development of social language research.

The main aim of foreign language teaching in our country is to master and use a language tool that can be used for international communication. Therefore, foreign language teaching should pay attention to the actual situation of our country, fully consider the foreign language learning environment of our students, fully consider the individual differences of our students and other factors, and constantly improve the language learning environment, we should establish our own foreign language teaching theory system to promote our college students' second language acquisition ability.

5.2. “Sinicization” of second language acquisition

In the final analysis, the study of second language acquisition in China should be in line with the international practice. However, in the process of second language acquisition research, we must carry out the principle of combining localization with application, and actively absorb the essence of foreign studies in the field of second language acquisition, this paper introduces, analyzes, criticizes and reconstructs the theories and hypotheses of second language acquisition studies in foreign countries in order to make them more useful to us and to promote the “Sinicization” of second language acquisition research.

In addition, domestic researchers need to pay more attention to English learners in China. Domestic scholars should strengthen the description and analysis of the features of English phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics at different stages of second language learning, this paper discusses the influence of social environment, foreign language education policy, foreign language learning resources and classroom teaching on second language acquisition. At the same time, researchers should pay attention to the internal mechanisms of L2 acquisition, such as mother tongue transfer, heart and brain mechanism, and carry out relevant research on individual differences such as cognitive style, emotion, anxiety, etc., and the research results will be applied to the actual foreign language teaching, and further implemented in the foreign language education and teaching policy-making, outline design, ability development, skills training and other teaching process.

5.3. “Organization” in second language acquisition

Although the study of second language acquisition has been widely developed in our country, there are few social organizations and few academic journals related to second language acquisition, the academic exchanges present the situation of “The heart is full but the strength is insufficient”.

First of all, in order to meet the needs of the development of second language acquisition research in our country, we have established a national academic organization for second language acquisition research. Secondly, domestic scholars still need to establish high-level academic journals on Second Language Acquisition Research and open up a new field of academic exchange.

In addition, the second language acquisition (SLA) research in the master’s and doctoral applied linguistics in foreign linguistics and linguistics in our universities is still the most important aspect of SLA research. Our country can creatively set up the Second Language Acquisition Department to train more reserve talents for the professional study of second language acquisition, to set up and carry out the national project and Team Research of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) , which matches with the practice of the extra-large scale foreign language teaching in our country, so as to make our SLA research base on the frontier of the development of the subject, and International Second Language Acquisition Research.

6. Conclusion

In the more than 40 years of learning and exploration in the field of second language acquisition, Chinese scholars have constantly tested, revised, supplemented and enriched the theories and practices of second language acquisition, which has greatly promoted the development of the study of second language acquisition, it provides a lot of enlightenment for foreign language teaching in our country.

First of all, domestic scholars actively explore the methods and laws of foreign language classroom teaching in our country, and focus on building a good extracurricular learning environment and classroom learning environment, in order to improve the motivation of Chinese English learners. Secondly, the study of second language acquisition takes the creative education as the idea and the ability cultivation as the core, which can fully arouse the students’ learning enthusiasm, it plays an important role in improving teachers’ comprehensive quality and their ability of self-regulated learning. In addition, through the study of second language acquisition theory, the researcher probes into the significance of the learner-centered teaching model, and pay more attention to the situation of teaching, the ideal classroom input environment on second language acquisition far-reaching impact.

In a word, we should learn from and absorb the achievements of foreign SLA research, at the same time, we should also sum up the experiences and lessons of the development of SLA research in the past 40 years, and adjust and clarify the direction of our efforts in the future, in order to improve the quality and level of foreign language teaching in our country. We believe that with the continuous efforts of our domestic colleagues, SLA research and foreign language teaching in China will be full of hope and flourish into the future.

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