

THE PLACE OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES ON  
THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA  
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## **Abstract**

*Language is a system of human communication through the use of spoken or written signals or words. Language gives expression to our thought; it is used to communicate knowledge, ideas and information from one person to another. Language is seen as purely human and non-instinctive. However, when it comes to learning second language, it's quite different and highly tasking and demanding. Due to the peculiar nature of Nigeria with many ethnic groups coming together as one nation, there is the need for a second language that will unify the people in terms of language spoken, hence, the adoption of English language as the lingua franca and official language. It is quite obvious that learning English language in Nigeria needs an intentional and conscious teaching since it is learnt as a second language. Nigerians have different mother tongues which will either aid or hinder the learning of English language. Where there are differences in the structure of the indigenous languages and English language, learners struggle to learn English language, but, similarities in these indigenous languages and English aid the learning of English language. Nevertheless, it is important to consider and utilize the theories of second language acquisition in the teaching and learning of English language for easy and smooth learning. Many theorists postulated different theories regarding the acquisition/learning of second language. These theories are critically assessed and their relevance to the teaching and learning of English language is examined.*

**Keywords:** Second language acquisition, Theories, English language, Teaching and Learning.

## **Introduction**

The individual is not born with a language. People acquire language skills when they are born. Not everybody develops language skills to the same degree but people speak, listen, read and write as they have opportunity. The study of language involves describing and explaining what is and what is not observable and therefore there, are some internal mechanisms involved in language production that have to be explained. Linguists try to explain what goes on when we speak and also how we are able to perform any language task (Corder, 1973).

The Nigerian education system needs to keep up in providing every student with an equal and high-quality education that will set all students up for success, this

means that it is very important that conscious effort is made that no child is left behind. According to De Jong, Harper and Coady (2013), few educators are well-equipped and trained to understand the foundational knowledge in regards to teaching English Language Learners (ELL). Hence, this paper is set out to examine the different theories of second language acquisition in order to determine how these theories can be harnessed for effective teaching and learning of English Language in our schools. It is important and pertinent for teachers to understand the language acquisition process as this will enable them to do the needful in the teaching and learning of English Language. Many theories on second language acquisition have been developed by numerous people. This paper will critically assess these different theories so as to know the meeting point of these theories and how English language teachers can apply the theories in teaching their learners. Many scholars like Robert Lado, Pit Corder, Pavlov and Skinner, Noam Chomsky, Stephen Krashen, Schumann and Vygotsky have developed theories on how one acquires a second language to the degree of proficiency. These theories include the behaviourist theory, contrastive analysis theory, innatist or mentalist theory or universal grammar hypothesis, error analysis theory, monitor theory by Krashen; this includes five hypotheses- the acquisition learning, the monitor, the input, the natural order and the affective filter, sociocultural theory, the acculturation model and the intergroup model. (Menezes, 2013). This paper unveils the need for English Language educators to understanding how second language acquisition occurs and using these theories may assist them in helping students achieve success in the teaching and learning English Language.

### **The English Language in Nigeria**

English language belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, a language family extending from India to Western European. The present day or modern English has been influenced greatly by several other languages such as Anglo-Saxon, Latin, French and German, all of which interacted with Old English as from 55B.C till about AD 1066 (Mekiluwa, 2009). Through these interactions, the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of modern English have evolved.

Today, English is an international language. It is a mother tongue and first language in countries such as Britain, North America, Australia and New Zealand. It is also widely used as a second language in countries such as India, Ghana, Pakistan and Nigeria and it is a foreign language in several countries in Latin America, France and Western Europe. The four major vehicles for the transportation of English worldwide are conquest, war, trade and emigration. Nigeria's first contacts with the English language were due to conquest, trade and colonization. As far back as 1472, Portuguese traders interrelated with Nigerian traders in Calabar, Warri and other coastal areas. From these interactions evolved an English-based pidgin, a mixture of English, Portuguese and some Nigerian languages. The evolution of the slave trade and its eventual abolition also increased the interaction between the European traders and the West Africans.

Though English language was introduced into Nigeria through commerce,

the immediate factor that led to the implantation of English in Nigeria is the advent of the white missionaries in the 19th century. When the missionaries settled in Abeokuta and Badagry in 1842, they could not speak the language of the natives. When they set up schools and churches, the primary language of communication was English. Though the natives were taught English in the mission schools, the need to learn the language of the natives eventually became necessary. Gradually, English came to be known as the language of commerce, civilization and Christianity. Today, English performs several functions in Nigeria's socio-political life. First, English is Nigeria's official language, that is, it is the language of government, legislature and judiciary. The business of the national and state houses of assembly is conducted primarily in English, and government edicts, decrees and the Nigerian constitution are all drafted in English.

The use of English for official and national matters is imperative because Nigeria is a multilingual country comprising about four hundred languages (Mekiluwa, 2009). The task of developing a national language to capture the nation's socio-political identity has been a difficult one over the years. The attempts of successive governments over the years to empower the major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) to perform official duties have also failed woefully. English therefore continues to perform official functions till today. English is also the language of formal education in Nigeria. At the three tiers of education, primary, post primary (secondary) and tertiary institutions, teaching and learning are conducted primarily in English. English is also the language of science and technology, as well as the preferred medium for mass media communication.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that English language has come to stay in Nigeria and its central role to communication and other vital functions cannot be over emphasized. There is the need to pay attention to the teaching and learning of this key language in Nigeria so that effective teaching and learning can take place.

## **Second Language Acquisition**

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a field of study that investigates how humans pick up languages other than their first. It is the development of knowledge and use of a language by people who already know at least one other language that is learning a second language after a first language is already established. It is the process by which people learn a second language that is the learning of a non-native language after the acquisition of the first language. It is the learning of any language other than the First Language (L1). Unlike the First Language Acquisition (FLA) that starts at birth and acquired easily without any noticeable challenges, the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) can occur at any age, it requires instruction and not instinctively acquired; it is also a new addition to the usual life. SLA refers to a formal, conscious and deliberate acquisition of a second (or foreign) language, usually by an adult learner. Since learning of a second language is fraught with a number of challenges which are related to the abilities of the learner, teacher, teaching methodology, the quality and appropriateness of textbooks used and the

communicative requirements of language learning, the SLA researchers therefore, made it easy by discovering the theories that determine the success in second language learning so that we can be better English language teachers and learners.

## **The Different Theories of Second Language Acquisition**

### **Behaviourist Theory**

The first coherent theory of language learning was the behaviourist theory based on the work of Pavlov and Skinner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1986). Using the behavioural patterns of some animals in their experiment, the theory states that 'language is a mechanical process of habit formation which proceeds by means of frequent reinforcement of a stimulus-response sequence'. It was based on the view that all learning including language learning occurs through a process of imitation, practice, reinforcement, habit formation and generalization (Spada & Lightbown, 2002). Simply put, language is learnt, like other psychomotor skills such as walking, jumping, dancing, etc.; "the motto of behaviourism is that language is a verbal behaviour, learn-by-doing activity in learning a language" (Demizeren, 1989). To the behaviourists, the social environment is crucial, not as the source of linguistic stimuli that learners need to form associations between the words they hear and the objects and events they represent, but it provides feedback on learners' performance (Spada & Lightbown, 2002).

Skinner (1957) claimed that when learners correctly produce language that approximates what they are exposed to in the input, and these efforts receive positive reinforcement, habits are formed. Spada and Lightbown (2002) note that one of the ideas associated with behaviourism was the notion that L1 habits which learners had already established would interfere with the formation of new habits in the L2, hence, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which was proposed to account for the role of the L1 in the L2 learning.

However, (CAH) failed to predict errors that L2 learners were observed to make and those it predicted did not occur at all. It was then realized by researchers that learners from different backgrounds made the same errors.

Some of the behaviourist precepts are:

1. The social environment is very crucial in language learning.
2. The teacher or facilitator has a role to play in the language learning activity.
3. Errors must be corrected immediately; they are not permitted in learning.
4. Frequent repetition is essential to effective learning.

### **Contrastive Analysis Theory**

In addition to the foregoing, Robert Lado in his contrastive analysis theory explains that to identify the areas of difficulty a particular foreign language will present for native speakers of another language, there is the need to systematically compare the two languages and cultures- this is the crux of contrastive analysis theory. Where the two languages and cultures are similar, learning difficulties will

not be expected, where they are different, then learning difficulties are to be expected, and the greater the difference, the greater of expected difficulty. Contrastive Analysis (CA) is founded on the assumption that second language learners will tend to transfer the formal features of their L1 to their L2 utterances. Hence, it is necessary to systematically study a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities so that better descriptions and better teaching materials for language learners will be provided. There should be a comparison of languages, starting with the sounds, the grammar and the vocabulary.

### **Innatist or Mentalist Theory**

This theory was developed in America by Noam Chomsky. As a result of the weaknesses in the behaviourist theory, the 'innatist or mentalist theory' was introduced. The major principle or tenet of mentalist theory is that everybody learns a language, "not because they are subject to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal maturational process" (Wilkins, 1972:168 cited in Demizeren, 1989). To Chomsky (1968), the child learner has innate properties of language because s/he masters their native language in a very short time in spite of the highly abstract nature of rules. He insisted that every human being is born into a society with a language acquisition device (LAD) which embodies the nature and structure of human language. Language acquisition device (LAD) is the language innate faculty which is responsible for language acquisition without any need for the social environment. This was later referred to as Universal Grammar (UG), which was described as "a specialized module of the brain, pre-programmed to process language" (Spada and Lightbown, 2002). Universal Grammar (UG) permits the child to acquire language during a particular developmental period, called "critical period" for language acquisition. At each learning level, the child subconsciously form hypotheses, and lists them in their linguistic formations and thus s/he induces rules from their data.

However, it has been argued that language learning cannot be separated from the social environment. The presence of people such as father and mother around the child learner establishes a natural social environment. Therefore, language is not totally of inborn nature nor is it just a matter of biological make-up. Also, language learning involves a learn-bydoing activity to an extent. When the child realizes that their hypothesis falls short, s/he makes necessary corrections or modifications (Demizeren, 1989).

Mentalist tenets are:

1. The language teacher is not needed.
2. Errors are permitted because they serve as reflections of learners' language learning or acquisition process.
3. The role of social environment is undermined.
4. Language is innate.

### **Error Analysis Theory**

According to Corder (1974), second language learners are engaged in a process of discovering the target language, hence, learners may make errors in this discovery process. Error analysis theory focuses on the errors that appear in learner's language and to Corder, identifying and studying these errors might supply clues to inbuilt order of acquisition. He further made a distinction between true errors of competence and performance. Performance errors are mere 'mistakes' which say nothing about the speaker underlying speaker competence and should therefore be excluded from analysis. Corder (1967) discusses the importance of error analysis in three dimensions: firstly, the error analysis tells the teachers how close the student is to their goal and what s/he should learn as a result, secondly, it provides evidence on how language is taught or acquired, what strategies the language learner uses in discovering the language; thirdly, the language is indispensable to the learner himself because the mistakes made are seen as a tool used by the learners to learn the language. It is a way for the learners to test their hypothesis about the nature of the language they learn. Making mistakes is a strategy practiced both by children who acquire their mother tongue and the people who learn a second language. Error analysis has two objectives; theoretical and practical. The theoretical goal explains what is learnt and how to study a second language. The practical goal is pedagogical purposes that serve to enable the learners to learn more effectively by utilizing our knowledge of his dialect (Corder, 1974).

The procedure for error analysis was elaborated by Corder as comprising five stages:

1. Selection of a corpus language
2. Identification of errors in the corpus
3. Classification of the errors identified
4. Explanation of the psycholinguistic causes of the errors
5. Evaluation (error gravity ranking) of the errors

There are problems of identification, notwithstanding native speaker intuition, error is difficult to define and can by no means always be unambiguously identified in production ( Hughes, 1982). Hughes further explains that the distinction between “errors” and “mistakes” is highly problematic since in performance correct and incorrect forms of a single target often occur side by side.

### **Monitor Theory**

This theory was propounded by Krashen (1982). Spada and Lightbown (2002), note that this theory shares a number of assumptions with the Chomskyan Universal Grammar (UG), but its scope is specifically second language acquisition. One of these assumptions is that human beings acquire language without instruction or feedback on error. Krashen developed this theory in terms of five “hypotheses” – the acquisition-learning hypothesis; the monitor hypothesis; the input hypothesis; the natural order hypothesis; and the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982;

2003). The fundamental hypothesis of Monitor Theory is that there is a difference between “acquisition” and “learning”. The monitor hypothesis suggests that in the case of spontaneous or impromptu speeches, which originate in the system, what has been learned may be used to edit or self-correct speech of the L2 learner (Spada and Lightbown, 2002). In order to state that L2 learners undergo a series of stages like L1 learners, Krashen (2003) presents the following five hypotheses as the core of his language acquisition theory. They are as follows:

### **The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis**

This hypothesis claims that we have two independent ways of developing language ability: acquisition and learning. Language acquisition is a subconscious process. Nobody is aware when it is happening. Language learning is done in schools, it is a subconscious process and it helps learning. “When we make a mistake and someone corrects us, we are supposed to change our conscious version of the rule” (Krashen 2003).

### **The Natural Order Hypothesis**

This hypothesis claims that the parts of language are acquired in predictable order. That is, you can predict which aspect of the language the learner will learn first. This theory seems to relegate the language environment to the background. It is said that the order of first and second languages are similar. This also depends on the individual and his/her exposure to the language. In a situation where a learner has some natural deficiencies such as deafness, a natural order hypothesis may not work.

### **The Monitor Hypothesis**

This monitor hypothesis is an attempt to explain how acquisition and learning are used. Language is normally produced using our acquired linguistic competence. Conscious learning functions as a “monitor” or “editor”. Our conscious monitor corrects, inspects and scans internally human subconsciously acquired competence. For instance, before a sentence is uttered, our monitor or edit must scan the sentence for any error. This is referred to as “self-correction.” Three conditions are stated by Krashen that, to successfully use the monitor, the acquirer must know the rule. The acquirer must be thinking about correctness, or focus on form. The acquirer must have the time.

### **The Input Hypothesis**

The input hypothesis attempts to explain how language acquisition occurs. It reflects the view that Second Language (L2) learning occurs like L1 learning as a result of exposure to meaningful and varied linguistic input which helps the learner's developing competence.

### **The Affective Filter Hypothesis**

This suggests that a condition for successful acquisition is that the learner is



motivated to learn the L2 and, thus receptive to the comprehensive input. This motivation could be intrinsic or extrinsic. If intrinsic, it means the learner is naturally motivated to learn the language and if extrinsic, it means the learner is motivated by social factors such as jobs or social climbing. Krashen (1982) has been criticized on the ground that his “hypotheses” are vague and difficult to investigate empirically. Nevertheless, the monitor theory has had a significant impact on the field of L2 learning and teaching. His attempt to distinguish between “acquisition” and “learning” is laudable.

### **Socio-Cultural Theory of Language Learning**

This theory was proposed by Vygotsky (1987). It states that the theorists working within a socio-cultural perspective of L2 learning operate from the assumption that there is a dialectical relationship between culture and mind, and that all learning is first social, then individual. Their argument is that through dialogue or communication, learners construct knowledge and this knowledge is later internalized. In this theory, emphasis is laid on the integration of the social, cultural, and biological elements.

### **The Acculturation Model**

The acculturation model sees the learner adapting to a new culture. It was used to explain the acquisition of an additional language by immigrants in naturalistic majority language contexts. Barkhuizen (2006) notes that the theory emerged from a now famous case study of a 33-year-old Costa-Rican named Alberto who failed to acculturate to the target language community and thus developed only a pidginized form of English. Schumann who was the proponent of the study, explains his findings as follows: Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language. Acculturation is said to be expressed in terms of social distance (becoming a member of a target group) and psychological distance (how comfortable learners are with the learning task). Welsh (2001) used the acculturation model in investigating English learners' perception of their language learning within a home stay as an accommodation which includes full board and lodging for students studying in a foreign country through which they may be exposed to the culture, language and social structures of that country. Welsh notes that, for many of the students, their expectations were not met. The study provided useful insights into the connection between acculturation of international students and their experiences of language learning.

Some of the limitations that the model had are summarized below.

1. It does not explain the internal mechanisms of how an L2 is acquired
2. It is a psychological model rather than a cognitive processing model
3. The model does not consider the language learner as having a complex

4. It does not consider social identity that must be understood with reference to larger and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day to day social interaction (Barkhuizen, 2006).
5. It focuses on group differences between the language learners group and the group associated with the target language.

### **The Intergroup Model**

This emphasizes ethnicity and the issues of social inequality as a social factor in L2 learning. According to Giles and Brye (1982), language learners tend to define themselves in ethnic terms and identify with their own group. They tend to make insecure social comparison with the outgroup. Giles and Brye (1982) note the following as criticisms against the inter-group theory:

6. It is a theory which also takes into account the relationship between the learner's group (in-group) and the target language group (the out-group)
7. Unlike the acculturation model which sees the relationship between the groups as static or changing very slowly, inter-group theory emphasises the dynamic nature of the interaction between the groups, specifically groups with different ethno-linguistic identities. Barkhuizen notes that the theory did not get off the ground probably because of lack of any research evidence to support its claims.

### **Language Learning and Language Teaching**

Many scholars have researched on language learning but according to Corder (1973), the development of language teaching methods have been a little bit controversial. Scholars have noted that most teachers in classrooms try to adopt some methods of teaching, which were not consistent with the language learning theories that have earlier on been discussed. Corder noted that teachers have continued to use teaching procedures such as imitation, drill, formal practice and over-learning of sentence patterns. He further notes that this method has been accompanied by what is considered the traditional techniques of exemplification, rule giving, description and translation, which are more appropriate to a deductive than an inductive theory of learning.

Teachers have probably noticed some deficiencies in the theories and have therefore decided to stick to the techniques which seem to be working for them and their students. To the teachers, the techniques they use are as good as the newer techniques which emphasize audiovisual. In short, teachers seem to be using an eclectic approach to get the best from their pupils. Recently, however, with the advent of computer facilities, there has been a lot of research on how to use the computer to aid learning. This is fast gaining grounds in many advanced countries and is gradually gaining ground in developing countries like Nigeria. Thus, this has led to a shift in emphasis from the traditional method to some other modern methods of teaching.

## **Second Language Acquisition Theories and English Language**

English Language teachers who want to provide the best environment and make SLA easy for their students will be conversant with SLA theories so that the right strategies will be chosen to help their learners to learn SL with ease. It has been observed that the majority of the ESL learners in Nigeria (public schools specifically), cannot competently express themselves in English (Adebilieje, 2017). Communicative competence is as important as cognitive competence; hence, the two should be overtly seen in our learners. It is important that English language should be well taught so that learners can easily learn it and use it freely to communicate and for other language functions.

The teaching and learning of English language can be a herculean task especially when the first language sounds are different to English sounds or when they are even similar but used in different contexts. (Young, 1996). According to Cummins (1979), there is more to learning English than vocabulary and grammar. Also, learners' social background and their mother tongues which are always complex, present challenges to proficiency and easy comprehension of the English language. The question now is what is the best SLA theory for learning English?

Linguists are of the opinion that there is no single best theory for all learners in learning English language. It should be noted that learners are not in the same environments, nor will they use the language in the same contexts. Also, learners learn at different rate, and have different communicative competence and their levels of understanding differ. Hence, teachers of English language are expected to apply the most proper theories that suit a particular learner and context. The theory should address learners' specific objectives and needs.

Adebilieje, (2017) posits that teachers of English Language should put the following into consideration when choosing theories that best suit the teaching and learning of English language:

1. Be familiar with the background of the students
2. Choose the theory that addresses the students' needs and contexts.
3. Consider the use of different theories in teaching English language before arriving at the most appropriate one.
4. Involve the learners so as to identify their needs; their involvement may bring out their objectives and needs.
5. Don't compare learners, treat them differently and work at their pace.
6. Encourage students to read texts in class.
7. Encourage collaboration among students and allow them to interact in English.
8. Do not be too hard, critical or judgmental, correct them mildly
9. Don't over correct errors when they don't alter meaning.

Learners should also follow the following for a smooth learning process:

They should be ready to learn and open up for the teacher to discover their needs and goals and they should build up their skills that will enhance

communicative competence. Furthermore, be ready to learn through visual, audio and kinesthetic media and finally consider correction as a necessity to learning and necessary aspect of learning SLA theories help teachers and specifically English language teachers to tailor their classroom speech and choose materials for their learners. It is important that English language teachers should be open to all the second language acquisition theories so that the right one(s) will be chosen for teaching and learning process. They should create time to observe their learners so as to know the most appropriate one or even combination of theories for a particular learner. However, the teachers should not assume that a particular theory that works in a particular context with a particular learner will work in a different context even with the same learner. Efforts should be made by the teachers to update their knowledge of SLA process so that effective teaching and learning process will be achieved and their students will be able to acquire practical command of English.

### **Conclusion**

Many people assume that learning a second language ought to be like learning a first language, but studies (Adebileje, 2017; Krashen, 2003) showed that learning a second language is highly demanding and there may be interference of L1 to L2. Hence, some scholars postulated theories in learning a second language. Therefore, this study has critically examined the SLA theories: it has been observed that no single theory is the best for teaching and learning English language. Each of these theories is appropriate to teaching and learning of English language, this depends on the purpose, goals, needs, objectives and contexts of use. It is equally important to note that none of the theories is perfect in all situations. It is therefore important to select the best theories as the occasion demands to suit the students' needs to achieve the desired results.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the comprehensive exploration of various Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and their relevance to the teaching and learning of the English language in Nigeria, several recommendations can be made to enhance the effectiveness of English language instruction:

1. English language educators in Nigeria should adopt an eclectic approach that draws from a combination of SLA theories. No single theory is universally applicable to all learners and contexts. Teachers should have a strong understanding of multiple theories and be able to apply them appropriately based on individual learners' needs and circumstances.
2. Teachers should recognize the diversity of learners' backgrounds, motivations, and learning styles. They should tailor instruction to meet the specific needs of each student, and engage students in the process by involving them in setting goals, identifying needs, and selecting appropriate learning strategies.

3. There is the need to acknowledge the influence of cultural and linguistic diversity on language learning by teachers, so as to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity in the classroom in order to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.
4. Teacher should endeavor to prioritize communicative competence in English language teaching, as a way of encouraging students to engage in meaningful communication activities that promote language use in real-life contexts. This will no doubt provide opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and authentic language production.
5. There is the need for teachers and learners to embrace technology as a tool for language teaching and learning by incorporate multimedia, online resources, language learning apps, and digital platforms to enhance engagement and provide additional opportunities for language practice.
6. Teachers should design their lessons by integrating the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Balancing these skills will contribute to well-rounded language proficiency and effective communication.
7. English language educators should engage in professional development to stay updated on the latest SLA theories, teaching methodologies, and educational technologies. Regular training workshops, conferences, and networking opportunities can contribute to pedagogical growth.
8. There is the need to encourage culture of collaboration among language educators, researchers, and practitioners on research projects that investigate the applicability of SLA theories in Nigerian educational contexts.
9. There is the need for advocacy on the integration of SLA theories and research findings into English language curriculum development at various educational levels. Policymakers need to be engaged in discussions on effective language teaching practices.
10. Parents and communities need to be involved in supporting English language learning by creating opportunities for learners to use English outside the classroom, such as through community events, language clubs, or online forums.

By taking these recommendations into consideration, English language educators in Nigeria can enhance their pedagogical approaches and contribute to improved language acquisition and communication skills among their students. The dynamic nature of SLA theories calls for a flexible and responsive approach that prioritizes student-centered learning and the effective use of language in real-world contexts.

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