

Discussion Questions for Chapter 4: Explaining second language learning

The behaviourist perspective

- 1 State the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and explain why it is often linked to the behaviourist theory. What are its limitations?
- 2 What types of activities are emphasized in the audiolingual classroom? Can you think of some advantages and disadvantages of this type of instruction?
- 3 What contribution has behaviourism made to our understanding of how languages are learned? What is the theory not able to explain?
- 4 If you know a second language, list some of the errors you make (or used to make) that appear to be caused by influence from your first language. If you do not speak a language other than English, try this exercise with someone you know who speaks English as a second language.

The innatist perspective

- 5 What is Chomsky's theory of SLA? (Be careful!)
- 6 Sum up, in your own words, the main points surrounding the debate about the nature and availability of UG in SLA. Where do you stand?
- 7 Name the five hypotheses that make up Krashen's Monitor Model. According to this model, what conditions must be present for 'acquisition' to take place? What are the conditions for language 'learning'?
- 8 What aspects of the Monitor Model make it compatible with an innatist theory of SLA?
- 9 What are the limitations of Krashen's theory? Why do you think that Krashen's ideas have been so influential in second- and foreign-language education?

The cognitive perspective

- 10 Working within an information-processing model, Gatbonton and Segalowitz advocate the use of activities with built-in repetition. DeKeyser has also argued forcefully for the importance of practice. How is the practice they recommend different from audiolingual pattern practice?

- 11 Do you think that the brain–computer analogy is a useful metaphor for understanding SLA?
- 12 Explain the difference between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. How (according to DeKeyser) does the former get converted into the latter? How does this contrast with Krashen’s learning/acquisition hypothesis?
- 13 What explanation is given for apparent bursts of knowledge or backsliding observed in a learner’s performance? Have you experienced this in your language learning or teaching experience?
- 14 What is transfer-appropriate processing? How do you think this is applicable to learning that takes place in a classroom?
- 15 Compare and contrast the role of the environment in the behaviourist, innatist, and cognitive perspectives. Which is closest to your own view?
- 16 Why do connectionists have an easier time accounting for the acquisition of formulaic chunks than for the acquisition of complex syntactic structures?

Interaction hypothesis

- 17 In what way are proponents of the interactionist position in SLA in agreement with Krashen’s monitor model? In what way do they go beyond it?
- 18 What kinds of conversational modifications do native speakers make when they talk to non-native speakers? What similarities and differences would you expect to find between these modifications and those that are observed in child-directed speech? Why?
- 19 Think of a scenario where there needs to be an exchange of information between a native and a non-native English speaker or between two non-native speakers (for example, asking for directions, making hotel reservations, ordering at a restaurant, discussions at a UN meeting, etc.). Write a short dialogue of no more than 10 lines in which modified interaction facilitates this exchange of information.

Noticing and processing

- 20 How do the L1 English speakers’ misinterpretations of the Spanish sentence *La sigue el señor* constitute evidence for the competition model? What is VanPatten’s explanation?
- 21 What is the role of L1 influence in the early stages of SLA according to processability theory? How is this different from the way behaviourists perceive the role of the L1 in SLA?

Sociocultural theories

- 22 What is the difference in emphasis between Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Krashen's $i+1$? More broadly, how is sociocultural theory different from the interactionist hypothesis?
- 23 What is Swain's comprehensible output hypothesis? According to this hypothesis, what are the benefits of producing language?
- 24 Swain's recent work draws on sociocultural theory in interpreting the benefits of learners working together. Describe an activity that has been used in her research on learners' interaction.

Theory into practice

- 25 What are some of the questions that classroom teachers would like researchers to investigate? Can you think of reasons why these questions have not already been answered? Do you think that the questions that are important to teachers can only be answered through classroom research? Or do you see how research carried out in other environments can also contribute to pedagogical practice?