WHAT exactly does the L2 learner come to know? HOW does the learner acquire L2 knowledge? WHY are some learners more successful than others? While there are some significant differences of opinion, and while there is much yet to discover, there is also much that we now know about SLA. Our review of answers to these questions will be followed by a discussion of what we know about the most advanced state of L2 learning (or “near-native” competence), including what features are likely to be mastered last, and how ultimate achievement levels relate to individual and social goals. The chapter concludes with a brief set of important implications for L2 learning and teaching that we may draw from the findings we have summarized here.
Integrating perspectives

Linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives on SLA all address the basic what, how, and why questions that we have been considering throughout this book, but as we have seen, they have each tended to focus primarily on one question over the others. These disciplinary perspectives are listed in 7.1, along with the priorities that scholars working within them have generally set in relation to SLA.

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<th>7.1 Disciplinary priorities</th>
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There are significant differences of opinion within each perspective as well as between them, depending on subdisciplinary orientations. Still, it is possible at this stage in the development of SLA theory and research to report some answers to our questions with considerable confidence. For others, we should remain more tentative. I will integrate findings from the three perspectives as much as possible, but I give greatest weight to linguistic contributions in answer to what, to psychological contributions in answer to how, and to social contributions in answer to why.

What exactly does the L2 learner come to know?

- A system of knowledge about a second language which goes well beyond what could possibly have been taught. There is significant overlap with first language knowledge, especially (1) in underlying rules or principles that languages have in common and (2) in the potentials of language to make meaning. The L2 system is never exactly like the learner’s L1, however, nor is it ever exactly the same as that of its native speakers.
- Patterns of recurrent elements that comprise components of L2-specific knowledge: vocabulary (lexicon), morphology (word structure), phonology (sound system), syntax (grammar), and discourse (ways to connect sentences and organize information). The amount of overlap with L1 knowledge depends on the genetic or typological relationship of the two languages and on whether there has been borrowing or other influence between them. Exactly which elements are acquired within each of these components depends in large measure on learner motivation and on other circumstances of learning.
- How to encode particular concepts in the L2, including grammatical notions of time, number of referents, and the semantic role of elements (e.g. whether subject or object).
• **Pragmatic competence**, or knowledge of how to interpret and convey meaning in contexts of social interaction.

• **Means for using the L2** in communicative activities: listening, speaking, reading, writing. Many learners develop only an oral channel (listening, speaking), or only a written channel (reading, writing), without the other; neither channel is a necessary precondition for the other, though they may reinforce one another. Minimally, language learning requires means for participation in at least one receptive activity (listening or reading); otherwise, necessary input for SLA would not be available.

• **How to select among multiple language systems**, and how to switch between languages in particular social contexts and for particular purposes. What is acquired thus includes a system of knowledge about how to process multiple languages: understanding of multilingual language processing is also highly relevant to our understanding of how languages are learned.

• **Communicative competence: all of the above**, plus social and cultural knowledge required for appropriate use and interpretation of L2 forms. Inclusion and definition of communicative competence as a goal or outcome of L2 learning is highly variable, depending on macrosocial contexts of learning (discussed in Chapter 5) as well as on linguistic, psychological, and interactional factors.

A basic disagreement among different linguistic perspectives comes in considering whether the system of knowledge about a second language is primarily (1) an abstract system of underlying rules or principles, (2) a system of linguistic patterns and structures, or (3) a means of structuring information and a system of communication. This disagreement stems from different assumptions about the nature of language and language study that arise from different theoretical approaches. These differing assumptions yield different questions to be explored, different methods of inquiry, and different interpretations of findings. Resolution of the disagreement is not likely in our lifetimes, and perhaps it would not even be desirable. I have suggested that we recognize these differences as being like different views we get of Mars through seeing it with different color filters. They complement one another and all are needed to gain a full-spectrum picture of the multidimensional nature of SLA.

Looking to future directions, neurolinguists in particular have made important advancements in exploration of what is being acquired in a physical sense: specifically, changes in the architecture of the brain that accompany SLA. Although this line of inquiry is far from new, there is much that is not yet known, and findings thus far have not been well integrated with those of scholars who take different approaches to the study of L2 phenomena. Modern brain-imaging capabilities, especially as they are applied to greater numbers of L2 learners and at progressive stages in their L2 development, offer exciting prospects for future discovery.
How does the learner acquire L2 knowledge?

- **Innate capacity.** While there is disagreement over whether capacity for language learning is basically different from learning any other complex domain of knowledge, it is clear that some innate capacity must be posited to account for learning. Language learners are not merely passive recipients of “stimuli.” There is a creative force involved in language development (and other domains of learning) which must be an innate endowment.

- **Application of prior knowledge.** The initial state of L2 includes knowledge of L1 (and Language in general), and the processes of SLA include interpretation of the new language in terms of that knowledge. There is also application of what has been acquired as part of general cognitive development, as well as of all prior social experience.

- **Processing of language input.** The critical need for L2 input in SLA is agreed on, although its roles in acquisition receive differential definition and weight in accounts from alternative perspectives and orientations. The processing of input in itself is a necessary factor in acquisition.

- **Interaction.** Processing of L2 input in interactional situations is facilitative, and some think also causative, of SLA. Benefits come from collaborative expression, modified input, feedback (including correction), and negotiation of meaning. SLA is likely to be greatly inhibited if learners are isolated from opportunities for use. Social perspectives generally hold that SLA benefits from the active engagement of learners in interaction, or participation in communicative events.

- **Restructuring of the L2 knowledge system.** SLA occurs progressively through a series of systematic stages. Development of L2 knowledge does not manifest itself in a smooth cline of linguistic performance, but rather in one which sometimes shows abrupt changes in the interlanguage system. This indicates reorganization takes place from time to time during the process of SLA, presumably as perceived L2 input cannot be accommodated within the learners’ existing system of knowledge. This restructuring is a creative process, driven by inner forces in interaction with environmental factors, and motivated both by L1 knowledge and by input from the L2.

- **Mapping of relationships or associations** between linguistic functions and forms. L2 acquisition (like L1 acquisition) involves increasing reliance on grammatical structure and reduced reliance on context and lexical items. This development is driven by communicative need and use, as well as by awareness of the probability that a particular linguistic form represents a particular meaning.

- **Automatization.** While simplistic notions of habit formation are no longer accepted as explanations for language acquisition, frequency of input as well as practice in processing input and output are widely recognized determinants of L2 development. Frequency and practice
lead to automaticity in processing, and they free learners’ processing capacity for new information and higher-order performance needs. Automatization is an incremental achievement upon which efficient and effective engagement in all language activities ultimately depends.

A basic disagreement within both psychological and linguistic perspectives comes in considering language learning as primarily a process of acquiring (1) language-specific systems of rules, (2) very general principles with options to be selected, or (3) increasing strength of associations between linguistic forms and meaning. Again, this disagreement derives from very basic differences in theoretical orientations and is not likely to be resolved.

Looking to future directions, the growing recognition of the complex nature of SLA, and of individual and situational differences, promises acceptance of more complex answers to the question of how language is learned. Scholars may not need to decide whether general or language-specific learning forces are involved in SLA, for example, but how types of learning complement each other and interact.

Why are some learners more successful than others?

- **Social context.** An early activity in this book asked you to identify yourself as a good or poor second language learner, and to speculate why that is so. Most of you probably gave reasons which relate to social context and experience, and you were quite right. Features of social context which affect degree of success include the status of L1 and L2, boundary and identity factors within and between the L1 and L2 speech communities, and institutional forces and constraints. These macrosocial factors influence L2 learning primarily because of their impact on attitude and opportunity. They also determine whether the L2 is being learned as a second language, a foreign language, an auxiliary language, or a language for specific purposes.

- **Social experience.** Quantity and quality of L2 input and interaction are determined by social experience, and both have significant influence on ultimate success in L2 learning. Because social variables are complex and often impossible to control, there is very little experimental evidence to support this conclusion. However, correlational and anecdotal evidence abounds, and it is quite convincing.

- **Relationship of L1 and L2.** All languages are learnable, but not all L2s are equally easy for speakers of particular L1s to acquire. Knowledge of L1 is an important component of all L2 competence in its initial state, but the genetic, typological, and historical relationships of L1 and L2 will yield differential possibilities for positive transfer of parameter settings and surface-level features, including vocabulary and writing system. This remains an underexplored area of SLA, but there is little question that it is significant.
• **Age.** There is a common belief that children are more successful L2 learners than adults, but as we noted (Chapter 4), the evidence for this is equivocal. Younger learners generally have an advantage in brain plasticity, in not being so analytical, in (usually) having fewer inhibitions and weaker group identity, and in having more years to learn the language before ultimate proficiency is judged. Older learners generally have an advantage in learning capacity, in analytic ability, in pragmatic skills, in greater knowledge of their L1, and in real-world knowledge. It is possible for older learners to achieve near-native competence in an L2, but less likely.

• **Aptitude.** Learners differ in capacity to discriminate and process auditory input, to identify patterns and make generalizations, and to store linguistic elements in memory. We may conclude that aptitude is an important predictor of differential success in L2 learning, but it is not completely deterministic.

• **Motivation.** Motivation largely determines the level of effort which learners expend at various stages in their L2 development, and it is often a key to ultimate level of proficiency. No particular type of motivation (e.g. integrative or instrumental) appears to have any inherent advantage over the other in terms of L2 achievement.

• **Instruction.** Quality of instruction clearly makes a difference in formal contexts of L2 learning, although this book has not attempted to evaluate teaching methods. What is known from linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives on SLA, however, does not strongly support any one instructional approach over others, despite the claims of proponents. The array of social circumstances and individual learner factors which we have explored indeed suggests that there can be no one “best” method that will fit all, and a combination of different methods is undoubtedly the wisest approach.

Basic disagreement remains in the definition of relative “success” in L2 learning. Without common criteria for evaluation, drawing general conclusions is very difficult, since the definition of criteria for “success” (along with determining questions to be explored, appropriate methods of assessment, and interpretations of findings) depends on theoretical orientation. Any answers to this question must be considered within the disciplinary framework in which it is posed. From a social perspective, it becomes particularly problematic when “success” is measured only in relation to native speaker norms, since there are significant ethical issues to consider when this is used as a determining factor in access to educational and economic advancement.

Looking to future directions, we can anticipate more relativistic criteria for the definition of “success,” and even more consideration of the complex interaction of social, psychological, and linguistic criteria in research on L2 learning. A crucial element for guiding developments in this direction is the recognition of SLA as a necessarily interdisciplinary field of study.
The judgment that L2 learners have approached or achieved “near-native” or “native-like” competence means that there is little or no perceptible difference between their language performance and that of native speakers. Because one’s L2 system is never exactly the same as the native speaker’s (even if we cannot readily perceive differences), most of us would not consider the final state of L2 development to be completely “native,” although we may allow for some rare exceptions.

The most likely level of linguistic production to retain some identifiably “foreign” feature is pronunciation, especially if L2 learning began after the age of twelve or so. Next most likely is that learners will have to select from a more limited lexical repertoire than do native speakers of the same educational level, will not use words with the same probability of occurrence in the same phrasal units (e.g. collocations), and will not recognize connotations and allusions which require cultural information and experience. Native interpretation of variability is also unlikely ever to be acquired in L2, including the social meaning of variants and appropriate choice for different registers. For example, while the English adjective big may be perfectly “correct” semantically and grammatically, it may sound “odd” in written academic contexts where a native speaker would use large, major, great, considerable, significant, or some other synonym.

Among the last grammatical forms to be mastered in English L2 are the choice of complements to follow specific verbs (e.g. the use of for . . . to after like, as in I like for her to sing but not after enjoy, as in “I enjoy for her to sing”), article selection (the, a, or nothing) before nouns, and appropriate use of prepositions. The residual nature of these problems cannot be explained in terms of order of exposure or frequency of input, since articles and prepositions are among the first words encountered and have the highest frequency in the language. I cannot find convincing evidence to account for this phenomenon, but I believe that these errors remain persistent in large part because they resist conscious, “logical” treatment. When nonnative uses of articles and prepositions are pointed out to them, advanced English L2 students may ask why one form rather than another is used. The only genuinely valid answer, “Because it is,” appeals to grammaticality judgments that are based on a level of intuition which few L2 learners can be expected to attain.

Older L2 students who do approach “near-native” competence almost surely have benefitted from extensive and varied input, feedback which includes some correction and focus on grammatical form, and very high levels of motivation. At the same time, we must recognize that many intelligent, hard-working, highly-motivated students will not approach this level of competence.

It is important for language teachers, in particular, to accept the fact that “native-like” production is neither intended nor desired by many learners whose goals for L2 use do not include identification with native speakers of the language nor membership in its native speech communities. Indeed,
adopting this goal may be considered “imperialistic” in many social and political settings (discussed in Chapters 3 and 5), and in any case, is certainly unrealistic for most beginning learners beyond the stage of puberty. To be valid, criteria for assessing relative L2 achievement must take into account the needs, goals, and circumstances of second language learners.

**Implications for L2 learning and teaching**

Although we have seen that knowledge of L2 goes well beyond what can be consciously learned and taught, we have also seen that (unlike L1) L2 acquisition usually requires intentional effort, and that a number of individual and social factors strongly affect ultimate outcomes. We cannot control most of these factors, but recognizing them can contribute to efficiency and effectiveness in second language development. As a starting point, our findings about SLA suggest the following general guidelines for L2 learning and teaching:

- Consider the goals that individuals and groups have for learning an additional language.
- Set priorities for learning/teaching that are compatible with those goals.
- Approach learning/teaching tasks with an appreciation of the multiple dimensions that are involved: linguistic, psychological, and social.
- Understand the potential strengths and limitations of particular learners and contexts for learning, and make use of them in adapting learning/teaching procedures.
- Be cautious in subscribing to any instructional approach which is narrowly focused or dogmatic. There is no one “best” way to learn or teach a second language.
- Recognize achievement in incremental progress. And be patient. Learning a language takes time.

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**Chapter summary**

We conclude this book as we began, with an emphasis on the importance of taking multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives into account if we are to gain a full-spectrum picture of the processes involved in SLA. Linguistic perspectives have focused primarily on what is learned; psychological perspectives on how this knowledge is acquired; and social perspectives on why some learners are more successful than others. An integrated view across perspectives gives us a realistic impression of the complexity of processes and conditions involved in SLA, and it offers us a more complete and balanced understanding of these factors, and of their multiple interactions.