



**Florencia
Franceschina**

Florencia Franceschina is Lecturer in the Linguistics and English Language Department at Lancaster University, UK. Her main area of research is SLA, especially the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax.

Coming items in this series will include TBL, ESOL, NLP, etc. Readers are invited to suggest other acronyms in EFL that they would like to see in this column

SLA is a relatively young discipline, going back to the 1950s

The ABC of ELT ... 'SLA'

In the second article in this new series Florencia Franceschina looks at SLA – 'Second Language Acquisition'

What's in a name?

SLA stands for Second Language Acquisition. Researchers working in this area are primarily concerned with understanding how people acquire a second language, both in terms of the processes they go through and the learning outcomes.

The term SLA can be interpreted in a narrow way to mean the study of a language learned in a naturalistic setting after a first language has been acquired. A typical example of this would be somebody who emigrates from their country of birth, say China, to live and work in another country where a different language is spoken, say the UK. English would be this person's second language.

Very often, however, the term SLA encompasses a larger range of meanings. For example, if our hypothetical learner was a young adult who came from an area in China where Mandarin was spoken at home and Cantonese was learned at school, then strictly speaking Mandarin would be their first language, Cantonese their second, and English their third. The study of L3 acquisition is a relatively new and growing field (see for example Cenoz and Jessner, 2000). Although some researchers are exclusively devoted to the investigation of L3 acquisition, L2, L3, L4, L_n acquisition are usually subsumed under the SLA umbrella.

Another way in which the term is used beyond the narrow definition above is when it refers to people who acquire a second language through classroom instruction rather than through immersion in an L2-speaking environment. A common alternative term is foreign language learning, but we often use SLA to mean naturalistic and/or instructed language acquisition. When the distinction between instructed and naturalistic learning needs to be emphasised, one can use the acronym EFL in the case of instructed learners, and either ESOL (English for/by Speakers of Other Languages) or ESL (English as a Second Language) to refer to naturalistic learners.

Still another term that is close to SLA is bilingualism. Some people use the term bilingual to refer exclusively to learners who have been brought up speaking two languages from birth. However, the distinction between the simultaneous and consecutive acquisition of two languages is not always considered relevant, and in some cases researchers will use the term bilingual language acquisition to mean bilingual and/or second language acquisition.

One last complication: have you ever wondered what is the difference between language acquisition and language learning? Some researchers, such as Stephen Krashen, believe that there may exist two quite different processes through which one can come to know a language: one mainly conscious and voluntary and the other largely unconscious and impervious to manipulation by learners and teachers. These researchers use a different name to refer to each type of process: the former is referred to as learning and the latter as acquisition. However, many other people use the two terms interchangeably.

Although it is easy to draw up the distinctions outlined above conceptually, one often finds that the labels do not fit individual learners comfortably. In other words, real life is more complex than SLA researchers would like to make us believe.

What is the focus of SLA research?

SLA is a relatively young discipline, going back to the 1950s. Below is a list of general SLA research questions, as a way of illustrating the types of issues that drive SLA research work:

- Do child and adult learners acquire an L2 in the same way?
- How can we explain the large variation in terms of speed and outcome of acquisition observed in individual L2 learners?
- Is it useful to correct L2 learners? Is it necessary?
- How can we explain the fact that most L2 learners typically retain features that give them away as non-native speakers?
- Does our L1 determine the way we learn an L2? (For example, is the acquisition of L2 English similar in L1 German and L1 Chinese learners?)
- How does an individual's brain cope with acquisition, storage and use of more than one language?

A large body of work is available with at least partial answers to these and similar questions. Below are some suggestions for readers who would like to find out more about the fascinating field of SLA.

Email: f.franceschina@lancaster.ac.uk

Where to get started?

Doughty, C & M Long (Eds.) (2003) *Handbook of second language acquisition*. (2nd edition) Oxford: Blackwell
 Ellis, R (1997) *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
 Cenoz, J & U Jessner (Eds.) (2000) *English in Europe: the acquisition of a third language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters