

Mind Matters in SLA

Clare Wright, Thorsten Piske, and Martha Young-Scholten (Eds.). (2018).
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While human beings' ability to master their native language has been widely recognized in second language acquisition (SLA) as an invariant learning experience, the ability to master a second language has shown a wide range of variance whose outcome is dependent on the nature of the target language rules, types of language tasks, and different learner characteristics, to name but a few of the many considerations in SLA. As an example, from the perspective of considering teaching as creating the right conditions for the mind of the learner to acquire a second language, Corder, paraphrasing Wilhelm Von Humboldt, notes that "... we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the *mind* [emphasis added] in its own way" (Corder, 1967, p. 169). Thus, in order to teach language effectively by creating a supportive learning environment, one must understand how the human mind learns language in the first place. To this end, *Mind Matters in SLA* (2018), edited by Clare Wright, Thorsten Piske, and Martha Young-Scholten, considers some of the important and diverse topics in SLA research regarding what appears to be the most significant factor in both theoretical and instructed SLA—understanding the mind of the language learner from the learner's perspective.

Mind Matters in SLA is part of the Channel View Publications series on second language acquisition, and was produced as a companion volume to *Input Matters in SLA* (Piske & Young-Scholten, 2009); the intended audience of *Mind Matters* includes first-year applied linguistics graduate students involved in SLA research, language teachers, and educational policy makers whose interests are related to language acquisition. It comprises 12 chapters, each presenting key SLA theories accompanied by relevant empirical studies that highlight the theories in practice—all written by contributing experts from the fields of linguistics, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, language education, English studies, multilingualism, and psychology. The chapters are organized into three sections: (a) language and mind, (b) properties of interlanguage grammars, and (c) transitions in acquisition. Each section begins with a baseline chapter on the topic by the contributing authors, leading to the section chapters containing deeper debates on these current issues in SLA research.

Section 1, "Language and Mind," introduces key property theories, which explore the nature of learners' linguistic competence. Property theories in SLA ask how the learner actually acquires a second language by tracing the linguistic knowledge of the learner; such theories are often presented as constructs that address the logical problem of language acquisition—i.e., how do we come to know what we know about language despite a scarcity of linguistic stimulus (Gregg, 1998)? The editors' perspective in Chapter 1 begin with where language learning first takes place—in the minds of children. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce two competing theories on how children are able to develop their L1 linguistic competence: In Chapter 2, Chomsky's universal grammar (UG) is explained, including a primer on generative grammar and phrase structures; in Chapter 3, an alternative view on syntax and L1 acquisition is presented via emergentism, which holds that language acquisition is innate, not behavioral. Chapter 4 discusses the poverty of stimulus (POS) phenomenon, which posits that when the linguistic input children are first exposed to is insufficient, they still manage to acquire their native tongue. The POS phenomenon is often used to support the concept of an innate mechanism in humans for language, such as asserted by UG. The editors question whether L2 knowledge for adults is epistemologically different from L1 knowledge, where UG is often involved, against Bley-Vroman's (1990) fundamental difference hypothesis, which posits that adults lose access to UG. The

section ends with a chapter on the evolution of human language. To this reviewer, while the topic is interesting and full of curious facts, the inherent mystery behind the deepest origins and evolution of human language is perhaps not directly pertinent to SLA scholars or language instructors. As a result, the information in Chapter 5 could seem tangential and not material to the rest of the topics covered in the book.

Section 2, “Properties of Interlanguage Grammar,” concerns the term “interlanguage”—first coined by Larry Selinker (Selinker, 1972)—which refers to the linguistic system of a second language learner in the process of learning the target language. The section’s introductory chapter, Chapter 6, discusses the missing inflections in the development of L1 morphosyntax in children and second language learners. The rest of the chapters shift their focus from characterizing learners’ grammatical competence to other, non-grammatical aspects of interlanguage. Features of the second language lexicon are discussed in Chapter 7, and Chapter 8 explores the differential effects of native L1 speakers’ rating of oral proficiency in L2 speakers. The last chapter of the section, Chapter 9, reports on an often-ignored and rarely studied L2 experience—an extreme case of L1 attrition because of L2 immersion. The chapter follows a single case study of an L2 learner who displayed phonological attrition in his native German tongue and explores the implications of such results on our current understanding of SLA.

Section 3, “Transitions in Acquisition,” presents differing theories of the mechanisms behind the developmental process of acquisition that leads to achieving linguistic competence. In SLA, the primary explanation of changes in the learner’s linguistic system is explored through transition theories, which concern the development of second language acquisition. Chapter 10 gives some common psycholinguistic techniques that measure production and comprehension; research concerning memory and processing is introduced in Chapter 11. These two chapters provide the foundational knowledge needed for a careful exploration on a prominent transition theory in SLA, Pienemann’s (1998) processability theory. The final chapter discusses this theory—its constructs and applications—in great detail, along with applications in the classroom.

It is important to note that *Mind Matters in SLA* does not provide an exhaustive treatment on all theories of the mind in second language acquisition. Some notable omissions in the volume are dynamic systems theory (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007) and skill acquisition theory (VanPatten & Williams, 2014). That said, the book offers a cohesive collection of mainstream SLA theories supplemented with diverse and unique perspectives on mind matters that are not commonly found in most introductory textbooks. Though some of the chapters, such as Chapters 1, 10, and 11, do deliver easy-to-understand explanations on common SLA techniques and terms, the book best serves as a complementary reading to those who are already familiar and working with the topics. Language teachers in particular will find the discussions on transitions such as processability theory to be extremely useful in L2 classroom intervention; in addition, these discussions can help classroom teachers develop and implement classroom practices that are based on empirically supported SLA theories, rather than merely following the curriculum dictated by ESL textbooks—often with no background in the theoretical underpinnings behind the methods of such practices. In sum, *Mind Matters in SLA* is for language teachers and researchers alike—all educators, in fact, seeking fresh expression on longstanding ideas as well as fruitful perspectives on understanding the minds of second language learners.

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