<u>**Lecture 7**</u>   *SLA towards the 21st Century*

Developments in SLA

Since the mid-1940s and the 1950s, scholars have attempted to understand the acquisition of a second language and many researchers have since then put forward various views and hypotheses about the process. Before SLA established itself as a field of systematic study, Contrastive Analysis had been an approach to the study of acquiring a second language based on contrasting L1 and L2 similarities and differences to predict and explain problems that learners were faced with (Fries 1945; Lado 1957).

CA.   Heavily influenced by structuralism and behaviourism, the dominant theories in the 1940s and 1950s, CA was soon discredited for its overprediction and underprediction of learner errors, but mostly for its association with behaviourist psychology of language (Skinner 1957) and its inability to explain that "*innate linguistic knowledge must underlie language acquisition*" (Saville-Troike 2005:21), a notion already put forward by Chomsky in 1957, who later on formulated it in a theory of Universal Grammar which deeply influenced SLA research, though it first concerned L1 acquisition. In fact, L1 has always been regarded as playing some role in the acquisition of another language.

EA.   A weak version of CA paved the way for a more effective approach based on a systematic consideration of actual learner errors during the process of L2 acquisition. In fact, it was labelled EA for error analysis as it emerged with a methodology that focused on the process of L2 acquisition (Corder 1967, 1981). Unlike CA, EA was more concerned with underlying rules and shifted – under the influence of Chomsky's mentalism and TG Grammar – from behaviourist assumptions of habit formation to mentalist "explanations of language acquisition, with emphasis on the **innate** capacity of the language learner" ((Saville-Troike 2005:37-38). In his seminal article 'The significance of learners' errors', Corder (1967) focusses on two matters: shifting "the emphasis away from a preoccupation with *teaching* towards a study of *learning"*; and the hypothesis that "some at least of the strategies adopted by the learner of a second language are substantially the same as those by which a first language is acquired. ". With respect to learners' errors, Corder (1967:163) says: "Our ingenuity should be concentrated on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred", which is in fact an *a-posteriori* analysis! He also distinguished between *mistakes*, viewed as performance slips, and errors as systematic in competence, the underlying knowledge of the language.

IL.   Building on Corder's concepts and procedures, Selinker introduced in 1972 the term *Interlanguage* (IL) to refer to intermediate states of the learner's language development towards L2, heavily influenced by L1, though the output is a linguistic system that is neither L1 nor L2. The concept of IL is based on the hypothesis of a "psychological structure latent in the brain" which is activated when someone begins learning a second language. Corder's and Selinker's work became the foundation of modern research into second-language acquisition.

SLA. Research on first language acquisition – in particular since Chomsky's concept of an innate competence and a considerably productive language faculty – has certainly helped our understanding of teaching and learning languages other than the mother tongue. Corder (1967:164) clearly suggests that "at least some of the strategies adopted by the learner of a second language are substantially the same as those by which a first language is acquired". Krashen's Monitor Theory on SLA (1981-2003) is also clearly connected with Chomsky's theory of language.

* Various theoretical models have been proposed and research findings presented, ranging from purely linguistic to cognitive and then discourse analysis and social/interactional models. As a matter of fact, later developments in SLA theorizing advanced the idea that L2 learners acquire the language by *interacting*, not by learning syntax or lexis. The proposal was then formalized as the **Interaction Hypothesis** (Long 1983; Mackey 1999) in which negotiation of meaning was of crucial importance in facilitating acquisition.

The two central findings which emerged from SLA research before and well into the 21st century might appear contradictory at first sight, but they are not: (Myles, F. 2000+)

1. SLA is highly *systematic*	2. SLA is highly *variable*
- the **route** that L2 learners go through; - basically independent of the learner's L1 and the learning context (classroom vs. natural acquisition by exposure)	- the **rate** of the learning process (speed), - the **outcome** (proficiency) or both; - both are highly variable from learner to learner

Questions raised

1. What does the L2 learner come to know?
2. How does the learner acquire this knowledge?
3. Why are some learners more successful than other? (Saville-Troike 2005:2)

No simple answers to these questions can be provided and no full agreement has been reached among SLA researchers, in particular because they draw from different academic disciplines, and thus they are influenced by different views and theories. Indeed, SLA emerged from within **linguistics** but also from **psychology** along with their sub-disciplines of Applied Linguistics, in particular psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and social psychology.

Contexts of SLA

- Informal learning L2 in naturalistic contexts;
- Formal learning L2 in school;
- Learning L2 in a mixture of these contexts.
- **Microsocial context** : It deals with the potential effects of surrounding circumstances ;
- **Macrosocial Context** : It relates SLA to cultural, political, and educational environments.