TOWARDS A THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Ian Slater

Abstract

In this paper, the author examines attempts at theory building within the field of Second Language Acquisition, particularly efforts to formulate a unified theory of SLA. He argues that such attempts have been largely futile and moreover, given the nature of the discipline itself, that efforts toward consensus –style theory building are misguided and possibly counter productive.

INTRODUCTION

When the economist Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) joined the faculty of Cambridge University in the late 1860's, one of his principal ambitions was the general recognition of economics as a field of intellectual endeavour in its own right. Throughout his career, Marshall argued for economics as a separate field from history or the moral sciences. In this he was ultimately successful, although it took until 1903 to persuade Cambridge to establish a separate economics course. One of his other ambitions was to unify economic thinking and to exemplify it in one text. In this too, he was eventually successful; his celebrated *Principles of Economics* first appeared in 1890 and sales increased every year, peaking in the late 1920's. Indeed, Marshall saw eight editions in his lifetime and modern microeconomics textbooks still rest on this text (Bucholz, 1989).

There are some parallels here with the field of second language acquisition (SLA), which emerged in the early 1970's. Owing something to the many branches of theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics (which emerged in the late 1950's), psychology, and education, SLA arose from research into first language (L1) acquisition by children, as well as the need to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to the growing number of ESL learners around the world (Kramsch, 2000). From the outset, as in any

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* Ian Slater was educated at the university of Sydney where he took his degree in Economics. He is currently pursuing a Master's Degree (in TEFL) at Thammasat University. He has been teaching at Assumption University since 1996.

academic discipline, SLA researchers sought to develop and test numerous theories of SLA in order both to better understand their subject, to attempt to delineate the boundaries of the field, and to demonstrate the validity of SLA as a field of intellectual endeavour distinct from any of its parent disciplines. One important aspect of this has been the quest for the "holy grail" of a unified theory of SLA. Such an objective was explicitly stated by Gregg, when he began a paper on SLA research by stating "the ultimate goal of second language acquisition research is the development of a theory of second language acquisition" (as cited in Lantoff, 1996, p. 714). The purpose of this paper then, is to briefly survey the field of SLA research, consider its status among its allied intellectual disciplines, look at how far it has come toward a "general theory" of SLA (another pointedly economics-related reference and one to which I will return in the conclusion), and finally, to consider whether such strivings are worthwhile. A good point of departure is to consider the "nature of the beast".

What is SLA?

Kramsch (2000) sees second language acquisition as focusing on the acquisitional aspects of language learning and teaching, both inside and outside the classroom. It includes both second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) acquisition, where the term L2 is generally used to characterise languages acquired, in natural or instructional settings, by immigrants to the country of which that language is the national language. By contrast, FL is traditionally learned in schools that are removed from any natural context of use.

Such a seemingly innocuous and plausible definitive of the field does touch on one of the contentious issues in defining SLA, namely whether or not it includes (or should include) a focus on language teaching and language teaching methodology. While Kramsch (2000) clearly feels it does (and should), others have seen SLA as an internally-driven, individual-focused phenomenon that is largely independent of the context in which it takes place. Van Patten, for example, argues that "SLA research is largely concerned with the psycholinguistic, cognitive, and sociolinguistic aspects of acquisition that shape a learner's developing linguistic system" (as cited in Kramsch, 2000, p.314).

From such a viewpoint, SLA is seen as distinct from foreign language methodology (FLM) in that FLM is concerned with selection and design of teaching materials and classroom activities, and with the development of effective teaching methods. Nevertheless, while such activities are not generally covered under the umbrella of SLA (or SLA research), it seems intuitively correct to see them as an integral part of SLA given that practitioners in the field of FLM are, explicitly or implicitly, informed by theory and that such theory is often inspired by research in SLA. It seems reasonable therefore to adopt a "broad" definition of SLA like that espoused by Kramsch (2000). Importantly however, Kramsch (2000) goes on to point out that while foreign language methodologists construct materials and use techniques based on SLA research, the application of such research requires adaptation to the particular context of local institutions, classrooms, and learners. Thus while, definitionally, we can see the objectives and areas of applicability of SLA theory and research, the caveat of localised application may give an insight into one of the limitations on SLA research and on the achievement of a unified, or general, theory of SLA. This leads, rather nicely, into a discussion of Wolfgang Klein's ideas regarding what SLA research has so far achieved.

The Contribution of SLA Research

Klein, working at the prestigious Max-Planck-Institut für Phycholingoistik in the Netherlands, published a penetrating critique of SLA research in the journal *Language Learning* (see Klein, 1998). In it, Klein argued that the field of SLA had made some impressive achievements since the early 1970's, not the least of which was establishing itself as a separate discipline; an achievement accomplished considerably faster than Marshall's on behalf of economics at Cambridge. Yet, Klein argues, the field has largely failed to realize academic respectability and languishes as something of a "poor cousin" among the other disciplines concerned with investigating human beings' capacity for language or, as Klein engagingly puts it, "SLA researchers are bottom dwellers in the linguistic sciences" (Klein, 1998, p. 529). Interestingly, Klein argues that the reason for the low status of SLA is not any fundamental weakness of methodology or of theoretical standards. Indeed, he argues these are, on average, no worse than those in other areas of language study. Rather, he argues that "the field rates low because it has nothing to say to people in other [linguistic] areas". (Klein, 1998, p.531)

Klein bases his assertions on investigations into a number of questions he poses at his paper's outset. The most relevant one to the purposes of this paper being "How close has it [SLA research] come to a general theory of SLA?" (Klein, 1998, p. 528). Klein argues that, while much SLA research is practical, SLA researchers have an underlying theoretical objective: the identification and exposition of a general theory of SLA, based on solid empirical findings. However, he argues that the plethora of acquisitional phenomena that such a theory needs to account for, including vocabulary learning, pronunciation, syntax and interactive behaviour, may be prohibitive. Moreover, while many theories have been advocated, none have been fully accepted within the field of SLA, nor by the scientific community. At best, he argues, SLA research has generally explained a few, specific phenomena, and even these explanations lack universal, or even widespread, acceptance (Klein 1998).

Klein places the blame for such failings squarely at the feet of the majority of SLA researchers, whom, he argues, approach the question of language acquisition from the wrong perspective. He argues that SLA researchers continue to view learners' utterances as deviations from a target language norm instead of manifestations of the learners' underlying language capacity (Klein, 1998). This approach, which Klein (1998, p. 531) calls the "target deviation perspective", is natural and attractive to the language teacher in that language teaching is a normative process, and the teacher is responsible for moving the student as close to the norm as possible. Given that the ranks of SLA researchers are filled with current, or former, teachers, it is natural that such a perspective take hold. (Klein, 1998)

As an alternative, Klein (1998) suggests that researchers focus on learner's atterances, not as deviations, but as manifestations of a learner's underlying language capacity. Quoting research by Klein and Perdue, Klein describes three types of language rules that characterize something he calls "The Basic Variety", a language form developed and used by all learners, independent of their source language (L1) and target language (L2) (as cited in Klein, 1998, p. 536)

Kleins "Basic Variety" has obvious similarities to "interlanguage", a term proposed by Selinker in 1972 to describe a system that

learner's create from elements the source and target languages (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 1998, p. 552). Yet Klein rejects interlanguage as not being radical enough because it assumes learner languages are systems "in-between the real languages" (Klein, 1998, p. 532). Rather, he argues that "real language" is a "hoax" and that all language is a learner variety of one form or another. Learner's simply develop their own competence to speak and understand to a point that does not saliently differ from that of their social environment. The linguistic notion of "perfect mastery", therefore, is just a special case of learner variety where neither the learner nor the "native speaker" notice any difference. (Klein, 1998, pp. 534-535)

The relevance of all of this to the idea of, and search for, a general theory of SLA is that, for Klein, SLA research has been misguided in persistently adopting a "target deviation" approach. SLA researchers would do better to concentrate on the search for the internal logic of the learner's language. In this way they would move closer to some generalisable results about the process of SLA.

Klein's approach seems narrow and proscriptive, yet it is in line with the idea that it is possible to move towards a general theory of SLA, if not to actually achieve it. Indeed, in his conclusion, Klein states any universal theory of SLA is likely to be so broad as to be "meaningless". Yet he does not quite give up hope, arguing instead for partial theories, the aggregation of which may one day converge "without [their]losing their empirical content" (Klein, 1998, p. 549).

Klein's approach to SLA was critiqued by Dianne Larsen-Freeman at the time of its publication in *Language Learning* (see Larsen-Freeman, 1998). She argued that Klein's linguistic perspective may prove insightful for better understanding the human language faculty yet it unduly narrowed the field of SLA (Larsen-Freeman, 1998). She argued, rather, for a broader approach to SLA and SLA research, suggesting that SLA researchers needed to address, as a minimum, how cognitive functions operate to account for changes in learner language competence and performance. Also, she suggested, research needed to address why variation among learners has relatively little impact on L1 acquisition but great impact on SLA, and also to include issues such as learners' variability in performance. (Larsen-Freeman, 1998). In short, she argues for a broad approach to SLA research and one which is inclusive of other academic fields, pointing out that a linguistics-centred approach, as advocated by Klein, is just as limiting as the target deviation perspective against which Klein warns. (Larsen-Freeman, 1998). Whether such a broad approach to SLA is to be preferred, and how far it is inimical to the goal of a unified theory of SLA is an important theme in the work of James Lantolf.

SLA and Theory Building

In his review of SLA theory building, published in *Language Learning* (1996), Lantolf points out that a unified theory of SLA has long been a goal of SLA theorists and researchers. As mentioned in the introduction, this was stated as an explicit goal by Gregg, and he further expounded that the aim of such a unified theory was the explanation of some "as-yet-undiscovered mechanism – a mechanism that supposedly causes language acquisition" (as cited in Lantolf, 1996, p. 716).

Yet, as Lantolf points out, movement towards a single theory has been slow and he estimates that around 40-60 major SLA theories continue to exist at present (Lantolf,

1996, p. 716). This is obviously vexatious to seekers for a unified theory and Gregg opines that these theories "are not in fact really theories, but rather either descriptive, non-explanatory frameworks for L2 researchers on the one hand, or else metaphors for organizing one's thoughts on the other" (as cited in Lantolf, 1991, p. 716).

Such a response is typical, Landolf argues, of the 'absolutist' faction among SLA theorists. Such theorists seek to confer an air of legitimacy on SLA by allying it as closely as possible to the "hard" sciences. Delightfully, Lantolf quotes Gould as suggesting that such theory-builders are suffering from "physics envy", and cites Polkinghorne as suggesting such a position is anachronistic when researchers in the other social sciences are increasingly realizing that the natural (or "hard") sciences might not be the most appropriate model to follow (as cited in Lantolf, 1996, p. 715).

The common fear, Lantolf suggests, of SLA theory builders is relativism, and they tend to be united in their belief that difference and heterogeneity are impediments to the mastery of truth (Lantolf, 1996). Only Schumann has advocated a relativistic stance on SLA in the name of "an aesthetics rather than a science of SLA" (as cited in Lantolf, 1996, p. 722). Yet he has been criticized, by Beretta amongst others, as representing an extreme position of nihilism ("all realities are constructed so anything goes") that should be shunned (as cited in Lantolf 1996, p. 722).

While there are dangers inherent in abandoning oneself to such a nihilist (post-modernist) view of SLA, there are perhaps equal dangers in single-theory science (or even single-theory social science), containing as it does the implicit threat of a Hitlerian (Bushian?)

"New World Order". Michael Long recognized such possibilities and argued for an approach of "constrained relativism" toward SLA theory building (as cited in Lantolf, 1996, p. 722). Yet, if one accepts the merits of a relativist approach, or fears a single-theory approach, as Long apparently does, it seems unnecessary to worry about the degree of relativism. I am inclined to side, as Lantolf does, with Brown, who pointed out that "the world has witnessed far fewer atrocities as a result of excessive tolerance than it has as a consequence of absolutism" (as cited in Lantolf, 1996, p. 722).

CONCLUSION

I began this paper with a discussion of Alfred Marshall and it seems appropriate to return to him in the conclusion. Marshall's attempts to unify the body of economic theory were wildly successful in his lifetime and for some time beyond. Indeed, his Cambridge colleague A.C Pigou had the habit of answering student questions by saying "It's all in Marshall" (Bucholz, 1984, p. 211). Yet, within twelve years of his death, Marshall's pre-eminence in the field had been usurped by a fellow Cambridge man, J.M. Keynes. In 1936, Keynes published a widely influential treatise entitled (ironically enough in light of the concerns of this paper), *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money.*

Here was the new "bible" under the guidance of which the suffering economies of Western Europe (and the United States and Australia) would be saved from the pervasive illness of depression. Historians of economic thought will know, of course, that while greatly successful, and dominant in political circles for many years (e.g., Richard Nixon's comment in 1972 that "We're all Keynesians now"), Keynesian theories have come to be replaced

by others as the process of theory construction, hypothesis testing and experimentation in the field of economics continues apace.

The parallels with SLA research and the goal of a unified theory of SLA seem obvious, it is not from absolutism but from diversity and, indeed, change, that strength comes. I am inclined to conclude this paper with a metaphor from Lantolf, (1996,p. 726) who suggests that, when considering the field of SLA and SLA theories, he prefers the "image of a Kandinsky painting with its richness of colour, shapes, lines, angles, and patterns, some intersecting, some not, always intriguing, appealingly creative, and highly stimulating".

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