
Reviews of Books

Hitoshi Muranoi, *SLA Research and Second Language Learning and Teaching* [第二言語習得研究から見た効果的な英語学習法・指導法]. Tokyo: Taishuukan, 2006. 214p. ISBN 4-469-24513-5, ¥1,600

As the title clearly indicates, the author presents a summary of second language acquisition (SLA) research and attempts to apply SLA research to second language learning and teaching. It discusses the important theories, concepts, and issues of SLA research and applies these notions to learning/teaching of a language, particularly English.

Even though the application of SLA research to language learning/teaching is not the main aim of SAL research, it has always been very popular in the SLA research field, which mainly deals with learning/teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). This approach also seems to have been used recently in the field of teaching Japanese to speakers of other languages in Japan. In both cases, the target language is taught as a “second language” (i.e., English taught in English-speaking countries or Japanese taught in Japan), not as a “foreign language” (i.e., a language taught in a country where the target language is not spoken, such as English taught in Japan and Japanese taught in the U.S.A.).

In the preface of the book (p. vii), the author explains the difference between a “second language” and a “foreign language” as well as the difference between “second language acquisition” and “second language learning” (pointed out by Stephen Krashen in the 1970s). Both of these differences are usually introduced as important concepts in the SLA introductory literature. In this book, the author uses the term “second language acquisition” as a general term covering both “second language acquisition” and “second language learning.” Yet what the author actually attempts to do here is to present a summary of second language acquisition research and apply it to a foreign language learning/teaching setting: namely, classroom learning/teaching of English in Japan.

Some people may try to maintain the differences between a “second language” and a “foreign language,” and between “acquisition” and “learning,” and they may argue against the idea of applying SAL research to foreign language learning/teaching. This may explain why most SLA research has been conducted in a second language context and not in a foreign language context. However, I feel that the author’s attempt here is not only valid but also important because, after all, second language acquisition shares many aspects, both benefits and problems, with foreign language learning and teaching.

The book consists of ten chapters. Chapter 1 explains an overview of what SLA is. It provides a brief comparison to first language acquisition and presents the issues related to the cognitive processes of SLA, such as awareness, comprehension, intake, and integration. It also presents the commonly-used four steps of language teaching: presentation, comprehension, practice, and production. Chapter 2 discusses the input hypothesis and the importance of input in learning/teaching. In Chapter 3, different functions of interaction in SLA are mentioned. This chapter also presents some teaching ideas using various interaction opportunities and tasks for more independent learning. Chapter 4 emphasizes the importance of output: the output hypothesis and the production model with some examples of output activities. Chapter 5 introduces a relatively new approach called “focus-on-form” by incorporating some sample lessons. In Chapters 6

and 7, individual differences and factors related to individual variations in SLA and socio-cultural factors in SLA are explained. Chapter 8 asks the question, “Why is it necessary to learn a second language?” and talks about empowerment and enlightenment in language learning. In Chapter 9, the author talks about the acquisition of total intercultural communication ability, and the final chapter presents the summary of all those issues in SLA.

These chapters not only explain the theories of SLA research but also present specific learning/teaching suggestions. For example, Chapter 5 (“Acquisition of grammar through focus-on-form”) first explains “focus-on-form” as described by some SLA researchers. The author emphasizes how L2 learners’ acquisition of linguistic forms (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) are enhanced by meaning-based L2 activities, which is defined as linguistic comprehension and output activities focused on meaning through content-based and task-based instruction. The author also explains the difference between “focus on form” and “focus on forms” defined as grammar instruction in isolation from context. Additionally, this chapter describes some terminologies that often appear in SLA research, such as “pedagogical grammar,” “explicit/implicit grammar instruction,” “psycholinguistic readiness,” “processability,” “teacheability,” “zone of proximal development,” “automatization” processes, “intentional learning,” and “incidental learning.” Furthermore, the author presents some learning and teaching suggestions using the focus-on-form approach. For example, one of the suggestions made for learners is the use of movies/DVDs. The author cites a ten-minute dialogue from a movie and shows how a university student picked up some expressions from this segment of the authentic material. The author then suggests how this approach could enhance the learners’ acquisition of “form-meaning-function” mapping.

While I support the use of DVD movies for learning English, I feel that this approach, if used for independent learning by learners, requires a fair amount of English linguistic knowledge and a high level of motivation on the part of the learners. I myself have attempted a seminar project using DVD movies with my students. My students found the use of DVD movies interesting and motivating because, unlike regular homework assignments in academic courses, they could choose the movies they liked; however, their so called “independent learning” was rather limited to listening and vocabulary learning. The students lacked English grammar knowledge, and they were not able to pick up or identify any important grammatical features: in fact, they seemed to have intentionally avoided grammar learning completely. Those learners who do not have a fair amount of English knowledge may thus find this approach difficult for independent learning of grammar. However, I must say that this particular approach is an effective “teaching” suggestion because I have also tried to teach grammar through a movie segment and it worked very well. When specific grammar points (e.g. count/noncount nouns and articles) are pointed out in movie dialogues, this helps the students’ pay attention to this particular grammar form. They can also see how these forms are used in context, which usually results in awareness raising. Thus, their grammar learning can be facilitated through this approach, but this could only be done so with the assistance of the teachers who are able to point out which specific grammar forms to focus on.

Besides a comprehensive review of SLA research and application of the research to learning/teaching, one other thing I found interesting is the author’s view and attitude toward English. He seems to treat English not as a “second language” or even as a “foreign language”: he suggests a view of treating English as a global or common language used by many different speakers worldwide. His view seems to deemphasize the privileged status of English as the target language and treats it as a *hojo gengo* (補助言語) “a supplementary language” (p. 155) as a medium of intercultural communication.

As mentioned earlier, because the field of SLA research has been mainly developed in English-speaking countries, most textbooks and literature on SLA are published in English. It is an unspoken assumption that English-speaking academics lead the field of SLA research. I feel that the author’s attempt to systematically apply SLA research to English leaning/teaching in a Japanese classroom context has its

own irreplaceable value, especially to those of us who struggle to teach English here in Japan. Language teachers recognize that many of the activities mentioned in the book have often been used in the classroom, and we know experientially that these activities work well in classroom instruction. The knowledge of SLA research, however, can justify and substantiate the validity and effectiveness of what language teachers do in classroom settings. As the author claims, looking at English learning/teaching from the SLA research point of view allows the learners/teachers to have more objective views about their own learning/teaching.

Furthermore, this book, being written in Japanese, can serve as a useful introductory textbook not only for SLA courses but also for teacher education courses, targeting college English majors in Japan. Because SLA research presents some complex issues, it often becomes difficult for the students to read through these books and articles in English and comprehend all the details. By providing the important information in Japanese, this book allows the students to gain the fundamental knowledge of SLA research in Japanese. Such knowledge of SLA mechanisms can give learners and teachers a more insightful understanding of language learning processes, and this kind of solid theory-oriented approach is the real strength of this book as an academic resource.

On the other hand, this book can be quite dense for students who are new to the field of SLA. These students may find the content extremely difficult to grasp. Therefore, if I were going to use this book in my class or seminar, I would provide some supplementary readings that are slightly easier to read. For example, the book by Shirahata, Wakabayashi & Suda (2004) deals with different controversial yet commonly asked questions in SLA, such as “Do learners learn (the target language) in the order taught in textbooks?”, “Can people acquire English by only listening to the language?”, “Can learner’s language aptitude be measured by a test?” just to name a few. These questions have to be discussed critically with proper understanding of SLA theories, but at the same time, they can be used as topics for class/seminar discussions triggering students’ interest from learners’ points of view. Therefore, the book reviewed here can be used as a main textbook along with supplementary reading materials because this can encourage students to critically apply SLA research to different issues and questions.

As shown in the title, the book suggests that the content of the book is useful to both “learning” and “teaching” of English, implying both learners and teachers of English could benefit from the book. For someone like myself, the difference between learning and teaching has become rather obscure because they mutually affect each other. Therefore, for those of us who are non-native English teachers with fluency in the language, this book is a very useful resource. It is also useful to some motivated or advanced learners who can make efforts to learn English independently as well as to those who are aspired to become English teachers, which probably is the target learner population the author has in mind to begin with. For average learners of English in Japan, however, the content of this book is probably too advanced both in concept and in practice. As I have discussed earlier, not all “learning suggestions” can be used by average learners and put into practice. Thus, the actual application of SAL research to learning and teaching of English may only be applicable to limited groups of learners and to current and future English teachers, but for those people the book is definitely a useful resource theoretically and pedagogically.

Finally, the book mentions that English education in Japan usually focuses on four areas: English literature, English linguistics, English communication studies, and comparative cultural studies. Many programs also offer “English teacher education” in addition to these four areas. However, as the author points out, SLA research is not usually taught in these programs in spite of the fact that SLA research can indeed provide insights and useful tools for English teachers in Japan. I cannot agree more with the author regarding the importance of teaching SLA research to future English teachers, and I sincerely share the author’s wish that SLA research would be more incorporated in university-level English education in Japan.

参考文献：

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Norbert Schmitt and Richard Marsden. *Why is English Like That? Historical Answers to Hard ELT Questions*. USA: The University of Michigan Press, 2006. 246 pp. ISBN 0-472-03134-1. US\$ 27.50 (pbk).

Why is English Like That? is designed as a teaching manual that can provide English language teachers with a brief and accessible account of the history of English without assuming any prior knowledge of the subject. The book draws information both from academic and popular sources. The authors believe that students long for good explanations of seemingly unreasonable aspects of English grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation, and the book can give teachers “confidence in responding to students” by providing them with the answers “how the English we use today has developed from the English of past times” (p.v). The authors do not promise that the explanations from the book will help students learn English any faster, but they argue that the explanations can help alleviate students’ frustration with some of the aspects of modern English and, as a result, “maintain their motivation and interest”.

Why is English Like That? contains *Classroom Activity* sections with reproducible grammar and vocabulary exercises that are designed to help teachers incorporate some of the knowledge into their classroom activities. The book may be used not only with ESL/EFL students, but also with teachers in training and advanced ESL learners as part of a content-based instruction course. *Why is English Like That?* also includes a guide to the phonetic symbols, reference materials, teacher’s notes and answers to the classroom exercises, index, and lists of resources for further reading on the topics discussed in each chapter.

Why is English Like That? is written with English language teachers in mind; however, the authors try to avoid “the excessive use of references and linguistic jargon”, either in an attempt to make the information equally accessible for both teachers and students, or in the assumption that linguistics and the history of English might not be included in the professional training of someone who is certified to teach ESL/EFL. Nevertheless, except for the *Applications to Teaching* parts, delivered in less formal conversational manner, the book is written in academic style and can hardly be described as an easy read. In some of the book chapters--for example, in “The Sounds of English”--the authors actually assume that the readers would have some basic knowledge of the phonetic system of English.

The first Chapter, *Why English?*, introduces a number of factors that helped English to gradually gain its special status as a global language in the modern world. It also discusses English’s strengths and weaknesses that resulted from its new role.

In Chapter 2, *A Brief History of English Language*, the authors give a short historical overview of the English language among other European languages and argue that the changes in languages are caused by the key events in the speakers’ national and social history. This chapter provides the readers with some of the background knowledge necessary for the following discussions of the changes in English grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling.

Chapter 3, *English Grammar*, shows different approaches in describing English grammar and suggests that teachers should consider all three essential elements of grammar (“form”, “meaning” and “appropriacy”) in English language instruction. The chapter also offers some explanations of the irregular

forms and rules in English morphology and syntax and the reasons behind them. The authors show how English has constantly changed through its history and continues to change. They argue that grammar rules should describe rather than prescribe the use of language and “suggest that teachers consult reference sources that highlight the different grammatical tendencies of spoken and written discourse rather than those sources that essentially treat English grammar in a ‘one size fits all’ manner” (p.72). The “Classroom Activity” section focuses on irregular verbs and irregular plural nouns used in Modern English.

Chapter 4, *English Vocabulary*, discusses the challenges that acquiring a good vocabulary presents and explores the origins of the Modern English lexicon. The authors discuss the relationship between the historical origin and register of synonyms in English, making reference to Geoffrey Hughes’s idea that English lexicon developed a three-register structure (“general”, “formal”, and “specific/technical”) reflecting the historical origins of the words (Old English, Middle English, Early Modern and Modern English). The chapter also explores the ways English words have been created and illustrates the work of common affixes in English. Suggested classroom activities include vocabulary exercises and vocabulary level test.

In Chapter 5, *The Sounds of English*, the authors give a brief overview of the sound system of English, assuming that teachers who wish to teach pronunciation would have some knowledge of the “mechanics of sound production” (p.120). The chapter introduces a number of theories explaining why the sounds of a language and word-stress patterns change through time. It also shows how the Great Vowel Shift affected Modern English pronunciation and spelling, how the “standard” pronunciation was fixed, and what features of pronunciation vary among accents. The chapter includes a “Table of the Origin of Silent Letters in English Spelling”. The *Classroom Activity* section offers spelling and pronunciation exercises.

Chapter 6, *The Spelling of English*, explains how the writing system and spelling standard of English developed and changed, and how “etymological respelling” resulted in silent letters. The authors discuss why and how the American spelling and pronunciation standard is different from the British. Suggested exercises focus on the differences in spelling between British and American English.

Chapter 7, *English Around the World*, illustrates how varieties of English differ around the world and introduces the notions of regional dialects, national varieties and World Standard English. The chapter discusses Braj Kachru’s “three circles” of international use of English: the “norm-producing” inner circle of native speakers, the “norm-developing” outer circle of speakers in the countries where English is established as an official language, and the “norm-dependant” expanding circle of speakers in the countries where English has no special status. The authors give some information about the major dialects of England and the United States and summarize the main differences between British and American English in pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and grammar. They show that some internal pronunciation differences are greater than the differences between the varieties. The chapter also includes some information about Englishes in non native-speaking countries and illustrates “new” English of South Asia and languages born from English: Pidgins and Creoles. Addressing the teachers in *Applications to Teaching*, the authors argue that the differences between various national varieties of English are not really great, and that it is more important to become proficient in whatever variety of English you are learning than it is to master any particular variety, such as American or British. They add that, “in the end, the teacher will have to teach a form of English that is comprehensible to the maximum number of people (which would suggest a standard version), while being an English that students identify with and want to learn (which would suggest a national variety or local dialect thereof)” (p.199). The “Classroom Activity” section explores vocabulary differences in British versus American English and different kinds of English.

The final Chapter, *English in the Future*, opens a discussion about the future developments and functions of English in the world. The authors mention some factors (e. g., electronic forms of communication, changing nature of broadcasting and English language teaching, text messaging on

mobile phones) that may support or inhibit language diversification. They also discuss how demographics, urbanization, education, and economic changes may affect the future status and functions of English. The authors conclude the chapter with the discussion of the speculations about the reshaping of English in the future and suggest that one can only wonder whether the predictions are correct, or whether “English will be altered in a different direction by factors as yet unforeseeable” (p.216).

Why is English Like That? is an example of successful application of some of the knowledge from the history of English studies into modern teaching of ESL/EFL. The book provides the historical background knowledge of English that is required to answer some questions regarding the unique features of the English language. We can not but agree with the authors that by understanding how the English of today evolved from the past times, both teachers and students will be more comfortable with the many conventions of the English language, and will see more regularities and reasons in “seemingly unreasonable aspects” (p.v) of English grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.

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