

Second Language Acquisition and Language Education—Bidirectional Synergies between Research and Practice

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1. Introduction

This Special Issue brings together the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and language education in an attempt to offer a venue for exploring mutual insights into classroom language learning. While there is a natural interface between the two fields, opportunities for a more extensive dialogue are often restricted, with research often holding an independent identity in one field or the other. Notwithstanding any perceived independence, research in both fields carries significant insights for the wide-ranging stakeholders involved in language education, from practitioners to policy makers, as well as learners themselves. These stakeholders reflect that the instructed learning environment is a significant venue of language learning for language learners worldwide. While some previous publications have showcased the potential for a mutually beneficial dialogue, this Special Issue aims to further advance that agenda by presenting a range of studies that exemplify the scope for mutual engagement (for examples of previous publications, see [1–5]). While the scope of the interface between the two fields is extensive, the range of thematic areas covered here is necessarily non-exhaustive, offering contemporary perspectives on different themes of mutual interest across the dual fields. This introduction provides a brief overview of the natural synergies that exist, before presenting a short synopsis of the contributing articles.

2. Second Language Acquisition

SLA has been a buoyant field since the 1970s within the wider field of applied linguistics, drawing on a vast range of approaches and methods that offer a multifaceted lens on the processes and outcomes underlying our learning of a language beyond our first language. While a strong historical focus on the learner's language system, interlanguage [6,7], and its developing characteristics has prevailed, the field has necessarily extended its scope to input matters and learner characteristics, reflecting a generally threefold thematic focus. Such thematic remit puts the learner at the heart of SLA research inquiry, offering insight that spans a vast range of questions concerning the development of the learner's second language (L2) repertoire, from processing, comprehension, representation, and knowledge issues to learner production at different developmental stages. The role of crosslinguistic influences, as well as L2 input and interaction and their contribution to such development, constitute significant areas of investigation, as does the significant inter-learner variability that arises in the differential experiences of language learning across individual learners and their levels of attainment. The latter issues concerning individual variability extend to wide-ranging individual, crosslinguistic, psychological, social, and environmental factors that are hypothesised to potentially constrain and shape development. The extensive scope of the field is thus characterised by equally wide-ranging approaches, as exemplified by neurolinguistic, cognitive, psycholinguistic, developmental, social, environmental, and experiential perspectives. Indeed, such an array highlights the necessarily cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives adopted and provided. Irrespective of the learner, L2, and learning context, the thematic, methodological, and



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disciplinary scope of the field should carry insight that extends beyond SLA in itself to hold relevance for other stakeholders involved in the language learning enterprise.

The field pertains to all learners of an additional language, be it their first L2 or another learnt contemporaneously or subsequently, at any post-L1 acquisition level and in all learning contexts. Therefore, it is not restricted to an instructed learning environment, although instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) constitutes a significant sub-domain, giving rise to a range of areas of investigation (for a presentation, see [3,8,9]). Learning context has traditionally been considered in terms of a dichotomy between instructed learning in the foreign language classroom and naturalistic learning in the target language community. However, the alternation and complementarity between contexts are evident, such as in the case of naturalistic learners availing of language classes and instructed learners spending periods of time in the target language community during study abroad [10]. Moreover, even without physically venturing into the target language community, instructed learners have increasing opportunities to access the language outside the classroom via different means [11]. Moreover, even within an instructed environment, different types of instruction are available [12], with domestic immersion approaching some characteristics of naturalistic learning to varying degrees [13,14].

While a natural universality may be hypothesised to underpin acquisition processes across individual learners [15], the potential role of the learning context in impacting developmental processes and outcomes calls for an understanding of how contextual factors shape L2 acquisition. While a narrow conceptualisation of processes focuses on internal, cognitive, psycholinguistic perspectives, it is important to be cognisant that processes also pertain to social, cultural, and interactional aspects, among others, of language development and usage. Issues of language contact and exposure, as well as learner identity are fundamental to the fourfold learning context distinction alluded to above, namely naturalistic and instructed learning, as well as study abroad and domestic immersion, with a key question arising as to how instructed and naturalistic learning may differ, or not. The question pertains to the long-standing issue of input provision and opportunities for language use during instructed learning, such as the different manipulations of language input in terms of the type, quantity, quality, frequency, duration, and intensity of exposure and use. Critical examples concern the role of metalinguistic knowledge more generally, and more specifically grammar instruction on an explicit–implicit continuum in the context of focus-on-form versus focus-on-meaning approaches [16,17]. Similarly, against the backdrop of a traditional drip–feed approach [18] characterised by classes allowing for regular but short exposure to the language, other manipulations of instructed learning conditions have showcased the potential of more intensive exposure over longer periods of time. Beyond input and interaction matters, issues of identity may also be fundamentally at play, reflecting the differential status of the learner as a member of different speech communities, be it at home or abroad [19].

3. Second Language Acquisition and Language Education

Against the preceding backdrop, as noted, the scope of the interface between SLA and second language education is extensive, extending to a significant range of stakeholders involved in instructed L2 learning. Indeed, instructed language learners constitute a significant cohort of L2 learners, along with their naturalistic counterparts, with SLA-related research studies clearly classifying learner participants in individual studies based on such a distinction. Other distinctions pertain to study-abroad learners, namely instructed learners spending time abroad, and domestic immersion learners whose instruction holds other distinguishing characteristics. Second language education has a long history, with the learning of an additional language(s) being the norm for many students. Over time, the evolving pedagogic approaches prescribed within different educational policies and contexts have reflected changes in the conceptualisation of learning, underpinned by a greater awareness and understanding of language learning processes and outcomes. Language testing and proficiency scales have correspondingly been enhanced over time with the aim of

better capturing learner developing proficiency as it pertains to different areas of language and competences underlying language use and comprehension (for examples of publicly available proficiency tests and scales, see the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR [20], American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL [21] proficiency guidelines, and the ACTFL [22] Oral Proficiency Interview [OPI]).

Taken together, the two fields of SLA and L2 education have benefited from mutual dialogue to varying degrees, with some critical reflection arising in how relevant findings are used to inform one another. A case in point concerns language testing and proficiency scales, where there has been useful critique of different aspects of different scales and expected competences at different proficiency levels (see [23] for the case of the CEFR). Other examples concern our understanding of the role of different pedagogic treatments, as in the case of focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning approaches [14,16,17], along with task-based language teaching approaches [24] which, together, have been the focus of increasing reflection on the learning benefits that they promote. Taken together, such areas of mutual engagement point to the potential for a sharper reflection on learning expectations, activities, and outcomes for instructed learners.

This Special Issue is intended as an opportunity to continue that engagement agenda, as a means of showcasing some examples of the mutual insights to be had in contemporary research on L2 learning in an instructed context. The different articles presented exemplify the scope of reflection across areas that span input and interaction matters, linguistic skills, and learner factors. In the former case, a number of articles focus on issues in input provision and their relationship with the development of different linguistic skills. They highlight the importance of reflection on the role of different types and manipulations of input, as well as interactional activities. Particularly, at the level of linguistic skills, the articles further highlight the scope of skills involved in L2 usage, extending to areas that may traditionally have received less attention in classroom instruction, as in the case of sociolinguistic competence (for discussion, see [25]). Regarding learner factors, other contributing articles cast their lamp on factors that have previously been less explored, pointing to the scope of such factors at play in language learning, as in the case of learner investment and flow.

The articles present investigations that span different instructional contexts among learners of different languages within different age groups, reflecting the breadth of the instructed educational enterprise. Moreover, they reflect different methodologies, and the rich insights that such different approaches provide, as well as providing perspectives that extend beyond the learner, instructor, and classroom to curricular and programmatic matters. In the following, a brief synopsis of each article is presented.

4. Synopsis of the Contributing Articles

Maja Roch, Raffaele Dicataldo, and Maria Chiara Levorato present a study that investigates receptive vocabulary and listening comprehension among Italian–English sequential bilingual children attending an international English school in Italy. Reflecting the importance of listening comprehension in L2 learning, the study offers a quantitative investigation of such skills in learners' L1 and L2, finding that L1 skills are more advanced than in the L2 for both receptive vocabulary and listening comprehension. However, the results for listening are within the monolingual range, pointing to the level of attainment made by the children, although not in the case of vocabulary. A correlation was also found between listening and receptive vocabulary among the younger learners. The study highlights the role of vocabulary understanding in the development of listening.

Numerous articles offer empirical studies on input presentation and interaction issues in an instructed context. The article by Roger Gilabert provides a suitable backdrop, where the author specifically offers reflections on task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a significant area of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) investigation. The article first relates various premises underlying TBLT to wider issues in SLA and ISLA, thereby offering a range of insights for language practitioners into the interface between

the three interrelated (sub)fields. The author proceeds by considering task-based needs analysis, offering a range of practical insights for the enhancement of task design that draw on theoretical and applied concepts and constructs. The article highlights the synergies that can be beneficially embraced in exploring the interface between the three (sub)fields.

Reflecting the critical importance of learner exposure to the target language, Daniela Avello and Carmen Muñoz offer a study of the impact of captioned video-viewing on the development of listening and reading. The investigation of primary school learners of English in Chile explores the potential for such input provision in an instructed context, where learners' exposure to the language is primarily restricted to a limited number of classes. The comparative study of learners at two levels includes similar control groups of students who completed a range of tests which illuminate their listening skills, reading efficacy, reading speed, and vocabulary knowledge. Longitudinal tracking in pre-, post-, and delayed post-tests points to the developmental gains of the experimental groups at both levels. These gains pertain to enhanced listening skills at each stage of the study, along with enhanced reading efficacy and reading speed. Learner L2 vocabulary knowledge and L1 reading efficacy were found to contribute to their listening scores, while L2 listening skills further contributed to reading efficacy. These findings showcase the potential for captioned video usage in the classroom as a means of providing an input-rich resource for receptive skill development.

Raquel Serrano continues the focus on input exposure in an instructed setting, presenting a study of the role of extensive reading. The study of Spanish/Catalan child learners of English compares the impact of such reading over the course of an academic year through two modes, namely extensive reading only and reading while listening, with a control group included. Quantitative analysis of the increased post-test and delayed post-test vocabulary scores outlines the significant impact of such reading activities, with little difference between the two experimental groups. The study, however, shows some differences over the course of the year, whereby the gains were less extensive in term two compared to term one. While there were no differences between the two experimental groups in term two, the more reduced gains may reflect some differences in the reading activities between both terms, pointing to the importance of considering the arrangements of such activities in the integration of extensive reading within an instructed programme. Notwithstanding, the findings highlight the importance of extensive reading in L2 vocabulary development.

Joan C. Mora and Ingrid Mora-Plaza present a study of pronunciation training using a computerised map task. Their article reviews the difficulties that pronunciation poses to L2 learners, accounting for the ways in which targeted training can facilitate development among instructed learners. Situated in a task-based pronunciation teaching (TBPT) framework, the quantitative study offers a comparison of an experimental group and a control group of Hispanophone university learners in relation to their perception and production of the /i:/-/I/ contrast in English, as in 'feet' vs. 'fit'. While the findings demonstrate the benefits of a TBPT approach, they also illuminate a potential role of task complexity, as well as some issues in learner ability to generalise pronunciation in novel contexts. Overall, the study highlights the importance of focusing on pronunciation skill development during instructed learning.

Cyrille Granget, Cecilia Gunnarsson, Inès Saddour, Clara Solier, Vera Serrau, and Charlotte Alazard continue the focus on pronunciation in a study of the relationship between learner pronunciation and orthography. Their study focuses on nasal vowels among Japanese beginner learners of French as a third language. The learners' realisation of such sounds and their orthographic representation in writing are investigated in a spoken and written task. The findings indicate strong orthographic representation in writing, with the learners demonstrating high accuracy levels even at the outset of the longitudinal study presented. In contrast, the learners' oral production is more fragile, especially in spontaneous speech compared to repeated speech, with various alternatives to the nasal vowel produced, as in the case of a vowel followed by /n/. While some development is evident between the initial stage of the study and the post-test results, the findings indicate

crosslinguistic influences at play, as learners draw on other languages in their multilingual repertoire. Thus, the conclusion highlights the importance of pronunciation training, and the authors offer various pedagogic recommendations as a means of enhancing learner phonetic representation that does not rely on written representation alone.

Aintzane Doiz and David Lasagabaster explore the area of teacher–student interaction in relation to teacher questions in the classroom. Their study is set in an English-medium higher education context, drawing on data recordings of a series of lectures by teachers in the Humanities as a subject discipline that has not received attention in the area. Using a taxonomy of different question types, quantitative analysis shows how some question types dominate, with considerable inter-teacher variability also reflecting different questioning styles. When confirmation checks dominated as the question type, the authors observe how they do not serve their intended pedagogic goal, but rather are often used as fillers. Overall, the sense of student engagement through questioning seems to be restricted, as reflected by limited student responses. The authors consider the findings in terms of the interactional potential of the questions which dominate the classroom discourse, calling for greater teacher training in the area, in tandem with customised training to reflect the individual questioning styles of teachers.

Marit Myhre Bredesen and Kari-Anne B. Naess also present an article that investigates teacher questions among kindergarten children during a digital picture book reading task. Their case study focuses on ‘quiet’ children, representing a learner cohort who have not previously been the subject of extensive investigation on such a topic. The study considers different question types, from closed to open, where the questions are considered from the perspective of the learner response level that they elicit in learners’ L2 Norwegian. The findings are based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, pointing to different frequencies and details of responses across and within question types, with open-ended questions in particular not found to elicit extensive responses compared to the other question types. The findings have implications for teacher engagement with ‘quiet’ learners within the age cohort considered, as well as beyond.

Nadia Mifka-Profozic builds on interactions in a classroom, studying learners’ interactions in pairs and groups, and especially exploring the features of priming and alignment in contributing to the development of learner interactional competence. The author uses conversation analysis to consider how such features arise within interactional routines and their potential for language learning. The features relate to how learners may notice and use linguistic features previously arising in an interactional encounter. The study participants are university learners of English in Croatia who performed two tasks in pairs or small groups. The qualitative and quantitative findings indicate differences between the two group types. The study illuminates the potential of priming and alignment in the acquisition of interactional competence, with pedagogical implications for their integration in classroom interactional tasks presented.

Lidia Mañoso-Pacheco and Roberto Sánchez-Cabrero focus on bilingual education programmes in Spain as an example of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) education. In particular, they present quantitative findings relating to pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards such an education model, reflecting a critical cohort of stakeholders as future teachers for such programmes. The study draws on a questionnaire which allows the authors to consider correlations between a range of variables and attitudinal perspectives that emerge. While the bilingual programme is generally valued, key findings relate to the impact of self-perceived English proficiency in shaping participants’ attitudes, often conditioned by the participants’ own background schooling, as well as concerns around learner development on subject content in such an education context. The findings have implications for the future development of such programmes in a Spanish context, with regard to the relationship between Spanish and English as a dominant global lingua franca of our times.

Miguel Hernández Hernández and Jesús Izquierdo analyse teacher attitudes in a study that investigates their relationship with the adoption of curricular developments. The

study is situated in a rural education environment in Mexico, complementing a previous predominant focus of such issues in an urban context. The study draws on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaire and interview data to illuminate the challenges faced by generalist teachers who are called on to offer instruction on English in tandem with other subjects. These challenges are situated against the backdrop of curricular changes relating to English in a Mexican context. The study reports a weak correlation between teacher attitudes and the adoption of such changes, showcasing the critical importance of teacher engagement and support to teachers in curricular reform and implementation.

Focusing on sociolinguistic competence, Katherine Rehner and Ivan Lasan offer a study in the context of French as a second language in Ontario, Canada. Using different data types, they explore learner retrospective reflections on the fulfilment of their sociolinguistic needs during language learning. These findings are complemented with teacher reflections on how they are addressing sociolinguistic development in their classrooms in the context of integrating the Common European Framework of Reference. The study highlights mismatches between learners' sociolinguistic needs in their use of the language and the underdeveloped sociolinguistic skills they believe to hold. Optimistically, however, the teacher reports demonstrate the changes they have made to their pedagogic approach. The article builds on the extensive body of research on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in a second language to highlight the pedagogic potential of sociolinguistic development.

Leonor Dauzón-Ledesma and Jesús Izquierdo explore the area of learner investment in their language learning. Following a review of the concept of investment, the authors present the development of a quantitative questionnaire for learners in a foreign language institutional learning context, as opposed to the target language community, reflecting that the dimensions of investment may be distinct in one learning environment compared to the other. The questionnaire includes different items on a Likert scale which tap into different dimensions of investment, namely motivation, necessity, engagement, and agency. The remainder of the article presents findings stemming from a study which used the questionnaire among university learners whose English language learning is mandatory within their institution in Mexico. While the learners demonstrated strong motivation and a utilitarian perception of English language learning, learner engagement and agency were more reduced. In providing an understanding of learner investment on mandatory language learning programmes, the findings carry implications for language education policy in relation to such programmes.

Finally, in their article, Jean-Marc Dewaele, Alfaf Albakistani, and Iman Kamal Ahmed explore the concept of 'flow' during student learning in online remote English-as-a-foreign-language classrooms as they arose during the pandemic circumstances. The authors review the concept of flow, referring to 'an optimal psychophysical state' that may arise during engagement in a learning situation. The authors draw on questionnaire data to offer a quantitative comparative analysis with in-person classroom learning, finding that flow is significantly enhanced under the latter conditions. Their study also explores the role of some learner internal and external variables, finding that a larger range of variables impact flow during in-person classroom learning compared to online learning. While offering some reassurance on the potential for flow to be supported in an online remote teaching environment, the study highlights the importance of in-person classroom dynamics in engaging learner flow.

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