


# How languages are learned.

		
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## *How Languages are Learned*

**Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (1993)**

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Lightbown and Spada wrote *How Languages are Learned* in order to provide information to second language teachers about second language acquisition (SLA) research findings and theoretical views. It was originally based on materials the authors developed for workshops with experienced classroom teachers. This orientation is obvious throughout the example- and activity-filled book.

The book is brief, but covers the areas of SLA research that would be of interest to classroom teachers. It includes information about first and second language acquisition theories as well as information from classroom research. In addition, there is a chapter dealing with "popular ideas about language learning." The writing is clear and direct with a minimum of jargon. Each chapter includes tasks for the reader to do. This interactive approach encourages the reader to draw on his/her own knowledge, experience, and opinions. This helps to make the information derived from research understandable for those unaccustomed to reading SLA research, and applicable to classroom teachers. Data from the authors' research is often included, followed by discussion and possible interpretations of the data. At the end of each chapter, there is a topical list of suggested readings. Complete references are given in a bibliography at the end of the book. There is also a glossary of terms at the end of the book, and terms included in the glossary are italicized throughout the book.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide overviews of theories of first and second language acquisition respectively. The theories and issues introduced here re-occur later in the book in discussions of learner characteristics, factors affecting acquisition, and classroom acquisition. For example, the behaviorist theory of language acquisition is introduced in chapter 1. In chapter 2, this same theory is discussed with reference to SLA. In chapter 4, the theory is not mentioned by name, but

some of the tenets of the theory are mentioned with respect to "learner language" (the title of chapter 4). In the final chapter, "Popular ideas about language learning: Facts and opinions," these ideas are discussed with reference to the other information presented in the book. The recycling of these ideas and their reintroduction in conjunction with different topics makes the strengths and weaknesses of the theories clear without making the reader feel that there is needless repetition.

While Lightbown and Spada have simplified the theories somewhat to keep the explanation brief and easily understandable, they have done a good job of representing the different theoretical positions. [-1-] For each theory, they discuss strengths and weaknesses, and they include examples of data or summaries of research to support their statements. My only problem with the presentation is with the cutesy sub-titles: "Mom's the word: the interactionist position" and "Say what I say: the behaviorist position," for example.

Chapter 3, "Factors affecting second language acquisition," is a particularly good chapter. It begins with a task that asks the reader to rate a set of characteristics according to their degree of importance for a "good language learner." For example, it asks how important the characteristic "is a willing and accurate guesser" is, on a scale of 1-5. This is a good introduction to the topic for those who have not thought about learner characteristics. It is especially appropriate for classroom teachers who may have opinions about learner characteristics but are not familiar with the research on this topic. The rest of the chapter discusses specific learner characteristics such as intelligence, learning styles, and age of acquisition with reference to specific research findings. The discussion includes clear and useful comments about the problems presented by different research methodologies.

The discussion on age is clear and well-developed, with a conclusion that specifically address the question "At what age should second language instruction begin?" --a question that interests learners, parents, and teachers. One weak point in the chapter is the use of the term "communicative competence" without any explanation, definition, or reference in the chapter itself. There is a definition in the glossary at the end of the book; however, this definition does not refer to the literature on this term or note the controversy about its meaning and use. In the section on "Personality," the authors state, "Another explanation which has been offered for the mixed findings of personality studies is that personality variables may be a major factor only in the acquisition of 'communicative competence'" (p. 49). Given the amount of discussion of this term in the literature and among teachers, it would be appropriate to at least refer the reader to articles which discuss it (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hornberger, 1989; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1983).

The chapter on second language acquisition in the classroom is the longest chapter in the book. Two classroom excerpts are included to represent a teacher using an audiolingual approach and one using a communicative approach. The

characteristics of each class and how these characteristics fit the specified approach are then discussed. This discussion helps to make clear what the authors mean by "a communicative approach" and "an audiolingual approach" within a classroom teaching situation. Following this, five "proposals" for classroom teaching are presented. Each proposal is related to a particular language learning theory; however, Lightbown and Spada do not claim that the classroom [-2-] teaching actually *represents* a particular theory. In this way, they are able to look at the thorny issue of how language learning theories apply to classroom teaching situations. Each proposal is introduced with reference to the theory to which it most closely relates, an excerpt from a class lesson is given, and a discussion of research findings relevant to the proposal is presented; finally, the authors provide an interpretation of the research findings. For example, one of the proposals is labeled "Say what you mean and mean what you say." This proposal is related to an interactionist view of language learning. Following several examples from classroom data, three research studies are presented: one on group work, one on interaction and comprehensibility, and one on learner language and proficiency level. In the section "Interpreting the research," Lightbown and Spada discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of this line of research. This type of presentation makes the theory more relevant to classroom language teachers.

The final chapter of the book presents some popular ideas about language learning and then summarizes the research related to that idea. This chapter acts as a summary to the book. It provides a nice balance to the introductory task which asks the reader to agree or disagree with statements such as "The most important factor in second language acquisition success is motivation" (p. xv). This same statement appears in the final chapter with a summary of the research on motivation. This encourages the reader to think about his/her own beliefs about language learning and about the ways in which the research addresses, or does not address, those beliefs.

Overall, the book succeeds admirably in presenting theoretical views and research findings to experienced language teachers. It acts as a kind of workshop-in-a-book. For other purposes, such as in MA TESOL programs, other books with more a more extensive discussion of the research (i.e. Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) might be in order.

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**Rita Silver**

Drexel University/University of Pennsylvania  
<silverr@duvm.ocs.drexel.edu>

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