

Second Language Acquisition Theory and Pedagogy

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On the Teaching and Learning of Grammar: Challenging the Myths

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of myths in circulation today about the teaching and learning of grammar. The following are but ten of them:

1. Grammar structures are meaningless forms. They are the skeleton, the bones of the language.
2. Grammar consists of arbitrary rules; the acquisition of the rules is also a somewhat arbitrary process.
3. Grammar structures are learned one at a time.
4. Grammar structures operate at the sentence and subsentence levels only.
5. Grammars are complete inventories; they explain all the structures in a language.
6. Grammar is an area of knowledge like vocabulary (as opposed to a skill like reading, writing, speaking, or listening).
7. Grammar is acquired naturally; it doesn't have to be taught.
8. Learners will eventually bring their performance into conformity with the target language; error correction is unnecessary.
9. All aspects of grammar structures are learned in the same way.
10. Grammar teaching and learning are boring.

I will mercifully stop at ten; there are others, and I am sure readers will have their own lists as well. It is no doubt also true that some would not agree with my assessment of these as myths. Bearing in mind the theme of this book, *Second Language Acquisition Theory and Pedagogy*, I will use second language acquisition (SLA) research and theory to demonstrate that certain of these are indeed myths. SLA theory will be invoked to refute numbers 1–3. SLA theory has also, in my opinion, contributed several items to the list. I will discuss these as well (Nos. 7–9). Then, in the spirit of reciprocity, I will consider what SL pedagogy can contribute to SLA theory. Next, I will point to some areas where I believe a collaborative effort between theorists and pedagogues would be welcome. Finally, I will conclude with an important caveat concerning the application of SLA theory. To begin with, then, how has SLA theory helped to counter some of these myths?

2. COUNTERING MYTHS 1–3

2.1 Myth 1: Grammar Structures Are Meaningless Forms

Perhaps this myth is a holdover from structural linguistics, in which forms in a language were described without appeal to meaning. As forms, grammatical structures were characterized by their morphology and syntax alone. Judging from a survey of pedagogical materials, I think it is clear that this assumption persists today. Textbooks introduce learners to grammatical structures by delineating their formal properties. It is not uncommon today, for example, to find materials introducing ESL/EFL students to the passive voice in English by demonstrating how a passive sentence is derived from its active counterpart. The transformationalists' regard for the autonomy of syntax is manifest in this purely form-based description. Similarly, the follow-up to such an introduction is often a series of exercises in which students are instructed to transform active sentences into passive ones. To my mind, such an introduction to the passive voice is very misleading. Passive and active sentences sometimes have different meanings and always serve very different purposes. Moreover, the long-term challenge in acquiring the passive voice in English is not learning how to form it, but rather learning when to use it, that is, learning which discourse contexts favor the passive voice and which do not.

The reason I say that SLA research can refute Myth 1 is that quite early on in the evolution of the SLA field it was pointed out that the acquisition of the form of a grammatical structure was incomplete without the concomitant acquisition of its function. Wagner-Gough (1975) was the first, I believe, to make this point in print. Her subject, Homer, a five-year old Farsi speaker, used the *-ing* morpheme very early in his acquisition of English, as did the other subjects being reported on in the morpheme acquisition studies at the time. What Wagner-Gough noticed in Homer's performance, however, was that he used *-ing* not

only for its target function but also to signal an imperative function. Other researchers that expanded on this theme were Andersen (1977), who demonstrated the folly of talking about the acquisition of the English article as though it were one structure, thus obscuring its many semantic uses; Bahns and Wode (1980), whose German-speaking subject used *didn't* for some time as a past-tense marker before he used it as a negator; and Huebner (1980), whose Hmong-speaking adult subject used a general Wh-question marker (*waduyu*) for all Wh-question words (e.g., *Waduyu kam from?* for *Where are you from?* and *Waduyu kam?* for *Why did you come?*) It is obvious, then, that one cannot talk about the acquisition of a form unless its function is also considered. Indeed, it is often said these days that the language acquisition process is all about learning to map form on function or form and meaning.

I think it is worth pointing out that when we elect to use two terms in tandem as a shorthand—form and function, or form and meaning—we should never lose sight of the fact that there are really three dimensions with which we need to be concerned: form, meaning, and function (use) (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). To return to the passive for our example, we can clearly see that there are three dimensions that must be mastered before any learner can be said to have acquired it. Its form requires a 'be' verb (the final auxiliary verb), a past participle, a transitive main verb, and when present, the 'by' preposition before the agent. We also should acknowledge its meaning as conferring focus on the theme or receiver of the action, rather than the agent, as happens in canonical word order, and the fact that passive sentences may convey a meaning different from that of the active voice with the same agent and theme. Finally its use: When or why is it used instead of the active voice? The answers are numerous: when the theme is the topic, when the agent is unknown or redundant or when one wishes to conceal it, etc.

Thus, with some impetus from SLA research and a little reflection, we have come to realize that grammatical structures are more than forms; therefore, their acquisition must entail more than learning how to form the structures. It must also include learning what they mean and when and why to use them as well. This awareness is extremely important from a pedagogical standpoint, of course, because as language teachers will attest, the learning challenge for students is not accuracy alone but meaningful and appropriate use as well. As such, grammar teaching does not mean merely teaching forms and it is certainly not limited to teaching explicit form-based rules.

2.2. Myth 2: Grammar Consists of Arbitrary Rules; Their Acquisition Is Also a Somewhat Arbitrary Process

I am afraid arguing against the first half of this myth will take me too far from my foregrounded objectives in this chapter, i.e. discussing the process of teaching and learning grammar. Suffice it to say that much of the apparent arbitrariness of grammar rules is dispelled when we look at language from a discourse perspective, that is, viewing language from this perspective helps us to see why the

rules are the way they are. For the second half of this myth, I summarize what the SLA theory of interlanguage (Selinker, 1972)—which has been so fundamental to our understanding of the language acquisition process for the past two decades or so—has to say about the arbitrariness of the process.

Far from being arbitrary, learner interlanguages are thought to exhibit a fair degree of systematicity and order. Systematicity does not mean that learners use structures in a targetlike manner from their first exposure. What it does mean is that like natural languages, interlanguages (ILs) appear to be rule governed. There is variability in learner performance, to be sure, but it is typically systematic, that is, learners use certain forms erroneously by target-speaker standards but consistently as a response to certain extralinguistic factors such as task demands (Hulstijn & Hulstijn, 1984; Larsen-Freeman, 1975); topic, setting, and interlocutors (Bell, 1984), attention to form (Tarone, 1988), and planning time available (Crookes, 1989). There does seem to be some random or free variation, such as when a learner produces *no go* and *don't go* within moments of each other under seemingly identical conditions (Ellis, 1985). In fact, there is a fair degree of synchronic variability. Structures do cooccur with temporally and developmentally earlier constructions, and yet change over time follows established paths.

Many explanations for these developmental paths have been put forth, running the gamut from psychological explanations such as the shedding of speech-processing strategy constraints (Clahsen, 1987; Pienemann, 1985), and the invoking of Slobin-like operating principles (Andersen, 1988), to environmental ones having to do with factors in the input such as frequency of occurrence, perceptual saliency, or factors arising out of interaction with speakers of the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 1975; Lightbown, 1983; Long, 1980), and to linguistic ones having to do with markedness directionality (Eckman, 1981) and Universal Grammar (UG) principles and parameter resetting (e.g., Bley-Vroman, 1986; Flynn, 1987; Schachter, 1988; White, 1985). Continuing with our story of interlanguage I will address Myth 3.

2.3. Myth 3: Grammar Structures Are Learned One at a Time

IL theory posits that progress is not linear. Language acquisition is not a matter of steadily accumulating structural entities (Rutherford, 1987, p. 4). Backsliding is common, giving rise to so-called U-shaped behavior (Kellerman, 1985). Development is gradual, but occasionally there is a fundamental overhaul or restructuring of the underlying grammar (McLaughlin, 1990). A good example of this type of restructuring is reported in the work of Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981). They reported that learners of German in their study would sometimes omit items that the learners had previously appeared to master. The omissions involved certain forms over which learners had to move other forms. McLaughlin (1990) speculated that this apparent backsliding resulted from a temporary restructuring of the system that involved an omission of certain elements to allow for the development of other elements. Thus, the acquisition of structures is interdependent and not a matter of simple aggregation.

3. SLA THEORY: HELPING US TO UNDERSTAND GRAMMAR LEARNING AND TRANSFORM TEACHING

As was just seen, SLA theory has been helpful in challenging the first three myths about the learning of grammar. Before moving on, I would like to underscore the significance of the contribution of SLA theory to the understanding of the learning of grammar. Although the description of SLA that I have just given may seem commonplace by now, remember that in the historical context in which it arose, SLA was a radical departure. Before SLA researchers began looking at learning and the learner in the early 1970s, both had been virtually ignored, at least in modern times. So even if this description of the SLA process does not withstand the test of time, SLA theory has already performed a great service for second language pedagogy by helping us to see learners as rightful partners in any pedagogical enterprise.

This view of language acquisition has influenced language pedagogy in encouraging learner-centered teaching. Learner centeredness, combined with the shift to a focus on communicative competence, has helped to transform the language teaching field dramatically in the past twenty years. Instead of an explicit focus on language itself, there has been an emphasis on learners' expressing their own meanings through language. This in turn has led to a greater tolerance for errors in learners' performance and the creation of opportunities for learners to use the language in more authentic and spontaneous ways (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, p. 430).

4. A MEGAMYTH AND THE REFLEX FALLACY

Another application of an SLA theory to pedagogy has been the claim that learners can develop greater communicative abilities through instruction that more closely resembles the characteristics of a "natural," that is, untutored, environment. It has been argued by Krashen (1982, 1985) and others that given suitable exposure to the target language, SLA can proceed in much the same manner as child language acquisition, where a learner's performance gradually approximates and then matches the environmental input. This is a radical reconceptualizing of second language pedagogy, to be sure. But although we appreciate that SLA theory forces us to reexamine long-standing assumptions about second language pedagogy, it would be prudent to interject a note of caution. It seems to me that the biggest myth of all, a megamyth if you will, is the assumption that what works in natural language acquisition should automatically become the pedagogy of the classroom. It may turn out to be effective, but this should not be assumed a priori.

Whether or not there are fundamental differences between tutored and untutored acquisition processes (currently a contentious issue), why should it be assumed that features of natural acquisition are superior to those that occur in instructional settings? In a recent study, for example, Buczowska and Weist

(1991, p. 548), whose subjects were Polish adults learning English in Poland, reported that "in the domain of temporal location, tutored L2 learners do not follow the course of acquisition that is prototypical for L1 learners or untutored L2 learners, and deviations from the untutored L2 pattern [in L2 teaching] can facilitate rather than impede the acquisition process."

Indeed, I would strenuously object to the assumption that because certain conditions exist in naturalistic acquisition, our objective as teachers should be to emulate them to the best of our abilities. I have called this "the reflex fallacy." "The fallacy lies in the assumption that teaching is an involuntary reflex of natural acquisition such that what is present and natural in untutored acquisition should be present in abundance in classroom instruction, and what is absent in natural acquisition should be prohibited in the classroom" (Larsen-Freeman, 1990, p. 262). The goal of SLA theory is to identify what is minimally necessary for SLA to occur. What is minimally necessary for SLA to take place outside the classroom does not automatically constitute the most effective means of learning in the classroom (Cohen, Larsen-Freeman, & Tarone, 1991). One would hope that effective teaching would accelerate the natural process. "The basis of schooling is the assumption that nature can be improved on by artifice" (Widdowson, 1992). Yet sometimes SLA researchers have taken the unwarranted step of proscribing or prescribing pedagogical practices on the basis of their findings from untutored acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 1990). As a teacher, I do not ask myself what is minimally necessary for my students to learn but rather what I can give my students that will maximize their learning. It is important that SL teachers know about SLA theory so they can complement natural processes, but their job is to stimulate learning rather than to emulate acquisition.

I believe that there are a few myths that have arisen from the reflex fallacy. It is to these that I will turn next.

5. CONTRIBUTING TO THE MYTHS

5.1. Myth 7: Grammar Is Acquired Naturally; It Doesn't Have to Be Taught

Taken at face value, the first half of Myth 7 is demonstrably true. Some untutored L2 learners are successful acquirers of second language grammars, and SLA theory does need to account for their success.¹ Nevertheless, this item deserves the myth designation because not all untutored learners successfully acquire L2 grammars. Moreover, even if all learners were successful in acquiring L2 grammars without grammar instruction, the second half of Myth 7 is not an inevitable consequence. It does not necessarily follow that grammar should not be taught.

¹The same could be said, of course, for the successful acquisition of second language grammar by tutored language learners. Some succeed, but by no means all.

As I have argued previously, pedagogy cannot be wholly informed by reductionist explanations of natural acquisition. In light of the discussion just completed, a better question would be, what value is there, if any, in teaching grammar or of focusing on form, as it has come to be called?² Are learners who receive grammar instruction better off than those whose attention is not drawn in any way to the formal features of the code? My interpretation of the research conducted so far yields an affirmative answer to this question.

Research providing evidence that meaning-focused instruction alone does not necessarily lead to grammatical accuracy comes from the much-studied Canadian French immersion programs. "These programs are referred to by Krashen (1984) as 'communicative programs par excellence' since the focus is almost exclusively on meaning through subject-matter instruction rather than on the form of the language itself" (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, p. 431). Much good has come from these programs. Young classroom learners who receive this content-based instruction develop productive repertoires in French. It has been demonstrated, however, that although children learn to speak French fluently, their accuracy in French syntax and morphology is still far below what one might expect of learners who have spent several years immersed in the second language (Harley & Swain, 1984). "Less salient morphosyntactic features of the target system, incongruent with the L1 and/or not crucial for comprehension or for getting meaning across may fail to become intake" (Harley, 1993b, p. 11), possibly because of the self-reinforcing nature of peer interlanguage. "Indeed, some observers have concluded that French immersion is the best demonstration of the inadequacy of CLT" (Hammerly, 1987; see also Lightbown & Spada, 1990, p. 431), since students become "dysfunctional bilinguals who can convey messages but do so very ungrammatically" (Hammerly, 1992, p. 215). In fact, it is considered enough of a problem in Canada that "the improvement of immersion children's oral and written grammar has been identified as a major priority by immersion educators . . ." (Day & Shapson, 1991, pp. 26-27).

It is not my intent to detract from the success of immersion education. Indeed I have already asserted that much good has been achieved through it. It seems reasonable, however, to seek ways to address its inadequacy while preserving the good that has come from it.³ My position is that the acknowledged weakness of immersion education can be overcome by selective form-focused instruction. Research has already been initiated by Harley (1989), Day and Shapson (1991)

²An unfortunate appellation, in my opinion, given that the acquisition of grammar involves more than the acquisition of form.

³At the Symposium, Krashen commented that what's wrong with immersion can be corrected by giving students more of the same, i.e. more comprehensible input, not by resorting to form-focused instruction. It is ironic that Krashen advocates doing more of the same when he has previously faulted others for giving the same advice: "Some researchers have simply assumed the effectiveness of error correction. When correction fails, they simply call for more, or more consistent correction. Language acquisition simply does not work that way" (Krashen, 1991, p. 417).

and Lyster (1993) in French immersion programs which shows that form-focused instruction makes a positive impact on the IL development of students who have had several years of communicative language use. In the Day and Shapson study, for example, the experimental group of Grade 7 early French immersion students performed significantly higher on accuracy in the use of conditionals than a control group who had played no linguistic games with conditionals and had not received any metalinguistic instruction, as had the experimental group. Other studies that have corroborated the value of form-focused instruction, or "input enhancement" activities, to use Sharwood Smith's (1991) term, are Gass (1982), Pienemann (1984), Zobl (1985), Eckman, Bell, and Nelson (1988), Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989) (but cf. Doughty, 1991; Ellis, 1989; Lightbown, 1991; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Valdman, 1993; White, 1991; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991; Zhou, 1992). Although admittedly some of these endorsements are weakened because they could not demonstrate a long-term effect for instruction (e.g. Harley, 1989; White, 1991), it does not necessarily follow that focus on form does not affect the learners' internalized language systems, as Schwartz & Gubala-Ryzak (1992) concluded. As Harley (1993b) observed, alternative interpretations of the forgetting are possible.⁴

Moreover, Krashen (1991) did accept the Lightbown and Spada (1990) study as demonstrating an effect for form-focused instruction. In a post hoc description of some specific classroom events and outcomes, Lightbown and Spada used a modified version of the COLT (Communicative Orientation to Language Teaching) instrument to collect observational data on four classes of French-speaking students. The macrolevel analyses indicated that all four classes were primarily communicative in their approach and that classroom interaction focused on meaning most of the time. However, the four teachers differed from each other in terms of the total amount of time they gave to form-focused activities.

In class 1, where the most form-focused instruction was provided, the learners were most accurate in their use of the progressive *-ing*, were more likely to use the presentational forms preferred by native speakers (*there is* rather than *you have*), and were at a more advanced stage with their use of possessive determiners. Students in class 4 had the lowest accuracy on all the features examined in the analysis of spontaneous language samples. The teacher in this class was the only one who virtually never focused—however briefly—on grammar. (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, p. 443)

It should be noted, however, that students in class 4 showed no disadvantage in their overall performance.

⁴Among the explanations Harley (1993b) offered are that the instruction may have been lacking in some way because it was not oriented toward the students' communicative needs and because the target of instruction may have been too infrequent in subsequent class use to reinforce what learning had taken place. Harley (1993a) offered some guidance for a kind of form-focused instruction that may prove helpful. In any event, I would concur with Harley that in the future research methodology must include an assessment of long-term retention.

Why is form-focused instruction effective in dealing with morphosyntax? Perhaps it is because focusing student attention facilitates intake. Certainly this is what Schmidt (1990) reported for his own acquisition of Portuguese in Brazil. Schmidt was convinced that he usually noticed forms in the out-of-class input only after they were taught—and only then did he begin to acquire them. According to Schmidt, "Noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake" (1990, p. 129). Indeed in terms of information-processing theory, it is necessary for learners to attend to the forms they are learning. So giving increased salience to forms, especially perceptually nonsalient forms, is one possible explanation for form-focused instruction being helpful. Other reasons might be that with form focus, learning transfer from marked to unmarked forms is facilitated (more on this later), and provision of negative evidence might help to destabilize an incorrect rule (Long & Crookes, 1992). With respect to negative evidence, I turn to the next myth.

5.2. Myth 8: Learners Will Eventually Bring Their Performance into Conformity with the Target Language. Error Correction Is Unnecessary

There is currently a debate in the field over whether negative evidence (e.g., a teacher's correction of a learner's utterance) is needed. Krashen (1981 and elsewhere) has argued that the only data necessary for acquisition are the actually occurring linguistic forms provided by native speakers in communicative situations. The universal grammar (UG) model for SLA adopts this same theoretical premise. Learners are thought to be equipped with a set of principles that constrain their hypotheses such that the only data necessary for acquisition are actually occurring linguistic forms. Mere exposure to these "positive" data are thought to trigger the appropriate setting of a parameter in the case of L1, or to reset the L1 parameter in the case of L2 (Schachter, 1986, p. 221). This position has arisen out of the need for UG theorists to explain "how it is that learners can avoid being trapped in an overgeneralization from which escape without provision of disconfirming evidence would theoretically not be possible" (Rutherford, 1993, p. 4), part of the so-called logical problem.

However, some UG theorists have come to believe that negative evidence may play a more significant role in L2 acquisition than was first hypothesized. White (1987), in her discussion of Krashen's input hypothesis, argued that comprehensible input in and of itself does not eliminate overgeneralizations. A native speaker of French who treats English like French will produce utterances such as those in (1) if the speaker relies on positive evidence alone:

- (1) a. John drank his coffee slowly.
- b. Slowly, John drank his coffee.
- c. John slowly drank his coffee.
- d. *John drank slowly his coffee.

There is nothing in positive evidence from English to inform the learner that the last example is ungrammatical. Hence, White asks, how can learners learn of the nonoccurrence of a particular possibility if they have no access to negative evidence? It is worth noting that White believes that UG is in operation but that negative evidence may be a requisite in L2 acquisition although it is not in L1. Others have interpreted the need for negative evidence as a sign that L2 learning is fundamentally different from L1 acquisition and have concluded that second language learners do not rely on UG (because learners no longer have access to it) at all (Bley-Vroman, 1990). Still others do not accept the need for negative evidence in SLA (Schwartz & Gubala-Ryzak, 1992; Schwartz, 1993), holding firmly to the notion that L1 and L2 acquisition processes are the same and can be explained through the theory of UG, which requires positive evidence alone.

So certainly there is a controversy. It might be helpful to recall, however, that SLA theorists are concerned with specifying what is minimally necessary for acquisition to proceed. Second language educators are concerned with maximizing effectiveness. For this reason alone, second language pedagogy should derive comfort from the studies of Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989), Trahey and White (1993), and most recently, Carroll and Swain (1993), which offer support for the value of negative evidence or feedback in SLA. The Carroll and Swain study is worth summarizing, because their study included several different types of feedback mechanisms. Subjects were divided into five groups according to which type of feedback they received when they made an error in dative alternation in English. Group A subjects were given metalinguistic information when they made an error; Group B subjects were simply told that their response was wrong; Group C subjects were corrected when they erred and were given a model of the desired response; Group D subjects, when they made an error, were asked if they were sure about their response. The fifth group was the control group, which received no feedback at all. What the researchers found was that all four of their experimental groups, which received some sort of feedback when they erred, outperformed the control group, which received only positive evidence of acceptable dative alternation syntax. The authors tentatively concluded that their study "lends empirical support to Schachter's claim that indirect as well as direct forms of feedback can help adult second language learners learn abstract linguistic generalizations" (Carroll & Swain, 1993, p. 373).

Before becoming too complacent about this issue, however, we should note two often-cited observations in SLA: the first has to do with the fact that learners do not receive adequate feedback because only a small percentage of their errors are corrected, and even these are not always dealt with consistently (e.g., Allwright, 1975). The second concerns the question of why learners' errors often seem resistant to revision even in the presence of correction (Cohen & Robbins, 1976). Is it the case, as Schwartz (1993) suggests, that even when negative data are abundant, learners do not necessarily incorporate them into their IL system

in order to make changes? Certainly this is counterintuitive and would call into question traditional pedagogical practice. Nevertheless, whether negative data can initiate change in a learner's underlying grammar is an important question and one likely to motivate much future research.⁵ The last myth I will discuss in this section of my chapter is Myth 9.

5.3. Myth 9: All Aspects of Grammatical Structures Are Learned in the Same Way

I am aware of no SLA theory that claims explicitly that there is a single mechanism that accounts for the acquisition of all aspects of grammatical structures; however, some models, such as UG theory, seem to imply that this is the case. Calling Number 9 a myth is my way of warning second language educators to avoid presuming that there is a simple solution to an issue as complex as the nature of the grammar acquisition process. Any claim to the effect that all acquisition is the product of habit formation or of rule formation, or today, of setting/resetting parameters or the strengthening of connections in complex neural networks, is an obvious oversimplification of a complex process. The problem is not that our view of acquisition changes or differs. My concern is with the expectation that all of SLA will be explicable by a single process. With language as complicated as it is, why should we expect that a single process will account for all of it (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991)?

Some researchers are more circumspect. They acknowledge the complexity by pointing to a modular view of language and warn that we should refrain from generalizing across modules (Sharwood Smith, 1993). Schwartz (1993, p. 159) stated: "The lexicon is learned in a distinct manner from syntax. Indeed, lexical items must be learned. Aspects of syntax are not learned in this sense; they grow." Whether one agrees with this characterization of syntax and lexicon acquisition or not, certainly the underlying assumption of disparate learning processes is sensible. In fact, I have carried this line of reasoning further (Larsen-Freeman, 1991) by arguing that even within a module (here syntax), different aspects are learned through different means. I cannot go into this claim in any detail here, but consider the analysis of the passive voice. I submit that learning how to form the passive voice is different from learning what it means and when and why to use it. As such, I have suggested that we need to teach diverse aspects of grammar structures differently. Meaningful drills contribute to syntactic fluency; they are unlikely to enhance learners' understanding of the semantics or pragmatics governing the choice of particular structures.

⁵Of course, as SLA is a complex process, it is unlikely that we will arrive at a categorical answer to this question. It is more likely that we will find that negative evidence is helpful for certain learners, for certain structures (Zhou, 1992), at certain times (Jordens, 1993).

6. SL PEDAGOGY'S CONTRIBUTION TO SLA THEORY

We now come to reciprocity. I think SL teachers can contribute to SLA theory by constantly reminding theorists of the need to broaden their perspectives. Although it is perfectly acceptable for a theorist to concentrate on one aspect of a problem at a time, a comprehensive theory of second language acquisition must account for a number of phenomena with which language teachers have been acquainted for some time but which current theories have ignored. Teachers are known to draw on a number of theories to create a blend in practice. I do not believe that their eclecticism stems from capriciousness. I think it can be attributed to the fact that teachers confront the complexity of language, learning, and language learners every day of their working lives. This experience reinforces in teachers the conviction that no unitary view of the three will account for what teachers must grapple with on a daily basis.

There are a number of things that teachers know that no current theory of SLA explains.

1. A theory should provide an account of learner differences, including differences in rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment. Although the literature is vast now and grows bigger every day, not much has been noted about success or failure with regard to particular language modules, save for the age differences cited for phonology. But all teachers know that every learner with whom they work is unique. For this reason, as Tomlin (1990) suggested, SLA is a problem of individuals. "A proper account of SLA must be an account of how individuals learn second languages. . . . Thus, statements of the knowledge represented in an IL grammar, of the cognitive processes activated during second language learning, or of the social contexts favoring or inhibiting SLA must be statements that hold true for individuals" (p. 157).

2. The theory should account for the fact that successful learning takes place for some learners regardless of the method employed (Stevick's riddle). As much as we are reluctant to admit it, it is not true that the grammar-translation method or ALM failed to produce communicatively competent individuals. Certainly some students were successful. Why they succeeded when they did needs to be explained in any comprehensive theory of SLA.

3. The theory should account for learning of grammar that does not manifest itself in performance. Every teacher knows that learning is taking place even when it is not visible. But SLA research has traditionally relied on rather arbitrary thresholds in performance data (including grammaticality judgments) for evidence of learning.⁶ This is a limitation that must be overcome.

⁶I am thinking here, of course, of measures involving some percentage of compliance in obligatory contexts for a certain period of time.

4. The theory must account for the fact that SLA is not merely a linguistic problem. Although it is true that researchers have been exploring learnability constraints, it is not enough to investigate the relationship between knowledge representations for language and their role in constraining acquisition. One must also identify and describe the cognitive mechanisms that account for changes of state in the individual's interlanguage grammar (Long, 1990). By the same token, it must be acknowledged that cognitive psychological descriptions of second language learning also provide only a partial account of SLA and need to be linked with linguistic theories in order to explain such linguistic phenomena as markedness and linguistic universals (McLaughlin, 1990, p. 126). Furthermore, Wolfe Quintero (1992, p. 42) noted that UG theory must also account for how learners acquire morphological and lexical features of the target language that are language specific and are not instantiations of principles of UG. Currently, morphological and lexical exceptions are considered part of a marked, peripheral grammar, the learning of which is left unexplained within UG theory.

Pointing out that theorists have been selective in their foci is not a criticism, provided that claims that emanate from partial theories are duly modest. Lest we grow too satisfied with our theories, language teachers will be happy to remind us that SLA is a multidimensional phenomenon; by doing so, they will keep us humble. I now turn to the collaborative nature of theory and practice.

7. THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

It is not my intention to call for teachers and researchers to collaborate on research projects because this has already been advocated by others. Instead I propose to treat questions of concern to teachers as items for SLA research agendas. Theorists might have more impact on practice if they dealt with issues that teachers wrestle with all the time. To a certain extent they already do, but more such research is needed. Let me nominate five issues:

1. *Learner Readiness.* Teachers do not need SLA researchers to tell them that learners only learn when they are ready. What teacher has not had the experience of teaching some aspect of grammar on Friday, feeling reasonably satisfied that the students learned it, and then finding out on Monday that all of the effort was in vain? More important, is there a way to detect when learners are ready to learn? Pienemann's (1984) experiment, in which he showed that Italian schoolchildren made progress in learning subject-verb inversion in German only when they were at the stage to benefit from the instruction they were offered is tantalizing to language teachers searching for the most efficient way to use their limited time with their students. Will Pienemann's "teachability

hypothesis" hold up under further scrutiny if it is tested against more subjects than the few in his first two studies (1984, 1986)? And if so, will it help teachers to determine when to provide focused instruction to coincide with the learner's next stage along a developmental continuum? This would truly be a contribution.

2. Focus Selectivity. Teachers know they cannot teach it all. There is too little time for one thing. Are there aspects of structures that if focused upon would yield greater learning efficiency than others? Gass' (1982) experiment teaching relative clause formation is pertinent here. Gass demonstrated that if learners are taught to relativize marked structures (in her case to relativize objects of the preposition in English), they will not only learn to do this but will generalize their learning to being able to relativize unmarked structures as well. Replicating and extending the Gass experiment, Eckman, Bell, and Nelson (1988) showed that generalization of learning is indeed possible from structures that are typologically more marked to those structures that are typologically less marked. The exciting implication of this for L2 pedagogy is, of course, that a strategy of IL intervention could be formulated in which it would not be necessary to teach all structures.

Attractive for the same reason is the idea of clustering in UG. It is predicted by the theory that if the input contains evidence of one aspect of a cluster of properties associated with some parameter, that evidence should be sufficient to trigger all other aspects of the parameter (White, 1992). "Not only is there no one-to-one correspondence between input and acquisition of a construction, but, once the value is set, the acquirer ends up with knowledge that indicates that certain other strings in the language are either possible or impossible as well" (Schwartz, 1993, p. 154). In other words, learners will learn more than they are taught. Wouldn't this be a welcome development in L2 pedagogy if corroborated? Another attractive prediction is that instruction is not necessary if L1 and L2 parameters coincide, or where they differ, if the data needed to reset them are available to learners in the input. Thus, only "where L1 and L2 parameter settings differ and the necessary data to trigger resetting are not present, consciousness raising or instruction would be necessary" (Simblis, 1992, p. 232). If such predictions are borne out, SLA theory might eventually help teachers to focus student attention selectively and thus become more efficient with the time they have.

3. Defossilizing Errors. Of course, it is an empirical question in SLA theory whether a case can be made for errors fossilizing, let alone defossilizing. But certainly teachers can vouch for the fact that some errors in learners' production persist well beyond what one would expect, in spite of the attention the errors receive. What causes these errors to endure? There have been a number of suggestions involving the convergence of L1 differences and L2 inherent complexity, markedness, and so forth. White (1989) suggested that the failure of the Subset

Principle, which forces learners to entertain the most conservative hypothesis, contributes to the fossilization that characterizes L2 acquisition. This suggestion is based upon the observation that learners' interlanguage performances are replete with overgeneralizations and ungrammaticality; like the others, however, White's claim has not been universally endorsed (see, e.g., MacLaughlin, 1991).

Harley (1993a) proposed that teacher-guided crosslingual comparisons could help defossilize some L2 errors for immersion students, especially where partial similarities have encouraged an assumption of complete identity between L1 and L2 items. She cited Lyster's (1993) classroom experiment designed to teach the notion of social register in French to Grade 8 immersion students. According to Harley (1993a), "This study provides evidence that [with] analytic [form-focused] teaching that includes a crosslingual element, it is possible to undo fossilized errors—in this case the typical use of *tu* in all second person contexts by early immersion students, which Swain and Lapkin (1989) found still persisting at the high school level" (p. 250). Although form-focused instruction at a point of interlingual contrast is not exactly a revolutionary pedagogical practice, it would be worthwhile to look further at fossilized errors and see what can be done about them.

4. Role of Practice. This may be a curious addition to my list. After all, practicing grammar forms is a very well established pedagogical procedure. I myself have recently coined the term *grammaring*, asserting that grammar should be seen as a skill like reading and writing rather than an area of knowledge (Larsen-Freeman, 1993). Moreover, for cognitive psychologists such as McLaughlin (1990), practice plays a vital role in SLA. According to McLaughlin, "a complex cognitive skill, such as acquiring a second language, involves a process whereby controlled, attention-demanding operations become automatic through practice" (p. 125). More recently, however, the role of practice has been brought into question. Ellis (1993a) presented arguments in support of a comprehension-based approach to grammar teaching. Pointing to the learnability problem (here that the acquisition of specific grammatical features is constrained developmentally), Ellis (1993b) postulated that structural syllabi serve better to facilitate intake than to teach learners to produce grammatical items correctly. He stated explicitly that "the new rationale for [a structural syllabus] rests on the claim that grammar teaching should be directed at consciousness-raising rather than practice" (1993b, p. 108).

Ellis' preference for consciousness-raising over practice drew support from a study by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993). They reasoned: "Given the rather important role that comprehensible input plays in SLA, the value of grammar instruction as output practice is questionable, if the intent of the instruction is to alter the nature of the developing system . . . It would seem reasonable to suggest that rather than manipulate learner output to effect change in the developing system, instruction might seek to change the way that input is perceived

and processed by the learner" (p. 227). In their study, VanPatten and Cadierno compared an experimental group that received an explanation of a grammar point and had experience processing input data with a control group that received the explanation followed by output practice. Pretest/posttest measures revealed significant gains in both comprehension and production of sentences for the experimental group; for those that received traditional instruction, significant gains were made in production only. VanPatten and Sanz (this volume) corroborated the findings of VanPatten and Cadierno by demonstrating that the positive effects for processing input versus no instruction hold for sentence-level tasks. In addition, they report a significant positive effect for input processing as compared with no instruction on a discourse-level task in the written mode, but not in the oral mode.

5. Use of Metalanguage. Teachers often ask if metalanguage is helpful to students and, if so, to what degree it should be used. As Sharwood Smith (1993) noted, "It is still an open question as to how much conscious awareness of the formal properties of language, and hence instruction based on inducing this awareness, actually helps the development of spontaneous language use" (p. 172). It is interesting that in the Carroll and Swain (1993) study cited earlier, Group A, the group receiving explicit metalinguistic feedback, outperformed the other groups. Simply telling subjects that they were wrong, providing indirect feedback, and even providing the right forms did not help as much as the explicit metalinguistic information (p. 372). Such a finding, if it is replicated and if it holds for long-term retention, is clearly important to second language pedagogy. This leads me to my conclusion and final caveat.

8. A FINAL CAVEAT

SLA theory has contributed much to our understanding of the learning/acquisition process. As I pointed out earlier, learners and learning were not receiving much attention when SLA was launched. Second language pedagogy has been well served by second language acquisition theory for this reason alone. And yet, although our understanding of the learning process has been enhanced, it does not necessarily follow that the products of theory are prescriptions and proscriptions for classroom practice. One reason is the reflex fallacy; another is that just as there is more to learning than meets the eye (or ear), there is more to teaching as well.

Teachers are not mere conveyor belts delivering to their students practices/behaviors implied by SLA theory—and teaching is not simply the exercise of classroom activity. The nature of classroom interaction is complex and contingent. Teachers have good reason to say "it depends" when asked whether they would consider adopting a particular practice. Similarly, there are likely to be very few categorical answers forthcoming from SLA research. However, these will not be the measure of the contribution of SLA theory to pedagogy anyway.

I have already suggested a way that pedagogy can benefit theory. Theory can benefit pedagogy in two ways: First, teachers with enhanced understanding of SLA can become more efficient and effective in the classroom by making moment-to-moment decisions that are in harmony with the students' learning. If SLA theory can help expand teachers' awareness of learning beyond the teacher's own experience, can comfort teachers whose students experience backsliding or are not ready to learn, can help teachers to cultivate a positive attitude toward students' errors but can encourage them not to give up on fossilized errors, then it will do a great deal. Teaching does not cause learning, but those who have expanded awareness of it and fascination with it are likely to be better managers of it.

Second, SLA theory will be invaluable if it can help a teacher's sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) to stay alive. If a teacher does not have an active intellectual engagement with teaching and learning, teaching becomes more and more routine and stale. Having one's sense of plausibility challenged by research findings and theoretical hypotheses (even the ones I have called myths here) is one way of keeping it vital. Rather than having a circumscribed role, expanding awareness, enhancing attitudes, and challenging teachers' senses of plausibility are major contributions of SLA theory to pedagogy.

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