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## Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 4 Commonly Held Views About Second Language Acquisition

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Second Language Acquisition

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# SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## UNIT #4: LEARNER LANGUAGE

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### 4.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

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In this unit we'll have a look at language produced by people who are learning English as a second language, and also people who have reached a steady state in their abilities to use English. We'll start with a broad understanding of what learner language is like, and then we'll move on to look at various developmental sequences. This unit corresponds with chapter 2 in our coursebook, *How languages are learned*. Overall, the goal in this unit, as in all others, is to provide you with context and extra material not in our coursebook, as well as to highlight important information therein. Topics we will cover in this lesson are the following:

- interlanguage;
  - why learner languages involve variation and systematicity;
  - developmental orders, with a focus on questions;
  - how the “lingua franca core” helps us define the goals of foreign language learning and teaching; and
  - how the importance of “error” has changed over the years.
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### 4.2 THE CONCEPT OF “INTERLANGUAGE”

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A first and important problem to consider when observing learner language is how to conceive of it. One logical place to begin might be to contrast learner language with a native speaker model and see the deficiencies, and in fact this is how many students, and indeed, even many teachers see learner language: a poor imitation or a mere shadow of “the real thing”.

Let's start by listening to some examples of language produced by native speakers and also people who speak English as an additional language.

## LISTENING TASK: WHAT IS LEARNER LANGUAGE LIKE?

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Listen to the following radio interview. Which person is the non-native speaker of English? How would you describe the contrast between the native and non-native speaker's English?

National Public Radio interview with Yascha Mounk:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/14/657238873/the-complicated-relationship-americans-have-with-being-p-c?t=1595590788654>

How did you know that Yascha Mounk was the non-native speaker? How was his English different from the interviewer or the other voices that you hear? It was clear that he has a German accent, but it poses no problems for comprehension at all. But were there other differences between Mounk and the interviewer? If there are differences, they are difficult to find, and in fact, the sophistication and ease with which Mounk uses English to develop his arguments makes him the ideal and enviable model for any speaker of English.

Now listen to the second speaker in the following short video, which is a promotional video for a university English as a second language program.

Video of foreign student

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlGOW2WYnzA>

How did you know that the student in the video was a non-native speaker? Indeed like Yascha Mounk, you can hear that she is a non-native speaker from her accent. But her English was a bit more difficult to understand, and also contains elements that might be unusual or ungrammatical. So this speaker's English seems to show greater variation when compared to Yascha Mounk, and we might assume that a complex topic like Mounk's might be too complex for this speaker to tackle in English. Nevertheless, we have no difficulty in understanding this speaker – and in fact, even at this stage in her studies, she's an excellent spokesperson for the English language program. So while we see more variation in her speech, we also see systematicity, and it is this systematicity, whether it is native-speaker like or not, which is the hallmark of the student's speech and also an expert user's speech.

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The idea of "interlanguage" seeks to explain how it is that non-native language can be at the same time systematic and variable. As outlined by Larry Selinker in 1972, interlanguage refers to a learner's language system that exists at a particular point in time. It is characterized by five features

1. The learner constructs an abstract system of rules for comprehension and production. That is, learner language is not just random or a collection of mistakes – it's systematic. It's the systematicity which makes both speakers we just listened to easy to understand. Thus, just like L1s, L2s are systematic.
2. The system is permeable. New forms can enter the systems and change can happen. We can all see this with our own vocabulary acquisition. If we read challenging materials, there is a good chance that new words will be entering the system. This is true for all aspects of language.
3. The system is transitional. Many times the new forms that enter the system are aiding in the transitioning of a system to a new level or the complexification of the system. That is, the system is developing. This development is more likely to happen at earlier stages, so if we talked with the student we heard from in the above video years later, we would most likely that her language system has developed considerably – not only have new forms entered, but they have triggered developmental changes.
4. The system is variable. Not only is there variation in terms of new forms and development, but there is situational variation as well. We might be controlling this variation, like when we use more formal or informal language, or we might exhibit variation that we can't control in stressful situations, such as an oral exam. People whose linguistics systems are less developed and automatized might be likely to experience more of this kind of disruptive variation. This would be the same for L1 and L2 speakers.
5. Fossilization occurs. Despite the systematic variation and change that is happening, not all language forms will continue to meet the examples found in the speaker's environment. That is, forms might become fossilized and highly resistant to change even after many decades of extensive language use. One only needs to listen to immigrants to hear this.

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#### LANGUAGE ANALYSIS TASK: SOLVING INTERLANGUAGE PROBLEMS

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All though this is rarely done now, an excellent way to understand this systematicity of learner language is to look at examples of learner language and explore possible rules which underly the system. The following examples come from Gass and Selinker's 2008 book *Second Language Acquisition*. Have a look at the data in problem #1 and see if you can see a pattern. Basically, you want to ask why some examples are grammatical in English and some are not, and why this pattern exists.

Example 1: Arabic-English plurals

*Table 3.2 Possible categorization of plurals in Arabic–English IL*

<i>English-like</i>	<i>Non-English-like</i>
3-1. two deserts	3-2. a couple of towel
3-5. the streets, the avenues	3-3. how many ticket
3-6. four days	3-4. many kind of way
3-8. its boundaries	3-7. a few month
3-10. many people, ideas	3-9. a lot of mosquito
3-12. 100 years	3-11. nine month
3-15. many tents—and goats	3-13. one and half-million inhabitant
3-16. two mountains	3-14. how many month or years
3-18. 200,000 telephone lines	3-17. how many hour
	3-19. three or four kind of bread

—Gass & Selinker 2008:43

Looking at the data, you can note that there are certain conditions where the English native speaker rules for using plurals are not followed: when nouns are preceded by a quantifying phrase it appears that plurals are not used correctly. But when a number or single quantifying word is used, then nouns will properly be in plural.

As Gass and Selinker point out in their analysis, there are exceptions to this general rule, and an attempt should be made to explain these exceptions. As we already know, there may simply be variation in the data within or across individuals, but there may be other explanations as well. Example 3-11 doesn't fit the pattern, but Gass and Selinker raise the issue of whether this lack of a plural on "month" may be due to the voiceless interdental fricative "th" sound creating pronunciation difficulty in combination with adding the "-s" morpheme. Example 3-14 shows variability when the nouns are connected by a coordinating conjunction, and perhaps rather than simply being variation, there is a "coordination rule" in their interlanguage.

Stepping back a bit further from the data, we could also hypothesize that rather than needing an "interlanguage rule" we might simply say it is more difficult to process longer strings of words before a noun needing plural, and it is the attention need to process these longer phrases may take away from the attention need to "remember" to add the plural ending to these nouns. We will see in later lessons that this "information processing explanation" might just be an important idea for teachers and learners to keep in mind.

Below, you'll find a second interlanguage problem to solve. As Gass and Selinker note, the speaker intends the progressive meaning 3-25 through 3-29. Again the question is why was -ing omitted in those examples. Take a moment to think about some possible explanations.

Example 2: Arabic-English verb + ing

- (3-20) He's sleeping.
- (3-21) She's sleeping.
- (3-22) It's raining.
- (3-23) He's eating.
- (3-24) Hani's sleeping.
- (3-25) The dog eating. (The dog is eating.)
- (3-26) Hani watch TV. (Hani is watching TV.)
- (3-27) Watch TV. (He is watching TV.)
- (3-28) Read the paper. (He is reading the paper.)
- (3-29) Drink the coffee. (He is drinking coffee.)

—Gass & Selinker 2008:46

One possible explanation for the data could be that -ing is used when a verb is at the end of a sentence. As Gass and Selinker point out, this accounts for the data, but syntactic rules usually refer to hierarchical relations (the order of phases and the like) rather than simply linear order.

The solution to this problem relates to the verbs themselves and the meaning of the verbs. Take a look again and see if you can see it: the -ing form is used for intransitive verbs (that is, verbs with an object) and the bare form of the verb is used for transitive verbs (that is verbs without an object). We know that transitivity is a feature often encountered in languages across the world, and so this appears to be a pleasing solution to the problem. It is also important to mention here that we are seeing how the meaning, or semantics, of the verb is playing a role second language acquisition. We are reminded from the beginning that language is not just or primarily form, it is the expression of form and meaning.

Concerning other possible explanations – or explanations which might also be simultaneously correct – again we see that, just like in the plural example, a form is being left off in a clause which is more complex, in this case expressed as something following the verb.

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In summary concerning interlanguage, the most important point to take away is that learner language should not be seen as a collection of “errors”, but as a linguistic system which is potentially constantly developing. This systematicity can clearly be seen from the previous two interlanguage examples. We can also see the variability that exists, and we have noted one very important factor which affects the system:

the amount of attention that a speaker needs to bring to bear on the language they produce or comprehend.

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## 4.3 DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCES

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In the unit on child language acquisition we found out that English L1 speakers go through a series of developmental sequences when learning various grammatical systems such as question formation and negation, and that English L1 speakers even learn the basic morphemes of English in a particular order. Many of these same orders can be observed in English L2 learning. As we'll see later, this fact was used to suggest that L1 and L2 learning are based on very similar processes.

### DATA ANALYSIS TASK: EXPLORING THE STAGES OF QUESTION LEARNING

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In discussing learner language, though, once again the key point to be made is that learner language is systematic, here following a quite systematic path of development which, in the case of questions may take years to complete. Below you'll see the stages of acquisition of second language English as presented in our coursebook.

Stages of second language English question acquisition

Stage 1: Single words, formulae, or sentence fragments.

Dog?  
Four children?  
What's that?

Stage 2: Declarative word order, no inversion, no fronting.

It's a monster in the right corner?  
The boys throw the shoes?

Stage 3: Fronting: do-fronting, wh-fronting without inversion, other fronting.

Do you have a shoes on your picture?  
Where the children are playing?  
Does in this picture there is four astronauts?  
Is the picture has two planets on top?

Stage 4: Inversion in wh- + copula; yes/no questions with other auxiliaries.

Where is the sun?  
Is there a fish in the water?

Stage 5: Inversion in wh- questions with both an auxiliary and a main verb.

How do you say 'proche'?



What's the boy doing?

Stage 6: Complex questions.

question tag: It's better, isn't it?

negative question: Why can't you go?

embedded question: Can you tell me what the date is today?

–Lightbown & Spada 2013: 54-55

What you can see in this acquisition order is the gradual development of complexity and accuracy. And, even though the basic rules for forming English questions can be written on a single sheet of paper, the acquisition of the system can take many years, with some learners not ever reaching stage 6. Also what can be seen here is the astonishing similarity to the order of acquisition of questions for children learning English as an L1.

In the following table you can see some data from Japanese speakers of English. Analyze the first five questions based on the stages you saw in the previous table and determine which stages the questions represent. Look at the second two learners' questions and see if you agree with the analysis which has already been done for you.

## ACTIVITY Analyse learners' questions

Using the information about the developmental sequence for questions, circle the stage of second language question development that best corresponds to each question.

(Hint: Read all of each learner's questions before you begin.)

	Stage
<b>Learner 1</b>	
1 Where is he going and what is he saying?	1 2 3 4 5 6
2 Is the room his room?	1 2 3 4 5 6
3 Is he taking out his skate board?	1 2 3 4 5 6
4 What is he thinking?	1 2 3 4 5 6
5 The girl, what do you, what does she do, what is she doing?	1 2 3 4 5 6
<b>Learner 2</b>	
6 Are they buying some things?	1 2 3 4 5 6
7 Is they bought present?	1 2 3 4 5 6
8 Is they're retirement people?	1 2 3 4 5 6
9 Is this perfume or ... I don't know.	1 2 3 4 5 6
10 And it is necktie?	1 2 3 4 5 6
<b>Learner 3</b>	
11 Are there any shuttle? Space shuttle?	1 2 3 4 5 6
12 Inside, is there any girl?	1 2 3 4 5 6
13 You don't see?	1 2 3 4 5 6
14 What are, what the people wearing?	1 2 3 4 5 6
15 And they are carrying pink box?	1 2 3 4 5 6

—Lightbown & Spada 2013: 56

You have probably determined that questions 1, 4, and 5 are stage 5 questions, while questions 2 and 3 are stage 5 questions. You might have had a problem with question number 5, though. As Lightbown and Spada point out this question shows that the learner is self-correcting, and thus might not be comfortable at stage 5. Similarly with question 14, we see the speaker starting off creating a stage five question, but then producing a stage 3 question.

What else can be observed from the answers in the previous exercise? First, we can see learners moving through different stages. Thus there seems to be a progression toward more complex questions. Further evidence for this is that we don't see a greater difference than two stages in the questions the students are producing. Also, and perhaps the most important thing to observe here is that as students develop,

the complexity of their questions increases, as does, generally, their accuracy. If we were to judge the progress of students merely on accuracy – that is merely by judging how many errors they committed – then we would be missing the changes in complexity – changes which may initially bring with them more inaccuracy. The goal, of course, is both complexity and accuracy, but in the long term, it is the development of complexity which is essential.

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#### 4.4 PHONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE LINGUA FRANCA CORE

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One of the key questions which teachers and learners should be concerned with what the goal is of instruction. What is the standard by which learner language should be measured? The answer to this question has to do with what speakers will be doing with the language, who they will be interacting with, and where they might live. This issue can most clearly be seen in the area of phonology and accent. If a person's goal is to assimilate with a local native English language community, then following the goal would be to speak like those people. (Though it is worth noting that Yascha Mounk, the American-German academic who we listened to at the beginning of this unit, has retained a noticeable German accent in his English, yet this seems to pose no problems whatsoever to being an American.) But what about the vast majority of people who will use English as a lingua franca, with other non-native speakers – what should the goals be in terms of accent? The answer to this might be “the lingua franca core”.

#### VIDEO TASK: WHAT IS THE LINGUA FRANCA CORE?

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What kind of pronunciation should be taught to people using English as a lingua franca, and why? What should be the goals? What models should be used? Listen to the following discussion by two teachers of English as a foreign language as they talk about what the phonology goals should be for using English as a lingua franca. Note what some of the features are, and why these teachers believe that these are the right goals for students.

The lingua franca core:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JeDn1yeFNc>

You might have been surprised to hear that current views suggest that native speaker models might not be appropriate for students learning English as a foreign language. Not surprisingly, though, you heard that intelligibility is the most important consideration. Research by Jennifer Jenkins has shown that there are certain features of English which are necessary for easy intelligibility, and other features which are not. Features which are necessary are, for example, vowel length and aspiration of voiceless stops. These are two features not always taught. On the other hand, distinguishing the quality of most vowel sounds, and

the two “th” sounds may not be necessary. For more details on these features, see the website on this topic which is run by the two teachers from the video: <https://elfpron.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/what-is-the-lfc/>

One important issue mentioned by the two teachers in the video is the importance of being able to vary one’s pronunciation depending on who is being spoken with. And, once again, we see the issue of variation in learner language, yet in this case it is the ability to adjust one’s speech to specific situations. This is something that both non-native speakers and native speakers of English need to be aware of.

## 4.5 A COMMENT ON ERROR

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Throughout this unit we’ve been concerned with how to describe learner language, and we’ve seen plenty of evidence that using the presence of error as a judgement of the quality of language being used or even the level of language being used could be quite misleading. This is important for several reasons. First, errors tell us something about the level of the student. By analyzing how students produce questions we will be able to have a pretty good idea of their level. Second, learner language, errors and all, is systematic, and it is the development of this system which is what all students and teachers are interested in. And finally, error might, in the end, not turn out to be error. As we saw with the lingua franca core, diverging from native speaker norms may in some cases be the best path to take.

## 4.6 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT AND CONCLUSIONS

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Click on the following link for a PowerPoint presentation to hear a summary and concluding remarks concerning unit 4.

[Unit 4 summary and conclusions](#)

## 4.7 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

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Language variation

Interlanguage

Developmental sequences

Attention

Information processing

English as a lingua franca core

#### 4.8 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT.

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Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada. 2013. *How languages are learned*. (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gass, Susan and Larry Selinker. 2008. *Second language acquisition: An introductory course*. (3rd ed.) Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum.

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